Michael Bettencourt

Collected Essays: Volume 4

Block & Tackle Productions Press

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Co-Founders Elfin Frederick Vogel and Michael Bettencourt

To María Beatriz - always in all ways

Contents

Manchester, NH

Other Essays From That Time

Going 60

Manchester, NH

Introduction: Where I Live

I live where I reside. That is to say, even though I rent my space, even though I'm not squirreling away equity for the future, even though I'm considered one of the city's transient population, I feel as at home in my two rooms with full bath as Thoreau felt in his cabin, as a turtle in its shell, as a knife in its sheath. "To live" means that a place becomes an extension of one's skin, becomes as much a sense as the usual five, and provides a kind of welcome that happens nowhere else. "To live" at least implies something like staying still for some amount of time; it implies an amount of time long enough to see things; it implies seeing things clearly enough that they may begin to have meaning. "To live" is to have a universe in small where the constellations are known, the trajectories lead to the heart, and there is no entropy severe enough to endanger.

In these senses I've been lucky to live at two homes in my life. The first was in upstate New York, in a small town called Trumansburg. (Those who know Trumansburg will fondly remember The Rongovian Embassy, now defunct, a home for many of the odd and the left-behind.) It was a big three-story house, the third story being an attic large enough to live in, on a half-acre plot, with a two-story carriage house where the original owner in 1912 kept his horses. It had a big front porch, a 30-foot high tulip tree, an equally high spruce tree (which I had to cut down in a comic imitation of Paul Bunyan), and room for a 50' by 100' garden.

It was the perfect house for building a private world in the midst of a public village. Even though it was bordered on both sides by other residences and was one of many houses on a village street, it sported enormous lilacs on both edges of the property, and I could walk down the driveway which ran alongside the house into the backyard and be instantly shielded from everything, the world shuffled off some-where on the sidewalk in front of the house. It was a place I couldn't wait to get to; it was place I hated to leave.

I learned a lot from that house about making a place livable. I was lucky to have a friend knowledgeable about engineering help me survey the house before we bought it. We poked into odd corners, jumped on floors to feel the give, stabbed flashlights around the attic to see if the roof had holes, estimated which repairs needed immediate work, which could wait for later leisure. He thought it needed a new roof as soon as possible, and laying shingles and putting up

flashing became my first courtesy call on the idiosyncrasies of making a house a home.

I had never done a roof before. So I did the only thing I know best how to do - I read a book on it. The local library had one of those *Time-Life* books that showed me pictures of always-straight chalk lines and people whose clothes never got dirty. It talked about materials and how to set up scaffolding and what a "square" was. (A square, by the way, means a hundred square feet; bundles of shingles are measured by squares, with three bundles to one square. The area of a roof is also measured in squares so that you can figure out how many bundles, plus 10% waste, you'll need for your roof.) The first step, then, seemed to be to lay out the money for the materials and get cracking.

But, as Murphy says, in order to do something, one first has to do something else. And not much could be done without measuring the roof first, which meant, logically enough, that I had to get up onto the roof. And here is marked on the map of life the disjunction between books and roofs. Something I find out right away as my head peeps above the gutters (which I look down the length of, noticing how they are clogged with leaves and how they, too, will probably have to be replaced - another trip to the hardware store) is that the roof slants. This is something I know, conceptually, but not something I really know until my nose is even with the eaves. And something else almost immediately occurs to me as I stand: I am going to have to untether myself from the ladder and float into its slantedness. So I spend a good portion of a quarter-hour just surveying the roof, noticing the pretty patterns of the shingles, how nicely curved they are from being dried out, the bristle of dead branches at the top of the spruce (cutting down the spruce: chainsaw, oil, gas, axe...).

But a certain implacable determinism works here: the roof won't get done unless I do it, I can't do it until I measure it, I can't measure it until I'm on the roof itself, and the roof itself will not unslant in the near future. So I ooze up the ladder, carefully splaying my feet on each rung, and lean my hands against the gritty nap of the roof. As my feet come up my hands waddle forward until my toes grip the last rung (as if gripping the last piece of wood in an uncharted ocean) and then one off, and then the second, and I am on the roof, arched like a bridge truss, staring down at my hands turning pink and white from the pressure. Slowly, because the physics of this place are unfriendly because unknown, I swing my right arm behind me and lower my left hip, hoping that my left buttock and right hand will hit at the same time and I can simply roll myself over into a sitting

position (and not suddenly find myself sliding unimpeded and with terrified élan toward the precipice). And then I am sitting, held by gravity, friction, and my toes digging through my sneakers into the asphalt shingles. I grip my knees and make believe I am enjoying the view.

Leaning carefully onto my left hip I fish the tape measure out of my right back pocket, and then roll back. I know what I have to do to take the area of the roof - I've mentally walked myself through hooking the end of the tape over the edge of the roof, pulling it steadily to the other edge, and reading the distance.

But there seems to be something going on here I need to think about before I take my measure. All the angles are different here, the forces that either keep in place or release work from different premises. The simple act of leaning a ladder against a building and raising myself above ground level has put me into a space-time that, while familiar enough to be called reality, is outside most of the physics I've had working on me most of my life. To be on the roof means learning how to walk again, learning new fine motor skills in the hydraulics of the ankles, new prehensile possibilities for the toes, new balances from the sloshing liquids in the inner ear.

It is also to know that walking thirty feet above the ground is not the same thing as walking on the ground because the added premium of slipping over the gutter gives a piquancy and a jazz to the work that simply falling face down never had, and never will have. To be up here is to be where most people haven't been, a place people take for granted and never really own, even if they've owned their houses all their working lives.

All of this speculation is nice - but it isn't getting the roof measured. Still squarely planted on my buttocks, I push backwards and swing myself toward the spine of the roof. I do that again, and then again, until I'm sitting on the peak. Here it's a bit more familiar, like sitting on the curb, and from this vantage I can survey the odd geography of rooftops, the more or less undiscovered terrain of asphalt, slate, and aluminum paint, television antennas and crooked unpointed chimneys, gutters full of twigs and flashing in the valleys embroidered with dried-out sealer. It looks unkempt in the way most ignored servants look - serviceable, for the most part complete, but lacking the finer points of attention, the small bounties of affection and care. In fact, rooves are those kinds of servants who are not supposed to speak up, who are expected to work without report or breakdown to keep the house dry, like Orwell's coal miners in *Wigan Pier* silently digging coal for all the people who will never know, or care to know, them. My

servant has broken down and needs to be replaced, a serf too old for profit. Every roof I see is in the same flux of entropy, and every owner of every roof is blithely ignorant of the gathering dissolve.

Slowly I lever myself up and stand above the ridgepole of the roof. My feet cambered, my eyes firmly fixed to the overlapping scales in front of me, I propel forward, rocking my weight balanced between the twin struts of my outstretched arms. I slow as I near one end of the gable; the street, the front lawn, the edge of the porch roof gradually slide into view. And then I am at the edge. I squat, my knees painfully tucked under me, and hook one end of the tape measure over the gritty edge of gnawed shingle. I stand up again, fighting the slight vertigo that comes from rising too fast, and move backwards, bent over like some old man trailing crumbs for squirrels.

Of course the lip of the measuring tape lets go several times and the tongue comes bouncing up across my knuckles. Each time I have to move back to the edge, wedge it a little further down into the softened asphalt, and try again. Finally, it holds and I measure. I whisper the number to myself over and over again, as if it were an incantation that must not be forgotten. (I'| also forgotten to bring up paper and pencil.)

But I've only discovered one half of one dimension: length. Width is harder. For that I will have to go to the roof's dripline and reach out unanchored to hook the tape. At least the rooftop's angle is more or less familiar territory. I can stand more or less straight up and down there, even if my ankles bow out. But here I will have to cant forward to keep my gravity's center centered, give up the commonsense notion that hugging the bristly skin of the roof is the safest motion. (Only later, after I'| spent more time on the roof did I understand the importance of staying more or less perpendicular to the plane of the roof, the way a good skier figures out the best slalom a mountain has to offer.) I plant my buttocks against my ankles and half-waddle, half-slide down the incline to the immediacy of the roof's edge. Within a foot or so of the edge, I lean forward and slide 18" of tape measure out like a one-fanged metal snake. The tape inches its own inches forward but because of the pressure I'm keeping on its pivot point it curls up at the end. There's no argument with physics here - I am going to have to move more forward to be able to hook it.

I do hook it. I do move back up to the arête of the roof. I do commit the number of feet to memory, do calculate how many squares I need, do make it back down the ladder and out to the hardware store. It is by these small victories

over the three dimensions that I'm able to put the roof on, able to say I have really begun to own this house. It was not easy work. Anyone who's done a roof knows that it is a hot unforgiving job, done in a rush to beat the rain, a job that for do-it-yourselfers always takes more time and money and sweat than originally planned - even after they've planned to spend more time and money and sweat than they'| ever thought they'| need for anything.

In fact, it was not a job that an amateur, especially one only read up and not practiced, should have tackled, at least alone. It was not just simply a matter of slapping down a new pelt of shingles. The previous owners had had asphalt shingles on once, and then put a second layer over the first. No one who wants to keep the roof for long will put a third layer over a second. That meant the entire stratigraphy of the roof had to be removed, nail by nail, broken shingle by broken shingle. And there was no place to throw the remnants of the roof other than over the edge, onto the driveway, into the bushes, scattered across the lawn - all to be picked up later, of course. (I was still extracting nails and shards well into the autumn.)

That in itself was not a hard job, just a boring and lonely one. But what I hadn't counted on was a third layer of shingles underneath, not asphalt but cedar shakes, the original shakes put on the house at the turn of the century. They all had to come off (providing a winter's kindling). That left only long irregularly width'| boards nailed across the rafters on which to hang my new shingling. I could now stand on my newly denuded roof and look down into the attic, at same time casting an uneasy eye up to the clouds. What had been a simple job of replacement was now becoming reconstitution.

More expense - and more time. I had to buy an armada of four-by-eight plywood sheets, 3/4-inch, and winch them up to the roof so that I could lay down a new substrate for the shingles. I had to have a second set of hands for this, so a man I knew who knew about these things said that he'| be glad to help out. Up sailed these broad swathes of glued wood slung in thin grips of cotton rope, he on the bottom with an anchor line to keep the things from smashing windows and stucco, me on top balanced with tight toes pulling the roof's new armor plating into place. We could only work with two sheets at a time, so up two would come and then he'| scramble like a midshipman up the ladder and together we'| nail them down.

It would have been nice if the house had been built square, with all dimensions in multiples of four. (That's how the *Time-Life* book had it.) We

wanted to stagger the sheets so that no vertical seam would run unimpeded for the entire length of the incline. Ideally this would have meant a half-sheet starting at the left drip edge, several full sheets across, and the remaining half-sheet at the other end. But the casual decisions of two generations ago came round to bother us and we found ourselves with a considerable overhang at one end, an overhang that would have to be cut off at some point. To add one more complication to the matrix, the rafters were not set 16" on center, so that we had to cut each piece of wood to fit the rafters' odd splay, which meant wasting a great deal of wood. And we often had to stand on slick unabrased plywood, leaning forward to set the nails, our knees going numb from our squat, our blows less sure and forceful than before as we tried to keep our untethered balance.

But we did it, one nail at a time, accustoming ourselves to the vectors at work. I believe our feet picked up new sensory abilities, acting like small gyro-scopes to compensate for new shifts of weight and breath, reverting back to a primate ancestral hand-foot. We learned to breathe full oxygen even while cramped into an "N," learned to hammer with the right hand and the left, learned to keep the carpenter's belt full of nails swung between the legs like a large prickly bollock and reach under the leg for another handful of nails (pointed semen impregnating the roof). These are not skills one puts on a résumé, or skills that even last for a long time without practice. But the beauty of compensation, of adapting, of learning the lingo was what made coming off the roof at night worth the fatigue and dehydration and the squint of arthritis in the knees.

Luckily it hadn't rained all this time the roof had been invitingly disrobed. At night, as the last act before we would grope toward the ladder's faint gleam in the dying summer light, we would tack down sheets of plastic over the roof. They were never tacked down very securely, partly because we were tired, partly because we never believed that anything other than a drizzle would dare disturb our work. One night, about two in the morning, I woke up to hear a whoosh and gasp of wind, the ragged clatter of leaves from the giant maple in the front yard. I could also hear the snap of loosened plastic.

I ran up into the attic and saw the whip-end of the plastic slam against the rafters. The moon was covered; the stars were covered; and I could smell that unmistakable gathering weight of rain in the air. I was frightened and completely powerless. I ran back downstairs and dressed quickly, then ran outside. I moved the ladder to the end of the house where the plastic cavorted and, grabbing a bag of nails and a hammer, scrambled up the rungs.

I couldn't really see anything. Some chancy light from one of the street lamps on the corner fractured on the ruckus of the waving tarp, but that was all I had. I tied the belt of nails around me and moved to the top of the ladder, hooked my feet under the eaves, and leaned out to catch the plastic, like some surfer arguing with a wave. I was lucky - I got it on my first stab. Then I had to wrestle it down like some cavorting rodeo calf and nail it to the wood. The wind had picked up slightly and the smell of rain grew thicker, more insistent.

I reached down to get nails with my right hand while I leaned my forearm and elbow on the plastic, trying with all my weight to keep the plastic from wriggling free. The nailtips bit into my fingers as I fished around and I pulled free a briarful. Then I slid the hammer from its sling along my thigh. So I had the plastic sealed down with the left side of body and a hammer and a bristle of nails in my right hand.

The trick was to transfer everything (nails to left hand, hammer in right) without the plastic sailing off to the stars again and before the rain indulged its gravity (closer now - there was more smell than air to breathe). It didn't work. As soon as I made a move to get some nails to my left hand, the wind hooked the plastic and like a hurt fish it thrashed free. That at least left my hands free and I made the transfer.

But now I didn't have a free hand to grab the plastic, so I put a few nails in my mouth (the dry taste of galvanized metal, a browse of pebbles and grit) and stuffed the rest away; I slid the hammer back in its holster. This time the plastic capered out of reach. Blots of rain foxed the air, darkened my tee-shirt. Finally, in one of its caprices, it came to my hand and I reeved it to. I pulled the hammer out and plucked a nail from my mouth, jamming its point through the plastic into the felt paper and wood underneath. I hammered it home, did another, and then another, and still another.

By this time the wind uncoiled itself as rain and tied everything down to the bollard of the earth. I couldn't see well because of the water streaming into my eyes. I scrambled back down the ladder to get pieces of scrap lath we had been using to tack down the felt paper. The edges of the plastic weren't going to hold with just nails - eventually the wind would crowbar its way under and neatly snap it free again. I grabbed two pieces, about six feet each, and shinnied up the ladder as fast as I could.

I fit one over the nails and I'| just hammered in, but that wasn't going to be enough. All along the drip edge the plastic had worked free and the wind had

ballooned it up, making the roof look like the back of a sounding whale. I had to argue that back down to the roof, but to do that I would have to crawl out onto the roof and hammer the second piece of lath home, balancing in a strong wind and a sparring rain on water-slick plastic. I walked over the top of the ladder and felt with my feet for the lath strips we'| put down earlier to hold the felt paper. Laying on my left side I slid out toward the drip edge. I could feel the snaky currents of air and water underneath me and tried to put out of my mind the picture of water trickling through in merry rills to pool on the attic floor.

I laid the lath in place and while holding it there with my knee I waggled my left arm from underneath me to filch nails from the pouch, slipping the hammer from its stirrup with my right hand. I didn't care that the lath was laid crooked, I didn't care that the nails were driven in at any angle. I was in a foxhole fighting the corporate enemy of the weather, saving my house from carnage. I slinked up the roof finding cleats of lath underneath the plastic, nailing the wood, feeling as the plastic calmed its luffing the calming of my own torquing stomach. When the lath's final inch was latched home I rolled onto to my back and let the rain wash away the last of the adrenalin. I was suddenly very tired, baptized into fatigue, and crawled slowly off the roof. At the foot of the ladder the house looked like a dark-hulled close-reefed three-decker gunboat and I was midshipman Hornblower just off the last watch standing at the base of the main mast.

I spent the rest of that storm in the attic cleaning up the water that had made it through and watching like a three-day-hungry carnivore for any leaks or fissures. The storm passed, and my fear passed with it, the visions of disaster, the scenes of waterlog and depression running off through the storm drains.

The rest of the roofing went easily enough; we learned to go faster by having had to do things so slowly. Finally, we finished everything except cutting the shingles for the cap, and I would do that myself. That night we went down to the local pub and got deservedly well-feasted and drunk. Walking back home we stopped and looked at the house and even though we couldn't see the roof from the street we knew we had done a good job. Then on an impulse (something which struck me the next morning as immense, if well-intentioned, folly) we climbed the ladder and spread-eagled ourselves on the roof to watch the stars. There we were, thirty feet above the ground, unfastened from our senses and singing. It was a wonderful irresponsibility, a fitting final gesture to a project that, had I known all the trouble I was going to have, I would probably never have done. We made it down in good repair and woke without hangovers.

I actually had a good time doing the roof; it did me good to do it. Finishing it (and it's never finished until the first winter's passed and the attic is still dry) gave me a sense of completion, of rounded-ness, of competence and sure-fingered-ness. But that sense of a well-done job, that rush of connection and centering, only came after long hours lugging 80-pound bundles of shingles up thirty feet of bouncing ladder, dropping chalk lines, setting in roof jacks, laying down scaffolding boards, stapling down felt paper, cutting drip edges, and nailing nailing nailing, forever nailing those coarse skin-stripping oblongs of pressed petroleum in end-less monotonous rows, like replastering a reptile or laying down quick sediment in a tar pit.

I will never forget the rasping gritch of the knifeblade as I trimmed off slabs to fit over the cap of the roof, nor the deposits of grit in my boots or pockets, nor the cracked skin of my fingertips, nor the styptic taste of roofing nails, nor the cut across my palm from a hot piece of aluminum flashing, nor the fluvial sweating, nor the smell of pitch caulk around nailheads. To this day my feet remember the rise and run of that space, the geometry of that fatigue.

What I earned was a sense of reality not ghosted out of first principles or deduced from a yearning. It was a sensibility that reaffirmed the three dimensions, reaffirmed the food of solidity and insight we gather when we urge our bodies to break the solipsistic ring of our housed senses and enter, holding the thread of our intelligence, the maze of risks and discoveries that make up the world. When I completed that roof I had *done* something, not merely spectated, not merely waited around for something to happen. I had *happened* to the world; I was not simply some frayed end or discarded lath.

I did many other things with that house. I delved the mysteries of power-sanding oak floors that had been painted battle-ship grey. Of a certain fish-oil base paint that would peel off the wall if covered with a fast-drying latex (the latex literally sucked it off the plaster). Of knocking down a wall and put-ting up sheetrock and suffering the arid storms of dust when the joint compound had to be sanded. Of American chestnut molding that lay buried under the sediment of repeated paintings. Of paint stripper and the attendant headaches from breathing it too long while taking paint off American chestnut. Of how to cut, split, and stack wood (three full cords in one summer, all split with a maul and wedge). Of planting a garden (two 50' rows of squash in my first untutored plot). Of trying to give away tons of squash. Of canning and preserving. Of cleaning a

dead rat out of a cistern. Of cooking an entire Thanksgiving dinner in a wood/coal cookstove - and not burning the bread.

Even thinking about it now makes me homesick, not so much for the actual place - though it was wonderful house, rampant with possibilities - as for the actualities of owning, the broad-bottomed feeling of being somewhere in the universe with an address and a load of canned pears for some dull time in January. With a house and plenty to do it, there is no dull time in January.

The marriage did not work, for reasons both long and short. In the settlement I had to give up the house, an immense gouge along the grain of my hopes for the future. I married again - I don't think I'| heard the saying that second marriages show the triumph of hope over experience - and acquired another house, this one in central New Hampshire, twenty miles west of Concord, in the small town of Sutton. It had been built by a Swedish carpenter, Steve Johnson, and it showed good solid unimaginative craftsmanship. He built square solid rooms with wide pine floors, which could be added to or taken from but never covered over or retrofitted into obscurity. (Though he did cut some corners - like not putting in a leach field for the septic system and some odd wall-building in the house.) The house also came equipped with eighty acres of forest, with 1500' of road frontage - more than enough wood to heat my fancies for a long time. It was a perfect house.

But the acres attracted me most. In the city, where lots are in bites of acres - an eighth here, a quarter there - where it's considered a touch of good luck to have a yard large enough to cook a meal in, all space and sense of space is confined and attached to the house, and energies that might have gone into clearing a patch for a garden or adding up wood for the winter are centered on furniture or remodeling. In the city everything is "inner" because there is no possibility for a large self-contained, self-owned "outer." One could say that there is no sense of acreage in a city, only of spatial relationships aimed at fitting as much into a limited area as possible. Things by necessity need to be confined in a city; even if the city is enormous, it has to be broken down into districts, wards, neighborhoods, apartment blocks, counters that can be conceptually moved around for urban planning or political strategies.

Acreage, on the other hand, doesn't suffer from such diminution. But what is acreage? What makes it different than a yard or a public park? The first characteristic of acreage is openness, both physically in its range and visually in its boundaries. A yard tucked away behind a house, or parked neatly in front of

it, doesn't have that length that draws the eye along its contours. Such a yard is more like a carpet that one occasionally cleans and brushes.

The second characteristic of acreage is that it's larger than the person who owns it. I can mow down a portion of my property in order to make a picnic area or a path through the woods. But one never "mows down" a lawn; one trims, cuts, barbers, makes it fit the scale of the house. One masters a lawn; I can't master, except by brute disregard, acreage.

A third characteristic about acreage is that it makes one feel profitable, not necessarily in money, but in the sense of future prospects: with acreage, one doesn't feel confined to the present tense.

These three characteristics - unfolding boundaries, something larger than one's head, a taste of more to come - might satisfy some urge in human beings that pre-dates their understanding of property rights and contracts, something more mystical and native. Perhaps - who knows what swims in Jung's collective unconsciousness. But for modern industrial capitalistic Americans (and they are the only people I think I really know), the mysticalness of acreage inheres in what can be done with it to better the individual life of its owner. People own acreage not primarily from urges of stewardship, or some aesthetic appreciation of its beauty, but because it will lead to something other than itself: filling out a powerfully conceived notion of what is the good life that stewardship and beauty can enhance but never supplant. In this sense "acreage" is different than "land": land is what one wishes to preserve, acreage is what one loosens for profit.

Acreage is a product of numbers and the artifice of a draftsman's eye cast on the rough unconventionality of a landscape. I've watched good surveyors work, watched how methodically they draw a straight line through what is inherently unstraight: it's as if the surveyor believed that he or she had uncovered a line that had been there all along, like Michelangelo's notion that he was only removing stone to reveal a statue already interred. And the resultant map, with its neat outlines and accepted legends, the line of blue tape or blue paint marks along a border, the orange-taped post at the corner of the property, these are all the work of a mind bringing shapes out of other shapes, of speaking of one thing in terms of another.

The artifice of acreage offers something both fictive and ductile - houses can be made and stories made about the making of houses. Acreage is an artifact created for acquisition and change and memory. It brings to the present a pioneer feeling that something could be *done* with all of this, that a future can

and will be shaped and graded. Acreage is not meant to stay still - or if it's to stay still, it stays still in the same way that water in a well stays still, so as to be used later. But it will be used.

As I said, this house had eighty acres attached to it. Here was space to really think about setting up the homestead I'| sketched in my mind so many times, of working towards a self-sufficiency that satisfied my notion of work and play. This was something different from how I thought about the house in Trumansburg. In Trumansburg I was living in a village, and even though I had a large house with a barn and space for an eighth-of-an-acre garden, I was still a village-ite. I could still cut and stack all the wood I wanted to, even raise rabbits and kill them if I desired. But all that was done in the lee of the town hall, so to speak, and there was not the freedom to really own the property one had signed for. (I'm reminded of how Howard Ellman, the main character in Ernest Hebert's *The Dogs of March*, signaled his ownership by keeping dead cars in plain view of the road. No hope for that in the middle of Trumansburg.

But in Sutton I didn't have that restriction. True, I'| have to get a building permit if I wanted to put another house on the property, and there were rules about set-backs and leach fields, but by and large I was free to do what I wanted. And I think that it wasn't so much that I could do what I wanted as that I *knew* I could do what I wanted, even if I never got around to wanting to do it.

One thing I did at Sutton that I hadn't done at Trumansburg was set stone. I think this shows the difference between life in Trumansburg and life in Sutton. Trumansburg was my apprenticeship; Sutton was my first opportunity to take what I'| learned and use it. At Trumansburg I put a new roof on and refurbished rooms, something that restyled what was already there; at Sutton I began to lay stone, starting up new shapes and weights.

To be honest, I didn't build a stone house, though that was on the drawing boards. (What I like about the notion building a stone house is the cheapness of the materials - every roadside has a potential house along its culverts.) I faced a chimney, and ordinary cinderblock construction, with stone from a nearby riverbed.

I first braced the floor to hold the ton or so of rock I was going to use, then laid down a concrete base four inches deep and equally wide. And then I began to collect stone. I hadn't figured that collecting stone would be difficult, but it turned out to be a tougher mix-and-match routine than I'| expected. I drove the truck down a small embankment to the river, which was conveniently choked

with scads of more-or-less uniform rocks. But as soon as I picked up the first rocks certain other rocks became choosable, while others were not because of the ones I'| chosen. Suddenly, not all rocks were potential chimneyfacing. This meant that I had to observe closely every rock's insistent geometry to see how possible a mate it was for the chimney. This meant that the rocks selected me as much as I selected the rocks, that the rocks were telling me in their stolid and unvoiced way what I could and couldn't do.

All of this is another way of saying that it took me a lot longer to find the stones for the chimney than I'| expected. I filled the truck bed with my first load and ferried them back to the house. I also stopped along a road with a deep culvert full of erosion stone put there by the state highway department. Erosion stone was more sharply cut and provided more squared-off stones for corners. I picked up a dozen or so rocks that looked to me like good corner candidates, and then repaired home.

What I did on that first course that first night was what I had to do for every course I laid down. I chose the rocks and corners I thought would fit and lugged them into the house. I them laid them out dry, figuring the space I needed to keep for the mortar, propping up an off-centered stone with a pebble. This usually meant a good bit of swapping around to get a fit that fit, and more often than not meant another trip out to the truck to find just the right kind of stone. It took me twenty minutes just to arrange the first course without mortar, another half-hour to mix the mortar and set them into place.

And once a course was set, I had to search through all the rubble of the riverbed and culvert to find those stones that would match it closely enough. Putting up the facing became, in part, a genealogical hunt, not so much to find pre-existing but unknown relatives as to create a lineage where one hadn't been before. And each course enforced a greater and greater selectivity so that every time I went back to the riverbed or the culvert I carried in my head a template of the course I was working on and the shapes of those to come. All this took a very long time.

In many senses of the word this work was absorbing. Stone can't be rushed the way wood can. Working with stone is slow; the lithic pace of mixing mortar and setting courses enforces a kind of calm deliberation, so that the proper measure of the work is not speed but trueness, not the time of completion but how well the tensions of gravity hold against one another. My hands had to learn each stone they handled the way a blind person read physiognomy. Stones are

thirsty; stones clabber gravity; stones have sound - granite with its dull thud, the mongrel crystallized lump with its muted ping; stones brandish a palette, from stippled to pied to brisk mica to bone white; stones are indisputable.

I did not become stone-like, at least in the usual sense of that word. If anything, I became pattern-like, partly invaded by and partly inviting the thick array of fit and match that gives spin to the world, the way river stones counted me in their display of form and possibility. We are all governed by patterns (habits, by another name, in another guise), but they often stay muted, if not totally invisible, and are often narrow in their range and purpose. To work with something like stone is to be forced to take the time to re-view those things which govern us *and* to initiated into whole species of patterns that, like stars in the sun's glare, are hidden until the glare is briefly doused by the eclipse of something novel.

And there's an active element here, not just some mystical unpeeling. I added to the stock of patterns in the world by rearranging its elements, renovating the given material into something that quite literally had not existed before. True, I had to work within certain constraints of shape and stock, but within those boundaries exist an infinite sum of possible additions because imagination and human purpose and the desire for order and homeliness is infinite.

The facing rose slowly, a row at a time, the new trowel I'| bought at the hardware store quickly taking on the grey bitten rusted pitted look an often-used trowel gets. To set the ring around the flue opening I used a flock of the oddest-colored and most serendipitously-shaped stones I could find to encircle the piece of stove pipe inserted into the flue hole, a collar tailored for the new suit of stones. Eventually I set the last stone in place flush against the ceiling (proud of the calculating that let me finish with such a volute and dash) and in the winter the stones purled out heat long after I'| banked and furled the stove, their spinning furious atoms making the winter darkness radiant.

So I've had two wonderful houses in my life; two wonderful houses have had me. I didn't have them for long. The vagaries of love and self-delusion, the battles and mortifications of the heart - more to the point, two marriages I soured - made me give them up. For the time I had them I was happy, with a happiness that seemed more fully-fleshed and less haste-ridden than anything I'| ever had that gave me pleasure. I suppose that the more conventional way of saying it is that I felt I had a home, felt I was *at* home.

But this is a dim way of saying it. I've read lots of quotes on home and home life, figuring that I'| pull the usual writer's trick of extracting some interesting juice from the thinking another writer had done, using words I hadn't sweated out to make my point. But I couldn't find any that struck a spark or tindered my feelings. So now I have sweat for myself.

What did it *feel* like in those houses? Aside from the storms that were going on (I don't want to make believe they weren't important - but they're not the focus here) I felt I had place. Not *a* place, but place, as if "place" were a quality like the arrangement of books on a shelf or the taste of pond ice. Place is an enhancer, a spice; it's not a direct characteristic like eye color, but instead makes eyes exude that ineffable lightness we associate with arrival, with that sense that one is not transient, or, as Alice Munro said in one of her stories, "at the mercy."

But I am not talking here about the kind of vacant-eyed time-shorn peace one finds in a religious cultist. Often I cursed my mortgage and my bondage to its twenty-five-year length. At times the houses were recalcitrant, frivolous with my money, uninspiring - not unlike raising a child, I sup-pose. No, place resided in those moments when, for instance, the last tomato plant had just been dropped in and the sun hovered on the rim of the hills and the air was thick with the summer heat and I took off my clothes to douse myself with cold water from the well to wash off the dirt and crusty sweat and the whine of mosquitoes filled the darkening air and the very top of the sixty-foot pine tree bristled with a shot of the last sun. It was a moment that seemed all-together, with all the elements allied, conspiring to give mortality the slip and fill the brain with sentences of long finesse that conclude and round.

That was a moment I felt placed, so to speak. Other moments were waiting in the attic during the first rain-challenge to my new roof and finding no leans. Another was picking up perfectly white stone to cap the ring I built around the flue pipe. They were moments that seemed to be culminations, when a number of disparate and individually annoying things suddenly, and usually without any fanfare, whirled into synchronous orbits, going from the chaos of Adam's first day out of Eden to Newton. It is this feeling of completeness, or at least destination, that gives place its power to whet and convene the senses.

But place is as much an effect as it is a cause; in fact, I wish there were a word for a quality that was both at the same time. One just doesn't acquire a sense of place - it must be earned like all good things. But it can't be pursued directly because it doesn't exist directly. It is an event, a distillate of many

things which by themselves give no hint of it. And its creation and arrival are serendipitous, though it will never arrive if one doesn't actively pursue getting it to arrive - however, not too directly or forcefully. And once it has arrived, once the mind has tasted it, then there's a clearer sense of what all the work is for - but no clearer idea of how to make it stay or to draw it forth when it's hidden.

But once it has been felt, once this sensation of peace and quiet has invaded the usual stark exigencies of getting a living, very few things can compare to place's tonic. I suppose I felt most alive when I felt placed; and I felt most placed when I was wrestling with the dimensionality of a house. Thoreau talks about this in the sections on building his cabin: how the house is a *sedes*, a seat, from which radiates the rest of the universe, how the house that one builds with one's own hands is like a skin or a pelt put on to shelter precious thinking and ardent living. In those places I owned I believed I had something like a purpose for living - true, a purpose that had no *telos* to it, no pretensions to a design, but certainly a trust that not every-thing I was doing in my life was foolish, or, worse than foolish, useless (for even foolish things can have an instructional use).

This is all a rather long, somewhat meandering (but I hope entertaining) prelude to this book I've composed. It's about place; it's about seeing and pattern; it's about discovering the micro-ecology of history and connection that fills us out (even if we don't acknowledge it). I don't own a house; as I said I rent. But I live in a house. I live in a bustling city called Manchester, New Hampshire. (The word "bustling" brings to mind Babbitt, a perfect word for this city-which-is-still-a-milltown.) A short while ago I wrote a commentary for the local public radio station, which I reprint below to give you a beginning sense of what this book is going to be all about.

> WHERE I LIVE
>
> A few years back Esquire magazine used to ask famous writers to offer a short piece on why they lived where they lived. Inevitably they all tried to define an ineffable "sense of place," something that helped make them fully three-dimensional people.
>
> I live in Manchester. But I don't live in the Manchester that has just finished building fortresses called Numerica and Indian Head and The Center of New Hampshire. I don't live in the beltway I-293 Manchester that cleaves through the West Side. Nor do I live in the Manchester of a Route 3 that's bristling with the mushrooms of new condos. My Manchester is very different.

> I live a few blocks west of Gill Stadium, near an Allegro's and an Amoskeag Bank and a Woolworth's (with a lunch counter) and a state liquor store and a twenty-four-hour laundromat. From my porch I can watch the sun set beyond Mt. Uncanoonic, watch it come up over the Felton Brush Company. At five thirty a.m. I hear the delivery trucks for Blake's and the supermarket, and at one-thirty on a Sunday morning I can hear the screech and growl of motorcycles as the local bar kicks everyone home. It is a neighborhood, a certain definable (if boundary-less) state, with character and texture and a spiky phizzog, as Carl Sandburg would say.
>
> Why do I live here, in a three-room apartment on the second floor of a house owned by a barely English-fied French-Canadian widow? Because here it feels like home. And what is home? Home is not the patronizing boarding-house of Robert Frost, where they have to take you in. Home is not a place at all. Home is a way to describe a certain kind of centering and connectedness. Thoreau had it right when he wrote about where he lived: home is "a hard bottom and rocks in place, which we can call reality, and say, This is, and no mistake." A sense of home really means one thing: you are not at the mercy or in jeopardy. Home is knowing where the umbilicals attach.
>
> Despite all the boosterism of Mayor Shaw and the Union Leader, and the efforts of developers to make Manchester look like Boston, Manchester's character rests on the fact that it is a city of neighborhoods, a city that still retains a human scale. Each time I do my shopping or deposit my money or watch the aged Salvation Army sergeant stand inside Allegro's angling for people's change, I know that I live in a world that can be known. Each time the woman with her four children pushes her full shop-ping cart past my house I know I am safe, the squeaking of the overworked wheels an anthem for the place I live.

These essays are an attempt to find place again in a place not my own. It's easy, as a renter, to believe that one doesn't own anything, with a further assumption that unless one owns it, one doesn't really have to pay attention to it. But that's a recipe for alienation, a giving-in to transiency and its attendant irresolution. Until I can have the real thing, I have to act as if I own where I live - not the actual place, its legalities, but its history, its wrinkles and characters, its actuality as a location where people tunnel through their lives with sweat, pain, some success, much confusion. So this book is in part about paying attention as a kind of ownership, about paying attention as a source of place.

It's also a book about seeing, about ways of paying attention that might lead to something like knowledge; or, if not that, at least to delight in revealing the unnoticed, to pleasure in speculating about connections. In this sense it's

a book of visions - not of grand enlarging future-pitched idealisms but of the ordinary, the settled, the for-granted. It's very difficult to see anything. Most of our eye-time, I think, is spent looking around. Our eyes remind me of flies that lazily course a room, occasionally landing for brush-ups - our eyes bounce around, rarely focusing for long on any one thing. Most of us are untutored in seeing; we see mostly the motes in our eyes, and we call those motes reality.

But to look at a stone, really take its measure, spend the time rousting out its curves and color, is to participate in the particularity of a thing, attend to its givenness and retrieve it (and oneself) from a cloudy buzz of the for-granted. Maxine Kumin has a book of poetry titled *The Retrieval System*, and seeing is exactly that.

Seeing, active attention, delving into the thingness of things, wearing the seen as if it were a skin - this is our only real redemption, in the same sense S&H Green Stamps were redeemed: something (the stamps) seen in terms of something else (the coffee pot), exchange, acquisition, use. Redemption, to me, is not holy; or if the word's religiousness can't be purged, its holiness to me rests in believing that there is *only this world*, and that we live here or die here to the degree to which we use our eyes (and the eyes in our brains) to make ourselves a piece of the world and the world a piece of ourselves.

Enough of this intro. What I mean by seeing, history, place is much better shown by what follows than the gaseous words I can collect about "vision." What follows is the act of a writer knowing his world through writing, practicing the craft of his seeing and sweating like crazy to get the ordinary down.

The Bowling Alley

Bowling alleys have their own peculiar sound, a polyglot rumble that ranges from the ominous guttural of the thrown ball down the maple boards to the treble dinging of the pinball machines lodged somewhere in an ill-lit corner by the bathroom door. In many ways it's a comforting sound. Everything is at once distinct and mixed, recognizable yet unthreateningly odd. It's not much different than how the ocean sounds with a mildly crashing surf: that same largeness of frequency, easily inhabited.

Just down the street from where I live is a 50-lane 10 pin bowling alley ("Stadium Lanes," because it's just across the street from Gill Stadium) where they use the "big balls" (as opposed to the "little balls" of candlepin bowling). It also has two bars - The Strikeout Lounge and Reflections (one of the local meat markets) - along with a snack bar, video games, and a pro shop where people can buy a blue bowling ball with swirls of white through it that looks like the earth Neil Armstrong saw from the moon.

The place is packed almost every night, mostly with league bowlers, with an even mix of men and women drinking beer and smoking cigarettes. I usually watch from the chest-high wall that separates the bowlers from the main concourse where little kids, young boys and girls hanging out at the snack bar, people going to the bars, and all the others who are not part of the sport wander around.

The difference is striking. In front of the wall people are arranged in a ragged semi-circular hierarchy. An inner rim of people, usually the main players, cluster around a video screen which automatically calculates their scores; out-side of them, more casually spread out around the fringes at the tables loaded with glasses, ashtrays, bowling bags, coats, are both participants and observers; just beyond them, almost at the wall itself, are usually family members who have come to watch, or people who have already completed games and are waiting to go home. This last group almost blends into the aimless stream that moves just past the wall, but they still hold a rough half-moon array, like the scatter-pattern of a shot-gun blast. Then the wall. Then the rest of the world.

The object of bowling is simple: knock down as many pins as you can in ten frames and add them up, giving yourself certain rewards for skill - additional points for spares and strikes. Though bowling doesn't have a lot of grace or subtlety to it, it does have some, and to watch a troupe of bowlers for even a

short time is to see every variety of it. Bowlers, like boats, seem to range from dugout canoes to sleek yachts.

There are the duffers, people (usually women and young children) who don't so much bowl as simply release something out of their hands and pray that it will avoid the Scylla and Charybdis of the gutters. Often they don't have the fingerstrength to really hold the ball, so it dangles off their finger-ends always in danger of mashing their toes. They approach the line as if it were a trip-wire, careful not to let the tips of their bowling shoes edge over, and they don't so much throw the ball as offer it to gravity and hope for the best. There is very little inclination from the vertical in their bodies and even less english.

Once the ball is out of their hands it's gone forever, and whatever falls at the end of the lane falls either because of a kind (or stingy) fate or because of simple chance moving in its unknowable fashion. These are the Calvinists of bowling, the predestiners, who believe that the decision at the end of the lane is literally out of their hands.

That is not a far-off analogy. According to official history, bowling was originally a religious activity. While archeologists have found bowling equipment in an ancient Egyptian tomb, our modern sport dates from the 1300s, in Germany. German men at that time often carried a large thick heavy stick used both as a cane and a cudgel (medieval roads were both rough and dangerous). As a test of faith, German priests would have the men place their sticks upright at the end of the aisle between the pews in a church and roll a large stone down the aisle to knock over the sticks. The stick was called a "heide," which was German for "heathen." The ritual, then, was a symbolic way of affirming the Catholic's duty to "strike down the heathen," and if a man missed the sticks, he was required to do penance and try again later.

The ritual did not last long, but the desire to throw a ball at sticks did. Soon the game was being played everywhere, usually with nine pins. But nine was not always official - the number ranged from one to seventeen. Martin Luther reportedly is the one who decided that nine was the proper number; no one seems to know when or why the tenth pin was added, though one source suggests that it may have been done to circumvent laws that banned nine-pin bowling and the excessive gambling that has plagued the sport since it began.

Nowadays the game has more participants than any other sport in the nation (and possibly the world), complete with its professional and amateur levels, arcane slang, and international governing bodies.

So when that dinghy of a bowler steps hesitantly toward the line and, in releasing the bowl, releases all intention of guiding what must be left to faith and chance, he or she is reviving, although in a slightly diluted form, an ancient action of purifying the world, striking down the heathen that threaten to turn the world to chaos and error.

Most of the people at a bowling alley are not duffers but are kin to that great crowd of people who took up the sport around the turn of the century as both recreation and a mild form of exercise. And their styles are as various as their backgrounds. I noticed three castes: the Throwers, the Pretenders, and the Actuals.[1]

Throwers have little grace or style, but they do have power. They walk up to the ball tray (that circular track just in front of the scoring table where the balls herd up) and grab, not lift, their ball out. They may or may not dry their hands on the blower spouting from the middle of the ball tray. They walk onto the lane holding the ball carelessly, either at the shoulder or hanging down at their sides, and approach the foul line much like a heavily-laden truck braking for a light turning yellow. When they release the ball it describes a small sharp thumping parabola before it attaches itself to the lane, and it moves down the boards like a syllogism rumbling towards its conclusion. Sometimes a strike, more often odd combinations of pins that leave the heathen standing.

It's hard to tell the difference between Pretenders and Actuals. They look very much alike and have similar mannerisms. But a little close watching brings out the distinctions, who is the pearl and who is the olivet. But first, their similarities. Pretenders and Actuals have obviously studied and practiced proper technique and form. Their bowling balls are not picked from the rack where everyone else goes but are usually customized, full of swirls and colors and sometimes monogrammed. They wear heavy leather braces that fit snugly over the hand and wrist, and their shoes have never been on feet other than their own. They are deliberate in their motions, concentrated and decisive.

But Pretenders give themselves away. Like the Pharisee in the Bible, they are just a tad too professional, too rigorous, too grim. They make a show of their game. Pretenders will use slightly elaborate gestures over the blower, rippling their hands as if they were rolling worry-beads in their palms. They will make a small scene of wiping the ball with a towel, and then take just a half-second too long to settle themselves on their spot before they approach the foul line.

And when the ball is released, often after some odd or quirky choreography the Pretender has devised, they will watch the ball as if they were Ahab looking for a spout, pulling appropriate english as the ball prepares for the pins. And when they're done with their turn, they will often sit down with their arms spread on the backs of the chairs next to them, the towel spread nonchalantly (but carefully placed) over the thigh.

Actuals often do all of what the Pretenders do, but there's a subtle distinction: they seem to enjoy the game for its own sake. They are not "outside" just throwing a hard plastic object at wooden objects. Instead, they are "inside" the objects, knowing in a whole sense the grip of the ball against the boards, the moisture sheen of their hands, the subtle personality differences between the headpin and the kingpin. I remember watching on television, one slow Sunday afternoon, several games of the Pro Bowlers Tour. I don't remember who was competing, but I do remember this one man who bowled a strong game over 200.

Yes, he had the heavy leather brace on his forearm, the marbled blue ball, the tight-stitched new-leather bowling shoes. But one could tell he was an artist at the game. There was an affinity between the man and his medium, between the sinew of the hand, the swirling grain of the maple alley, the skewed hourglasses of the pins - they all seemed variations of each other, synonyms of

a feel, variations on the theme of grace and inner understanding.

There really was a beauty to the game I hadn't noticed before, a circular fullness to all the motions. A man tosses the means of destruction toward ranked pawns, knocks them down and is rewarded. Yet it is not a one-sided act, an act of simple imperialism. The pawns re-set themselves, the ball returns, and the man is challenged again. And then again.

The pawns have only the power of regeneration, not attack, yet they force the man to return repeatedly to his efforts - he can never rest while they stand, he must renew the attack, and thus renew the fact that he can never conquer them totally. He must work with their regeneration if he is to have anything like peace because it's only by their regeneration that he has any reason for being.

This bowler seemed to know this by how he picked up the ball, the almost penitential way he approached the foul line, the careful blending of the ball with the lane as he released it, his intent look-out stare as all of the ball's bundled physics and instructions unwound, the contemplation of result and preparation

for the next move. He had an intense calmness about him, an absence of over-power but not of power, a look on his face which seemed to say that while what he was doing was important, it wasn't so important that he was going to forget the difference between the game and himself.

He reminded me of a Chinese artist I saw one time - the quick dash of the inked brush, the small subtle intonations that give the dash support and undercurrent, the easy moving-on to the next picture, each picture important, each picture not important at all.

Too much myth for what is essentially a blue-collar game? Maybe. But I like to think that even if what I see is wrong, or that even if most bowlers would think what I was saying was crap, that something inside people - their need for a beauty, the satisfaction found in rhythm, a part of the brain that delights in the subtle poetries of life - requires them to braid anything they can find into order and understanding. Any material will do, and for millions of people bowling seems to be it.

But something else is at work here, too, a something which is part of the reason why I hang around the bowling alley once in a while. Something about large groups of people. Something about temporary camaraderie. Something about a truce with all the things in the world which divide and single us. During the winter, during those one or two times when the snow settles gently in half-dollar-sized flakes, when the wind is still, the air cold but without acid, there is the feeling of having the best of two worlds: a soft collecting beauty outside which makes the warmth of the inside so much more desired, so much more comforting.

In that interim where the beauties of inside and outside not only counterbalance but leaven each other, a person can feel an accord that seems to be what all the fussing and fighting is about. For a moment all hostilities are suspended, it is Christmas at Verdun, and the Germans and British are singing carols to each other.

Being in the large, warm, boisterous, friendly, high-fiving congregation gives that same feeling, the actuality, however, brief, that who we are inside and outside is in "harmonic convergence," in this case all the terrestrial bodies roughly lined up and exerting a healing, conclusive power. I suppose it's a kind of love, brief, not very deep, but enough to knock the heathen of the world down for a moment, enough like that abundant vision of cold snow from inside a stove's warmth to keep them coming back each week.

I think I may go try a few strings myself.

1. Most of these comments apply to men, not to women. I haven't really noticed the same grouping in women bowlers. Good women bowlers seem to be just good bowlers, period.

Mrs. Joli

Mrs. Joli owns the house where I live. She is a somewhat reticent woman, with me at least, and probably with the other tenants as well. (I've only heard her say "You're too loud" to the people next door, and nothing to the man who lives upstairs.) However, she had a sprightly round of visitors this summer (mostly family - her daughters and their brood of children and husbands) and seemed at ease with that human flow.

It was during the summer that I caught glimpses of her outside the official portrait of landlady and houseowner. When she was sitting on the patio with family she would be drinking wine and smoking cigarettes - a bit of a turn from the formal older lady who took my downpayment check. And occasionally, when it was too hot in the house, or the evening breeze was particularly soothing, she would stretch out on the plastic chaise longue.

She preferred lying flat on her back rather than propped up, her hands laying in a lump on her belly, and when she got up, the stiff hair-do that she wore would be pushed forward, so that she looked as if she were wearing one of those winged helmets worn by certain orders of nuns. She would be momentarily disoriented from her nap and the polite outside face would briefly drop, the lines of its descent running from mouth corners and the wings of the nose. But with a push of the hair back into place and a few deep breaths she became the Mrs. Joli most of the people at the bank and the supermarket knew.

But those were only glimpses, and they said little - she liked red wine, she had a harsh braying laugh, she wore only half-stockings that came up over her calf. If Mrs. Joli is anything to most of the world, she is an outer person. Much of how she conducts her life - from the way she pulls *all* the blinds down every night to the paintings she does but does not display - is aimed at not letting people know how she conducts her life. And the most prominent way she maintains a moat around the well-cared-for meticulous house and garden called 331 Wilson Street is through her language - her French.

She does not speak English often or well. This is her choice, a decision not to anglicize herself. She has a "boyfriend", Henri Belcourt (more on him), through whom she speaks out her orders, and usually defers all my requests (for repairs, for permission to store something in the garage) to his mediation. For herself, she confines her English to the ceremonial: "How are you?" "Have a nice day." The few conversations I've had with her have been along these lines. I

have a hard time understanding her heavily accented speech; I'm sure she has a hard time with my relatively rapid talk. I slip the rent check under the door each week; she prefers it that way.

She is a handsome woman, though not pretty or striking in any way. I would like to see pictures of her as a young woman, to see how the broad planes of her cheeks and the smallness of her eyes and the strong presence of her chin combined to charm and capture Henri Joli (her now-departed husband). Her hair is now brittle white and she wears it teased out to give it a stiff buoyancy. She has designer-rim glasses, large roundish frames with bifocals, and dresses simply but fashionably. She drives a large bloated American car, a Plymouth Satellite Custom, with 53,000 miles on it. (I've noticed all her French-speaking friends, including Henri Belcourt, drive enormous cars: Lincolns, Buicks, Oldsmobiles, Cadillacs. It is certainly one way of being safe in a land that does not speak your language.)

These are the only kinds of stats I can collect on her - trying to read messages in the dregs of clothes, eyeglasses, glances through momentarily unshaded windows, the alluvium of paint cans and insecticides in the garage. None of this tells me who she is; it only tells me what I can see. I've got no inside sources.

I have no idea how old she is, when she was married, when her husband died (I'm assuming - though with a little confidence - that she's a widow who owns the house), what she does when she's not at home. Henri mentioned to me one time (for some reason I no longer remember) that she doesn't allow him to stay over (I filled in "overnight") or move in, signifying to me an independent spirit a little bit at odds with her other image of needful dependent widow. Perhaps this is how she gets the best of both worlds (and thus gets protection) - a helping hand when she needs it, a hand to slap away when she doesn't. If that's true, then that darkens rather than broadens what little I think I know about her.

More questions, like spoors on a humid piece of bread, ignite and blossom: why does she act like she does? did her husband hit her? does she not trust men? was she happy in her marriage? did she cry when he died? has she given up love? And so on. I could write a novel and answer them all myself, but my answers would not be as quirky, as logical, or as itchy as the real life. It's the real life that I want to know.

She keeps a clean house, even stylish, though in a heavily cluttered "Good Housekeeping" sort of way. Her kitchen, for instance. She re-did the kitchen herself, putting up the paper and the paint. It's essentially cream and blue, but

the wallpaper, a strong azurine, has small blivits of cream in it that pick up the cream window frames, cream cabinets, cream baseboard. Not only do these colors match, they're *welded*.

The kitchen is clean, formica'|, with a microwave and a toaster oven and a table held down by a large arrangement of dried grasses and ferns. A landscape of hers (signed "T Joli") hangs over a little nothing-table filled with another arrangement of dried somethings sitting on a blue doily, bracketed by two thin candles (unburned) and a glazed statue of a swan arching its neck back to nuzzle its tail feathers. A wrought-iron plant stand holds an ivy.

Her living room is clean and very Sears, with a heavy velvety-napped sofa along a wall covered with goldish flocked wallpaper, a large color TV, a horde of knick-knacks and "items" on shelves and in hutches, thick carpet, a winged velvety-napped chair, acres of muzzy curtains that only let in a glow rather than light. Even though she doesn't use the material, the furniture feels as if it has plastic on it, that special clear ice-like plastic reserved for rooms that are never used but displayed. I've only seen these two rooms, though I know there are three more: the bathroom, her bedroom, and the workroom where she must do her painting.

Interestingly, a large mirror hangs on the wall shared by her kitchen and her workroom, so that any curious eyes trying to read through the wall would only encounter their own reflection. I realized that all of the furnishings, intended or not, reveal only themselves and nothing else. In that sense they are "generic", even if stylish - the personality of the compiler of impersonal touch.

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Henri. I assume he's retired. He's hinted as much, speaking about having owned apartment buildings at one time in his life (which, I presume, qualifies him for being Mrs. Joli's *charges |'affaires*). He drives a blue-and-cafe au lait Lincoln Continental and has an interest in old planes. When the local airport sponsored an air show, he stood outside in the yard with a radio receiver which could pick up the control tower's transmissions and watched for the planes in the sky as they radio'| their positions to the ground. He was as jumpy and laughing as a young boy watching a parade, the difficulty of being able to see his beloved planes increasing the excitement he felt when he finally did spot the ancient bi-plane doing a barrel roll.

He seems quite attached to Mrs. Joli. He cuts her grass, rakes her leaves, weeds along the driveway, re-barks the ground around the bushes, cleans out the fountain (a heavy concrete bowl presided over by a nymph drooling water from an urn). He obviously enjoys doing this, though I don't know what he gets in return, what favors she favors him with. On Fridays they go out and when they return I've seen them sitting on her couch watching TV. (Again, fragmentary information - in my snooping all I can see in the inch between the casement and the shade edge is two pair of feet with socks on pointed in the general direction of the TV.)

He loves to talk, is always jovial, but with a slurry kind of speech, just on the edge of too much champagne. He has white hair and wears a jaunty little moustache. He seems happy enough with the arrangement: a little gardening, a little bookkeeping, some companionship, and the annual air show. His labor seems well-rewarded.

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It's not a bad life she has: someone who cares for her (or is at least willing to do some work for her), a property that gives her money, family and friends, painting and gardening: overall, a clean well-lighted place. Is she happy? I don't know. I assume she is - evidence says she should be, and she acts as if she has no quarrels with the world.

Is that the end of the essay? I suppose it is, though the end, like the volute on the tail of a signature, needs rounding off before it's properly consigned. What draws our eyes to the flourished signature is not the name so much as its pattern, the way the name becomes a web that catches our eyes. The web is inseparable from the name; to know the least part of the name means being caught in the web.

Mrs. Joli is more than the name she signs on my rent receipts, or the "T Joli" she affixes to her oils. Her name is every coil, whorl, and cirrus that connects her to me, her tenants, Henri (both husband and friend), napping on the patio, taking wine in the afternoon, dreaming in French. What I have tried to know about her name has drawn me into her sphere, made me feel, even to a small degree, *responsible* for her. Not to take care of her, necessarily; but she is no longer a stranger, an alien.

Which means to say she cannot be ignored or reduced. She has achieved in me a personal humanity, as opposed to the impersonal humanity we call love

of humankind (which is simply neutered aggression, an ethic meant generally to keep us from killing one another). She is particular and substantiated, and the filaments that draw me to her are *moral*: whether or not I choose to follow it, I have some small obligation to protect what I have made an effort to know.

It's endlessly provocative how humans do and don't connect, both with themselves and others - a cliché, perhaps, but fascinating in its durable elusiveness. Lately I have noticed how hard people work not to look at one another. I do it myself. Yet when for a moment I really look into the face of someone, anyone, I'm shocked, the way a person with repaired cataracts must be shocked. Some kind of gauze seems to disappear and for a moment I am connected to this other being - not intimately, not robustly, yet something which is not the usual vague imprisonment we feel as we lug our egos around.

It is really a kind of love, or at least love's alphabet, the simple constitutive pattern that can give rise to the intimate sentences that trouble and ground our lives.

But there is more here than a tale of learning to respect another human being, coached in the useful syllables of the metaphor of words. As is often the case with language, the act of naming a thing in a sense creates the thing. To be sure, the name gives the namer some kind of power over the object because the name brings the object into view, into range: It is no longer an "other".

But that desire for power is not just simple capitalistic rapacity, or a spasm of fear against a strange and dangerous world. The act of naming also brings the namer home, crystallizes out of all that is not the namer that which he can nourish and which can nourish him. And once the object has been named, it quite literally becomes incorporated into the namer, as much an organ of the body as skin or heart. Thus, by naming we fatten ourselves on the world, become more intimate and inclusive.

By noticing Mrs. Joli I have become a bit more fluent in that alphabet of naming, which is another way of loving the world (even as we fear it). Of course, by choice and circumstance I will not become totally fluent in the phonics of loving Mrs. Joli. Much like the way we exchange a hobbled French and English Mrs. Joli and I choose limited and approximate understandings of each other, which satisfies our (or at least my) desire to be something between strangers and confidantes. But by naming her, as I've tried to do, I have loved her. I have chosen to see her rather than simply look at her (or look her over); I can never deny her humanness, and I have increased my own.

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She has put a new basket of dried flowers on the small table on the landing and replaced the burned-out bulb in the hallway. She has mulched her flower beds for winter and begun putting seed out for the birds. She has also trimmed back the ivy vine crawling up the drain-pipe to the roof, made it slender and less shaggy. The other night I saw her drive out with Henri, both of them dressed well - either dinner or a funeral, I thought, or both. I continue to collect and collate, haphazardly - she is not a dissertation but a browse. The world continues to distill out for me, liquors of home and naming fresh on the tongue, raising up the blood as they course. I write down the intoxication as often as I can, go back for more, and for more again.

Mrs. Joli, *salut*!

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I have found out more.

One day I was at the city's historical society poking around the dusty innards of its files when I came across a bookcase full of directories. In those directories were listed all of the occupants and their occupations of all the households in Manchester. So I naturally looked up my own house. And then I did it again for a different year. And another year. I soon (soon? it took me all morning) reconstructed a chronology of when Mrs. Joli moved into the house with Henri, what Henri did for a job, when Henri died. The chronology is fairly simple. Mrs. Joli became a widow in 1977, which means that Henri died in 1976 or 1977. (The listing for 1977 was "Wid Henri L); his name is listed for 1976.) He was a grader/operator for T & M Paving, a job he began in 1973.

Before that, he'| been a grader/operator for Manchester Paving (possibly the same company) from 1964 to 1973, and before that he had been a crane operator for Manchester Sand, Gravel, and Cement. (The first listing for that job is 1959). It seems that Henri was a blue-collar worker all his life, doing heavy manual labor for at least 14 years. It makes me wonder what she did: no directory ever has an occupation listed for her.

The first year for a listing for both of them was 1959. They were living at 295 Concord Street. Since Manchester Sand is in Hooksett, it's possible they lived there before moving to Manchester. It's also possible that that's the year they married, since there's no listing for a "Henri L" before that, except for a student named in the directory for 1958, who most certainly could not have been Mrs.

Joli's Henri. In 1961 they began to be listed at 331 Wilson Street, meaning that they bought the house either that year or the year before.

They bought the house from a Mrs. Anna M. Liberty. She was a widow at the time. I've often wondered what the three of them talked about as Henri and Mrs. Joli looked the house and property over. (I know the plaza next door didn't exist yet - what did? how often did the trains rumble through then? how big was the maple hanging outside my window?) Mrs. Liberty had been alone for a while. Her husband, Victor (or, as the directory listed him one year, "Victor J, osteo") had died in 1952. Perhaps the house was getting too hard to handle, what with the large downstairs and the tenants. (Tenants had always lived there, often listed as 331 Wilson Street, as far as back as I went in the directories.) Perhaps she was just tired and glad to see the house fall into the hands of a hard-working young couple.

I've wondered what happened after 1961 to the woman with the last name of freedom. I've wondered if Victor was a good osteopath, wondered how their marriage worked, whether he gave her the same good attention he gave to bones and whether she really felt free.

There's an interesting pattern that gives rise to this fictive interest in the fate of Anna Liberty. (Such a name with rich fictional possibilities!!) Victor, as I said, died in 1952. For the nine years from Victor's death to its occupancy by Henri and Mrs. Joli in 1961, Anna had a boarder by the name of Roger Fredette, a millwright at Blackstone, Inc.

Roger had been living with the Liberties before Victor died, but there's no listing of him after Henri took over the house. Did they leave together? What did they do during that nine-year meantime, he on the second floor, she on the first? What makes it more interesting, at least on the level of gossip-spinning, is that Roger had a wife, "Dora S". She's first listed in 1957, presumably when they married. What tension did the entrance of another woman create?

And on and on.

Yes, perhaps 331 Wilson Street was a bed of salacious activity - trysts, possible ménages, dark guilt - but the truth, whatever it was, pales a little beside the excitement kicked up by the asking. More likely it was an orderly arrangement, with Mrs. Liberty collecting the rent each week or each month, and Roger and Dora moving out when Henri and Mrs. Joli moved in, as often happens with new landlords and old tenants. Perhaps -

Henri and Mrs. Joli had quite a number of tenants: laborers, a social worker for Catholic Charities, a teacher, a driver, a computer programmer for Bank of New Hampshire - and quite a few with no occupation given. A curious anomaly crops up in 1976, and again in 1981. In 1975 and 1980 her name is not listed, only Henri's - and this after Henri died in 1977.

The following years she's listed as a new occupant. I wonder what happened. It's not exactly accurate to say that Henri died in 1977. He could have died in 1976, and perhaps been ill before that. If she left, it might have been in mourning, on a trip away from Hades to recoup and rectify. It's even odder to have Henri's name in 1980, as if his departed self had taken up residence on the earth one more time, sitting in for her while she wished to be anonymous.

The lacunae are intriguing enough to kick-start the imagination, but the bare bones remain just that, factless and ossified, and there's a point at which imagination, no matter how fleshy, will play false with the skeleton. What I make up is most certainly *not* her life; in the end, I can't favor my version over hers. I am at a point where what I can gather *outside* will only darken rather than leaven the bones. I am at a point where I must talk with her, be *inside* the brain she has grown familiar with. That is, I must begin to know her rather than know about her. That is, give up the comfortable distance of the spectator and library-spook and touch the flesh.

The moral filaments that had drawn me to her are now more cabled, thicker if not less tenuous. I should have known this all along - where one lives always means knowing with whom one lives. It is not land-surveying or architecture but genealogy that eventually makes us understand ourselves. We do not live at an address but with people, even if we spend most of our waking and sleeping energy trying to make believe we only need a few of them for our comfort, and not much from those few. It is hard work paying attention - "attention" is a rare and demanding currency. No wonder most of us are poor in it.

The Fight Next Door

It was one a.m. when the banging started. Joan and I couldn't tell what he was doing - banging something down, running the water in the kitchen sink, banging again. We could tell how angry he was, though; that came through the walls clearly. I wondered where the woman was he lived with, and then I wondered if it was the woman he was banging - her head, perhaps, against the kitchen sink. I listened, half-attentive for danger, half-hoping he'| stop and let me get back to sleep.

Mrs. Joli came up, knocked on the door. He opened the door roughly and she, in her barely understandable high-pitched low-register English, told him that he was making too much noise. I couldn't hear his response at first, but she repeated herself, to which he shouted "It's Friday night and I'm alone. It's Friday night and I can't fucking keep a girlfriend." He slammed the door, the force of it sending Mrs. Joli back down to her apartment. That pissed me off - she did not deserve such treatment, regardless of what desperation he was feeling. I got up, got dressed, and went downstairs with the aim of asking her if she was all right. But there weren't any lights on in the apartment and I felt reluctant to knock. So I figured she was okay and instead went outside.

He lives on the second floor, as I do, but he has the front of the house. I walked down the driveway to the street and looked up. He was in a front room, presumably a bedroom. He is a large man, heavy and glum. When I first saw him, as he and his roommate moved in, I thought that she was a social worker and he was a recently released EMR sent into the community and that they had rented the apartment as a half-way house. He has a bland face, orangutan in expression. When he walks his feet point to 10 and 2 o'clock and he bounces. He has a pendulous gut, round and melon-firm. When I've passed him in the hall and said hello, I've been handed a few monosyllables in return from a mouth whose lips are thick.

He was pacing in the room. He wore no shirt, only jeans worn low on his hips, so that I could see the top of his ass's cleavage. He would stand facing his north wall, then walk to the door (facing east), then walk back to the north wall again. I watched for five minutes, not sure what I was looking for but fascinated by the glimpses.

His pacing gave what I had heard through the walls some texture, some solidity of vision. But after five minutes I was bored, wishing that some action

would happen, but not really - I wanted to go back to sleep. I finally went back inside, and a few minutes after I'| crawled back into bed and Joan's warmth I heard him leave the apartment. I fell back asleep easily.

When they came back (I could hear his heavy tread, her lighter one), it was at least three a.m. It seems as if they hadn't had time to get their coats off before they were shouting at each other. We never could tell exactly what they were fighting about. A short punctuated scream from her got us both out of bed, but it turned out to be nothing.

It was apparent after a while, as their voices got lower and less strident, that they had reached some kind of compromise and by four they had (presumably) drifted off together. Joan and I went back to our bed and hoped to be in reasonable shape when we got up for good later on. We only barely heard the cop arrive and ask them if everything was all right, and then his authoritative tread down the stairs.

But I couldn't so easily go back to sleep. There was a part of me that was angry at them, almost furious. Her scream had gotten me out of bed, had pushed me to where I would have to get dressed, find a dime in the dark, and run across the street to call the police. I would have to take responsibility for their troubles, for the safety of a person I've never met before. (Or would I have even gone to make the phone call? I probably would have knocked on the door and asked if everything was all right, probably would have been cursed and maybe even confronted - and for what? It was none of my business, and yet it was, and I was angry at being called to take account of something I had not chosen to care about.)

Above all I think I was angry at how cavalierly they invaded the lives of the people around them, how presumptuous they were that people should have to pay attention to them even if they didn't care to. They laid about with their explosions, throwing the shrapnel of their words and actions pell-mell, and forced an intimacy that they had not earned.

They were careless, the way Nick Carraway thought Gatsby and his crowd were careless - using others to satisfy or soothe their own whims or perturbations of spirit without ever caring about consequences.

Gill Stadium

My apartment is only a short walk from Gill Stadium. In 1986 the *Union Leader* ran a number of articles about the need to renovate and upgrade the facilities at Gill. It showed pictures of decaying concrete and chipped brick and flaking paint. Over that summer they began planting trees, maples, in front of the stadium, along Valley Street. The trees are fenced off by railings of pressure-treated lumber, and each of the railings has routered into it the name of a Manchester native who made good in the sports world: Flanagan, Balboni, Macek. They've also started re-roofing part of the stadium and have rehabilitated most of the worn-out benches.

It's encouraging to see some money being put into this section of the city and not being hogged to build office space downtown that won't be rented. Gill Stadium is part of an older Manchester, most of which is now enlisted in the ahistorical and profit-driven process called "development." It's a part of Manchester that's working class in spirit and origin, a part that is "small-town" even though it's in a city.

The stadium sits on the site of an older park, Varick Park, owned and operated in 1893 by one Thomas Varick. (But it also seems that the land where the park sat was owned by the Amoskeag Manufacturing Company.) Nobody in 1893 was having a good time. Manchester, like the rest of the country, was suffering from the wide-spread economic panic of that year, and the grounds (known then as the "Beech-street baseball grounds") were in disrepair and morbid decline.

Thomas Varick came along and single-handedly transformed the park. As one newspaper account says it, everyone thought that Varick would make "the prodigal son look like a piker," but this "veritable Aladdin" kept "sawing wood" and made the place come alive.

Varick put in a new stands, cleaned up the grounds, and installed a quarter-mile bicycle racing track, making it the only suitable arena for championship racing north of Boston. And it attracted droves of people. (The bicycle was quite a craze in the 1890s; everyone wanted to ride the "velocipedes" and "bone-shakers," including young lovers, who saw the vehicle as a way to outrun chaperons.) Ten thousand people showed up in 1894 for a bicycle race, where American champion "Eddie" Bald burned up the track for the mile race at 2:13.

But by 1912 Varick Park was in decline, and just as he had taken it over from someone in 1893, someone took it over from him in 1912 - the Amoskeag Textile club, "a social and athletic organization of employees of the Amoskeag manufacturing company." They spent an incredible $85,000 to restore it. (The recent request for restoration funds was $550,000.) On September 8, 1913, the park, known now as "Textile Field," was dedicated in a day-long extravaganza, including as its highlight a game between the "World Champion" Boston Red Sox and the Manufacturer's League All-Stars (with a few Boston Braves "donating" their help to the All-Stars to give the game some zip). The All-Stars lost 3-1, but gave a good accounting of themselves on the field of battle. (The game also revived, though only briefly, interest in the then-moribund New England baseball league.) At least 10,000 people attended. In a photo of the day the stands, shaded by a valerium, are filled with a sea of straw boaters, everyone dressed in starch and gabardine and leather.

Gill Stadium received its present name in 1967, dedicated to Ignace Gill, who had been superintendent of Manchester Parks and Recreation for 32 years. Since 1913 it's been the site in Manchester for the thrill of victory and the agony of defeat, grand drama and delible memories played out in a small space. For me, the best times at Gill are at the end of the baseball season and the beginning of the football season. It's August. The football players are already working on double sessions while legion baseball is winding down. It's hot. On a week-day night, when the apartment's too humid, I follow the brilliant cynosure of lights at Gill to see who's playing.

There's usually a sparse crowd. Cheering from the stands is sporadic - usually a parent for a child, or friends. (It's tough being the out-of-town team at times like this, since attendance is so small, and no great huzzah of people comes from far away for the game.) The people in the crowd seem to me mostly working class, people who have lived in neighborhoods all their lives, native Manchesterians for whom Gill is as much a part of the rhythm of life in the city as elections and the *Union Leader*.

There are a lot of old men at these games, to meet friends and harass semi-enemies. They rest enormous flabby arms on equally enormous bellies, their baseball caps tipped back or canted forward. Their hands are large, with fingers like thick dowels. They like to deliver their voices in strong decibels, laughing when they can, and I get the feeling, mostly because I don't know them, that everything they say is an inside joke to everyone around them - that these men

are much like respected elders of the tribe. They razz the ump, eat chili dogs, encourage the young players on the field, and generally have a high time.

Other men come as well, younger men. A lot of them look tired, scruffy, maybe ticking away at jobs that don't pay a whole lot, are hard work, and don't leave much of a day left at the end of the day. Many have dirty hands, chipped nails, bunged knuckles. Some of them, many of them, are younger than I, and I wonder what they are looking forward to in their lives.

The women seem more sprightly than the men. They yell encouragement as often and as loud as they can, but it feels different to me than how the men shout. The men shout, when they shout, to annoy - sometimes to goad and praise, but mostly to get on someone's nerves. They seem to boister *for* the home team by yelling *against* the visiting team's players or coach. The women, on the other hand, seem more "maternal"(?) in their cheering. Rarely do they complain about a bad call or decision (though I've heard let loose some rasps and anathemas that have raised the hair on my neck) but instead call out to the players by their first names and let them know that someone is literally and figuratively behind them.

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The younger women, in their late teens or early twenties, often have too much make-up on, eyelids darkened and heavily lined, cheeks heavily rouged. They are often skinny, wearing jeans and high heels, and their hair is lank. Sometimes they look like they have only two-and-a-half dimensions. Many have young children. The women slipping through their thirties seem to occupy more space, or occupy space better, their third dimension more fully compassed. The older ones are more matronly, carrying heavy hammocks of flesh under their triceps, wearing expandable pants to cover broad hips and stout thighs. They sport ample bosoms (as a quainter world might put it) and wear little or no make-up or nail polish. They are solid in the way the men's bellies are solid - rounded and present, moving forward.

The baseball games are fairly sedate and languid, much like the game itself - vast stretches of waiting broken by spasms called ground balls and home runs. Gill really comes alive - or at least comes to a different kind of life - during the football season. The Football Jamboree is a good time. The fall season has just started, the players haven't been hurt yet, the air has just turned autumn, people are feeling sprung, and the stadium is melee'| with people wanting less to see how the powerhouses of the season come off than to be seen in the present

tense. Everything is at the Jamboree that one attaches to high school football, and even for someone who doesn't like the game (like myself), it's an evening full of a harmless muscular boosterism.

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Most games don't happen like the Jamboree. Most games rarely have a lot of people at them, and those that do go usually sit bundled up on the uncomfortable seats, occasionally letting out the grey plume of a cheer or a shout, cupping hands around Styrofoam containers of watery hot chocolate, looking anxiously at the almost-wholly-lit scoreboard clock to see how much time is left to suffer the slings and arrows of a high school football game.

The only people that really seem to enjoy the football game are the adolescents. They, of course, don't go to the game to watch the game. They go to meet others and fool around, to eat endless pounds of hot dogs and Doritos draped in American cheese (called "nachos" at the concession stand), drink Coke (and a variety of other beverages, usually inhaled in someone's car before coming through the gate), and generally look around to see who is watching them look around.

It's almost a life-threatening situation to go to the concession stand, trying to cleave the hordes of loud talk and music (always a boom box somewhere). And they walk endlessly back and forth, back and forth. I have to be sure not to sit in the first three rows because if I do my view of the game will be a succession of a few seconds of the players clipped by knots of bodies bolting by. They can get obnoxious, especially the guys out looking for fights with fans from the opposing team, or who have drunk too much and don't know it yet. They get mean, and that meanness seems to violate the innocuousness of the whole situation - no one is supposed to take the game that seriously.

But of course they're stuffed with all sorts of false notions about honor and manliness - and the occasion they're attending is simply a more ritualized version of the heads they're trying to crack under the bleachers. And they're bored, too - adolescence can be such a desert sometimes.

I remember going to a freshman football game one Monday; what drew me was the fact that the stadium lights were on during a school night. It was cold, and the stands were almost empty, populated mostly by parents silently urging the game clock to hurry along. On the field were the two teams - and I was struck

by how *young* they looked, how much the heavy equipment didn't cover their thin bodies or lower in register their shouting voices.

These players - these children - were out there offering fragile knees and hands for the sake of testing themselves against grand strategy, and it was both sad and comical (and frightening, when one of the players hit the turf holding his ankle) to watch them muddle around in the center of the field, one team going three downs and kicking, the other team going three downs and kicking, their fingers nipped numb by the chill, their breath as thin and vaporous as pollen.

It was a small moment, really, an inconsequential game - and when the time finally ran down, the victors gave a short perfunctory yell of victory and high-fived the losers as both teams filed past each other, and everyone hustled off to the showers and, after that, dinner, wanting to get off that cold field as soon as possible. The parents huddled out by the ticket booth at the front gate, talking, clapping together gloved hands to encourage the blood, following the ancient rituals of all supportive parents waiting for a son to emerge wet-headed and duffel-bag-toting from the locker room. The visiting team had a short, jangly bus ride back across the river, where their parents waited for them in heat-filled cars.

I remember watching all of this, retrieving my own memories from when I played at Gill as a high-school "star" (I made the All-State team in my junior year), knowing how the locker rooms would be filled with steam and naked bodies and boasts and advice from coaches. In a few moments I knew I would be leaving the scene to go home, but I remember a reluctance to leave right away, hesitating in order to catch the run of images and sensations that were quickly radiating away into the cloudless onyx sky.

The game may have been inconsequential, ordinary, the parents§ muffled chatter routine and expository - but it's through such ordinariness that most of life plays itself out, shapes and defines its purpose. Imagine that living acts like the double helix of DNA. As it splits and recombines and repeats itself, it weaves disparate particles of matter - a word said here, a touch there, the daily routine jump-started by the alarm clock - into a narrative we use to give meaning to our time. So much of what we call "knowledge" comes from suddenly recognizing what had been around us all the time; it comes not from revelation but from more thoughtful reconnaissance.

It seems to me that the crucial dividing line between an examined and an unexamined life comes from how frequently we can really notice what we take for-granted. The more we make an effort to notice, that is, keep account of the

weights our actions have and not simply let them become gravity, the more possible it is to acquire a sense of living, of a flow that feels connected and consequential.

This isn't always possible: there are usually more wolves at the door than curses to keep them away. But for that bald brief moment standing at the stadium gates I felt I had tapped in to the for-granted, and witnessed a bit of narrative instructing itself into being.

THE FRESHMAN FOOTBALL GAME
An October evening sets down,
its brash chilling yardage filling
the almost empty stadium.
A few parents scattered in the stands,
mingling adolescents feasting on
coke, popcorn, shouted repartee,
one cop to represent order.
On the field, under the buzzing lights,
in stumbling gladiatorial patterns,
run the two freshman squads,
initiates into the order of
dive, counter weak, post, trap,
4-3, zone, pursuit, rotate,
the sacral language,
jargon of violence.
They're not quite grown
into their equipment,
bodies still gangly, unbalanced,
pushing out at different speeds -
shoulder pads stretching out
thin racks of bone and deltoid,
thigh pads thickening legs -
counterfeits of adulthood
barely protecting their headlong
rush into collision and cold glory.

The last series of downs:

grey plumes of gasping breath
rising from each huddle,
thin snap of clapped hands
as the huddles break,
the ragged precision as linemen set,
the jittery linebackers watching
the unmoving nervous backs -
then snap! the ball slaps up,
the quarterback turns, pitches
to the half back slinking left,
the pulling guard plowing a lane,
the linebackers slicing right,
the ends collapsing,
the linemen jammed and down
like logs on a sand bar,
the cornerback rotating up until
all crash in a spray of arms and legs,
settle into knotted pools,
then evaporate.
At the bottom of the pile
under a quarter ton of flesh
lies the leather grail jammed
into the sweaty gut, protected
by cold hands bruised
and scumbled with dirt.
For a second,
though no one notices,
the smell of cold earth
hardening into November
lifts off the turf through
the bars of helmets -
then the unGordian knot ravels,
someone shakes out a jammed finger,
unkinks a knocked knee,
substitutes scuttle in, and
they return to the huddle.
It begins again,

this time a pass, next a trap
until the zebra'| officials
blow last whistles and everyone
heads off to respective showers.
There's the ritual meeting
of the teams
to congratulate and console,
then the winners celebrate,
the losers nurse,
and the grounds crew quickly
strips the field of memory.
Then the lights go out
and the northern air of October
huddles down into the stadium,
making long elegant passes
into end-zones scored with darkness.

As I write this, Gill is quiet - there is nothing in January worth doing outside in a stadium. The spindly trees planted in the sidewalk look as sponged-out as the frozen turf. But spring is coming; already I imagine that baseball gloves are being oiled, rosters drawn up, schedules set. And the people will come again to the games at this stadium in their ones and twos and carloads, this stadium built for working people to enjoy what privileges they could muster.

The people who go to Gill are by and large not the people who go to lunch with politicians at the Vault restaurant or invest in down-town development. They are common people - not the romanticized masses of Marx or the ennobled workers of the trade unions, but the crush of people who do the drudge work of this society. They are the people Orwell talked about in *Wigan Pier* - the coal miners underground who provide the power that allows the driver on the road a mile above them to move safely and comfortably (and ignorantly) along.

A refurbished Gill Stadium is a place human in dimension - not a mega-stadium that is larger than some small cities but a bigger version of a saloon, where things are still in reach and the faces that one sees in a crowd may be faces that are known and who know you. A place where one might feel at home, a place personalized and thick with memory.

Laundromat

It was a Friday night, end of the week. Hot August night, sticky, gummy - the kind of weather you can't get away from unless you lock yourself into air conditioning. I was going to do my laundry - usual weekly ritual, coming clean and all that. Where I go is open twenty-four hours a day, a small shop at the bottom of a large three-story apartment building (the nether regions), in a neighborhood which seems calculated to the be transient and full of petty tragedy, a neighborhood full of triple-decker buildings divvied up into rectangles where people live and sweat. Every window facing the street had a fan it in trying to chew the heat in the air down to coolness, and you could feel, standing on the street, how thick those rooms must be with used breath and frenetic blue television light. It was not a pleasant place to live in August.

People were on the street, walking, sitting, running cars up and down. One old couple sat in their car, she in a dried-out floral print A-shaped housedress and tiny curlers mugging her thin grey hair, he in soiled khaki workpants and a more-or-less white tank top tee-shirt, the belt in his pants circumnavigating a gut like a large, ripe melon. They sat in their car with a CB radio listening to the conversations floating around (something in the air tonight). At one point he called himself "Paisan," and started busting someone's chops about it, but all I could hear was the sizzle and buzz of static. They sat out there the entire time of my laundry.

Other people were on the street as well. Two young boys (one black, or blackish, with the flat blades of cheekbones like a Hispanic's, skin not dark coffee but more like dirty khaki) were pushing a defunct dirt bike along, taking it someplace to work on it. A few people just hustled along - a squat lady in a nurse's uniform, a sallow thin-chested custodian-looking man smoking a cigarette - no one sauntered or strolled - it was not a neighborhood where you felt you could take your time. No one lingered.

When I got to the laundromat no one was there - unusual for a Friday night. The machines had their tops up and they looked like hungry chicks with their beaks open, waiting for the crumbs of my laundry. So I fed them, with money as a dessert. The place was surprisingly clean - the owner, whom I never saw, kept it fairly respectable.

But while it was clean it was old, and felt like the basement it was. In the windows, just as sidewalk level, were old arthritic exhaust fans, scummed with

grease which had caught, like brown lungs, loose lint and liberated threads, so that the blades looked like moldy bread or the fur on an animal with mange. They didn't pull any hot air out, just provided a border where the hot air of the place mixed with the hot air outside, a delta of limp anaerobic silt.

The floor was concrete, painted grey, scabbed with repairs, also painted grey. The fluorescent lights had a few dead flies at the bottom of their covers. The in the more-or-less center of the room was a picnic table for people who were waiting. This table had two kinds of reading matter. One was the out-of-date *People* magazines, *Time* issues full of old news no one wanted, last Sunday's newspaper, *Plain Truth*, a few evangelical tracts. The other was the table itself, gouged with a line of type faces and a vocabulary that seemed to indicate a language found nowhere else but in that room. It was a Rosetta Stone, but it deciphered only itself, nothing outside itself, so that the words circled in on themselves, going back into a tongue rather than out to an ear.

People soon came in and it got crowded quickly, the already thick air thickened with odd spiced breaths and single-syllable words. The men and women seemed to fall into two types. The women came basically in two shapes - pregnant and not-pregnant. Each woman had a hard face. Some were pretty, but all were hard. What is hard? Nothing about their faces looked or felt soft. It was mostly the eyes and mouth. The mouth seemed tight, like the top of a draw-string purse, or a sphincter muscle. Their jaws were angled, not sloped, as if they had clenched teeth since their they were born. Even when they laughed, it only made the mouths momentarily less hard, not soft. Years of accumulated arguments, bad food, shouting, insufficient dentistry, dehydrated their smiles, made their servant of speech look and act like a closeted cousin in a hidden attic.

It was in the eyes, though, that held it most, held the harshness, all the more shocking for that. Mouths can become dry, lips chapped, and it's not surprising to see the deserts of one's life played out on the dunes of one's lips. Yet the eyes are liquid, meant to flow and fill. But in these eyes it was not water but acid, shallow wells of disappointment and Friday night drudgery. They didn't flicker, look straight into, sparkle. They weren't flat or dead but tentative and distrustful, eyes on one frequency, seeing a spectrum of one color broken into its monotonous shades. Their faces seemed to have no rest in them, no respite, nothing nonchalant or playful.

In terms of shape, it was pregnant/non-pregnant. Some women were actually pregnant, waddling lower-case *b*s or *d*s (depending on which profile they showed), the heat like an added weight or an evening sickness, hair plastered against their temples, all looking tired from carrying their consequences around. Some were just fat, tented in large swaths of fabric or encased in stretch pant and sleeveless blouses, the skin under their triceps hanging like stretched-out hammocks.

The men almost uniformly wore gym shorts, sneakers, and no shirts, various guts hanging over their waistbands, a variety of tans, lengths of hair. Some had paps, others were just shapeless, Buddha-flesh. All seemed perpetually irritated, speaking in short bursts of cursing, and even when they laughed it was quick, not lingered over. I was surprised at how willing they were to expose themselves, figuring they'| be more reticent with their bodies.

But I realized it really wasn't an exposing but a dominating. There was no guile behind their almost-undressed state, no sense of seducing or impressing. They moved their bodies where they wanted to, as clothed or unclothed as they chose, because nobody would harass them, call them names, invade them.

Not that they thought about it that way - their being able to be anywhere at anytime in whatever state of dress was just the way things were, not so much a right as a law of physics. They probably didn't even think of their bodies, just threw them around to create space the way the earth rotated. Pregnant women had to think of their bodies, move them carefully - these men just *were*, like air.

There were children there, of course, little mites running around and screaming. Everyone was breathing heavily, adding to the miasma that is August, but somehow the noise of the children added even more than air, made it not only heavier but more irritating, as if the air got down *inside* the pores and made them itch, so that the entire six pounds of skin felt like an itch in the middle of the back that you can't reach with either hand. Screaming children can do that. And of course it didn't help when the parents made attempts to quiet them down because then the children cried rather than screamed, a dubious substitute.

The children were mostly dirty, dressed in undress: torn tee-shirts, soiled gym shorts, ragged sneakers (if they were wearing any shoes), various cuts and bruises dotting their skin, a smudge of dirt at the corner of the mouth, hair stringy and unkempt. An incident happened with one of them that had everyone on edge, that actually chilled the air, as if dry ice suddenly became the devil's property.

Various people came and went in the hour and a half I was there. At one point there were just a few of us sitting around: a couple with a child, a boy, myself, and a rather ratty-looking young man I assume was about 25 or 26. He had a black tee-shirt on that said "Kill them all and let God sort them out," the epigram circling a skull and cross-bones (a grinning skull at that). His skin was dusky, but I don't know if it was from dirt or tan or genes. His hair was curly black, not wild, but certainly not regularly coiffed, and it fell in ringlets over his ears. He wore a pair of dirty green gym shorts and black low-cut sneakers out at the little toe; the laces looked as if they'| been pulled on once too often. He had a big green duffel bag of laundry, and he continually had trouble with the detergent machine, losing money twice before he figured out how to work the lever on the side to make his selection.

But his eyes were most arresting. They were not in tandem. The right one looked off to the side; the left one stared straight ahead. They looked glazed, glued over by drugs or booze or both, and though he didn't stumble around or talk to himself or reek of alcohol, I had the sense (and maybe I was the only one, since the other people in the place didn't seem to pay him any mind) that he was not strictly in control.

I had watched him try to work the detergent machine. I saw him put in money and then work the machine over with his eyes trying to figure out what to push. He stared at it, staring it down perhaps, and it remained obdurate, unyielding. He didn't bang the machine, just looked confused by it. Finally, he had to ask one of the people in the place (others had come in in the meantime) to show him what to do (this was after he'| deposited money twice). I felt sorry for him at the same time I felt it highly advisable to not turn my back on him.

The place, as I said, started to fill up. The boy was running around, screeching. His parents didn't say anything, just sat on their bench (he in his gym shorts, she in her A-frame housedress) and smoked cigarettes (an even fouler smell than usual in the glutinous air of August). I was irritated by the boy because I was trying to read (pretending, actually - who could concentrate?) and annoyed that his parents didn't reel him in or at least take him outside. There were perhaps a dozen people in the place. The little boy caromed off the leg of the man and fell down. It didn't stop him, though; he got right up and went into the next lap around the place. His mother made a half-hearted attempt to grab his upper-arm as he went by, which only spun him around and caused him to laugh a

thoroughly unhumorous laugh, a series of staccato bursts like the dry cough of an irritated squirrel. It was the kind of laugh that scraped soft tissue raw.

Suddenly, before anybody knew what was happening, the man strode over to the boy (thoroughly purposeful, showing an energy and steadiness he hadn't shown all evening), leaned down into the boy's face, and said loudly "Shut up." And before anybody registered the words, he was back over at his washing machine loading in clothes. His words seemed bloodless, unburdened by any anger or threat, but chilling all the same because suddenly here was a creature who had largely exhibited only a human form coagulating his emotions into words that everyone understood (and, I bet, agreed with).

He became fully human at that moment, though no one, including myself, knew what that meant (and perhaps were too afraid to find out). A connection, however weird, had been made between isolated individuals. It was not the saccharine connection of oneness, nor was it necessarily an understanding, the usual positive outlines of what we mean by connection. The connection was fraught with danger and possible violence, it was an assertion rather than a consensus, and it left people essentially unchanged and uncomprehending. But it was a connection, an exhibition of human emotion, a breaking out of silence. Not all connections - not all breachings of our defensive walls - are salutary or enlightening.

The boy returned to his mother, people returned to their dirty wash, and the evening limped on. People left lugging their cleansed clothes down familiar paths, as did I. Friday at the laundry.

LAUNDROMAT

Hot Friday night.
The "Wash and Dry" sign stings
the gritty dusk with invite.

Inside it's even hotter,
summer heat forged up
in circles - chains on ankles.

In they come, one, twos,
lugging laundry like sins

from their three-story buildings.

From hot rooms filled
with air like formica,
walls blued with television.

From beds ironed by worry,
in bedrooms mapped
by cairns of empty pillows.

From kitchens thickened
by calories of waiting,
voices sauced, words pared.

Washing machines gape,
chick-mouths sprung
by hunger.

In drops the clothes,
veronica veils printed with
the week's routine calvary.

In drops clothes filled with
hieroglyphics of sweat and
the desert sand of soap.

They wait. They wait.
A picnic table scalpeled by graffiti
holds magazines from 1984.

Canned music extorts
the lukewarm frequencies.
No one talks.

Children carom, voices hot,
ignoring fahrenheit, ratcheting nerves.
Adults watch, tepid and murderous.

Young men wear no shirts,
they wear shorts and sneakers,
and a day's growth of beard.

Some women are pregnant,
with faces wet-dough slick
and thinned by tired.

"Get yer ass over here."
"It's so fucking hot."
"Yeah."

They wait. They wait.
Machines stop; they extract
medusas of sheets and towels.

They pile things into dryers,
hair corrugated by sweat
into matted tiaras.

They take things out,
hang, stuff, smooth out,
brief jitterbug of folding.

Then they leave, go back
on known, well-known paths,
lugging clean lives.

Shortcut

Every morning, about eight o'clock, I hear the leaves rustle in the yard below my window, and four young girls appear. I don't know their ages, but I guess they're either in first or second grade (probably first). Mrs. Joli's backyard is not large - the size of a good living room and dining room put together - and they cross it quickly. Their intention in this quick trespass is to climb Mrs. Joli's fence, as a shortcut to their school down the block. (I assume this is why they do it - though it may be that they just like the thrill of doing a shortcut through someone's backyard.)

I usually hear their voices first - thin upper-register staccato shots full of a kind of rough-edged urgency, as if everything to be said were either a secret, a proclamation, or an instant tragedy. Then they appear. Their clothes change each day, of course, though there are some constants. Two of the girls wear dresses, two wear pants and shirts. One has a teddybear backpack, a fuzzy resemblance that reminds me of nothing else but a hunter bringing home the evening meal across his shoulders. Two of the others carry little satchels, while the fourth usually has nothing, or carries papers in her hand.

On the particular morning I'm thinking about, they ran into the yard as usual (always running, these kids), their voices preceding them like the push of air in front of a jet plane. The ones with pants and shirts were similarly dressed - sort-of-rusty corduroy pants, functional sneakers with colored socks, a tee-shirt printed with some childhood icon, and thin jackets to take off the damp chill of a September morning. One of the girls had a nice gingham dress, with a small ruffle around the hem and slightly puffed sleeves, her hair matching the brown of the dress which echoed the brown of the downed maple leaves in the yard. (She wore the bear backpack.) The last girl was, to me, the most striking. She had long wispy blond hair down to her wing bones, parted on one side, with a blue barrette holding back the side away from the part. She wore a blue dress with small white dots, the bodice plain in its fitting, the sleeves ending in white cuffs. The skirt flared just slightly, enough so that when she turned, it turned with her, though just a little delayed. White stockings ended in blue shoes. She carried papers in her hand.

The other three had already clambered over the fence. It was amusing and heartening to see these nicely dressed children have no truck with decorum when it came to the important business of climbing over fences in a yard that wasn't theirs. They called to the slowpoke (she'd barely made it across the leaf-

crunching space) to hurry up, and she was making her way to the fence when all of a sudden she stopped and looked at the house, staring at something I couldn't see. The others were urging her on earnestly now, but she stood still, looking at the house. I assumed that Mrs. Joli had come to the window and caught them. The girl started backing off, something like fear and innocence in her eyes, and blurted "I wasn't going to climb the fence." Then she vamoosed, running back toward the driveway and, I assume, joining her friends down the block a bit.

It was that single sentence that most caught me, its text and subtext. She certainly was going to climb the fence; she knew it and Mrs. Joli knew it. But there is so much crammed into those seven words. I wasn't going to climb the fence like those other bad children - don't think that I'm one of them. I need to buy time to get out of here, so I'll throw you off the track while I escape by saying I'm not going over the fence. Don't punish me, don't be mean - I'm only climbing over your crummy little fence, not ruining your property. It's embarrassing to be caught - don't tell my parents. A mixture of fear, defiance, annoyance, chagrin - a heavy cargo for seven words.

I wonder what Mrs. Joli looked like, with her swept-up stiff white hair and designer rim glasses. I bet she can have a severe face when she wants to - no, not severe, petulant, pouty (though without a coyness to the pout), with her gently guttural Franglish ready to leap out at the little girl and tell her to get out of her yard. And the child's automatic response to such a face (and even to almost any adult) would be self-protection, getting the drawbridge up as quickly as possible.

I'm not sure what to draw from this. They haven't been back for the last few days, so I assume they've decided that this route is a bit too hazardous for their tastes. I'm sorry about that, sorry that Mrs. Joli appeared so proprietary that she denied them the passport of a little shortcut, sorry that I don't get the visual infusion of their energy as they cut through and climb over on their way to somewhere else.

Squirrel

Out in the yard, squarely (rectangularly?) framed by the window next to my desk, is a three-pronged maple tree, a trident of wood about 50 to 60 years old (judging by its diameter), thirty feet tall. When I look at it I see at least three things: a good full cord of wood that would thrill a stove; a weather barometer made of leaves and color; and a housing project for squirrels and birds. The first is proprietary and economic, the second scientific, and the third poetic, which, blended together, is not a bad way to look at the world.

Right now it's the squirrels that interest me most, even though the changing leaves, in their yellowing demise, push hard for attention. I have two squirrels that use the tree regularly. They've been foraging steadily the last month in the fallen leaves around the tree, moving through the debris like electrons through a cloud chamber, leaving faint trails flagged by a twitching grey exclamatory tail. (More on the tail in a moment.) This pair doesn't chatter all that much, intent, I suppose, on getting enough before there's not enough. They're meanderingly industrious (even as my fingers forage through these keys to describe them), pausing often to play but never really abandoning their attack on the stinginess of the coming winter.

The tail. These two have plush tails, handsome tails, a spectrum of grey from dark grey shoots near the core of the tail to pearl grey tips, like a plume of woodsmoke on a cold October day. The tail sometimes seems to have life of its own, sometimes thoroughly erect like the flag on a mailbox announcing a package to be sent, at other times whimsically undulating, like a feather-duster being shaken out a window. It metronomes, points, see-saws, gavels, gesturing out whatever passes for a passing thought in a squirrel. Like our own faces it moves often of its own accord, and so we have to accord it respect, even if we often don't know what it's saying.

The other day they chased each other up and down the maple for at least ten minutes, the dry scuttle of their claws mixed with their cheeps and chittering. They moved up and down the three main trunks, out on to thin whispers of limbs where they launched themselves either up or down to another thicker branches, along the chainlink fence around the yard, over the garbage cans, through the dry brocade of dead leaves, back up the trunks - some squirrel version of "tag," though "it-ness" changed constantly, each squirrel taking turns being both pursued and pursuer.

During this frantic gamboling they paused occasionally to carry a seed or cart an acorn from the oaks next door up to their nests up the branches, then picked up the Keystone chase without a blink of an eye (if squirrels blink). At times they were so fast I couldn't see them, their grey pelts blending with the maple's grey bark, descending from the upper part of the tree in a scattering spiral that brought them into view, then out of view, like a coin in the hand of a good magician. Then back to foraging, their noses flickering like some Geiger counter attuned to the radiation of food.

It may not be the same two squirrels I see each time, but there are always two, and so I make them the same. I have written this in much the same way they have worked, sometimes having the words just spiral down the trunk of my brain in a flashy descent, at other times picking through various dead leaves to find a husk redolent of food, stored away in a sentence for a later feast. And as for winter - I am pulling my skin in around me just as tightly as they are, cheeping and jabbering until the snow slows the blood, even then pushing out occasionally to taste the saved vittle and catch the cold that affirms the contained warmth under the skin, underlines the brain poking through waste to find what feeds.

Other Essays From That Time

The Lion King

I finally did it - I went to see "The Lion King." Friends of mine had Siskel-and-Ebert'| the movie at great length. I had read articles and letters in the Boston *Globe* which lobbed charge and counter-charge like mortar rounds. I have been serenaded by "The Lion Sleeps Tonight," courtesy of McDonald's, and bombarded with product spin-offs. In some respects, I had no choice: the movie pursued me, and I had to surrender.

The animation topped the bill, especially some of the focusing and defocusing effects and the smooth blend of traditional and computer-generated drawings. The Mutt-and-Jeff routine of the wart hog and whatever that other little animal was easily pressed the smile button several times. And the resonant smarminess of Jeremy Irons, along with the Yahweh-like tones of James Earl Jones, pleased the ear with their grace and power.

But after the movie, while I milled around the theatre lobby and mulled the story, I understood much better why Disney is playing such hardball to set up a history theme park within a musket shot of the Manassas battlefield in Virginia. "The Lion King" explains perfectly the ideology of the company.

First, the dominant political system in the movie is kingship, with all of its hierarchy and lack of democracy. While Mufasa, the king, talks in reverential tones to Simba, his son, about the sacredness of the Circle of Life, he really means that animals lower on the food chain, like the antelope, exist to feed the aristocracy. In return, the aristocracy promises to "honor" them for their sacrifice - not much consolation for the eaten. Mufasa may be benevolent when his stomach is full, but he holds no illusions about his job: The role of the aristocracy is to maintain the aristocracy.

In the same way, Disney trots out canards about preserving the "circle" of history and generating jobs in Virginia, but its actions, like squeezing $163 million in tax abatements from the legislature while it rakes in billions of dollars each year, show that it simply desires to feed where and whenever it wants to preserve the aristocracy of its profits. Like the antelope, Virginia citizens sit too far down on the food chain to merit much respect. Disney wants to teach American citizens about democracy and freedom so long as this allows them to remain a monarchy. Does this strike anyone as a bit contradictory?

Yes, I contributed $7 to what I consider one of the more subversive institutions in America. I should have sent it to the folks in Virginia. To paraphrase Karl Marx,

there is a specter haunting the countryside of America - the specter of Mickey Mouse. And his ears are really horns.

Affirmative Action Reaction

I hate to say this - admitting it seems like such a defeat of character these days - but, yes, I, a middle-aged, balding, white male, benefitted from affirmative action. How, you might ask (if you believe the reigning Republican theology), did such a perversion of the natural order ever occur?

The year was 1971, my senior year in public high school in a small city in western Massachusetts. I did well in school - good grades, Honor Society, National Merit Scholar, lots of sports, active in the drama society. But my SAT scores hardly rang the bell, in large measure because our guidance office and faculty expected us all to go to UMass Amherst instead of Amherst College and did little to nothing to prepare us for the test. No coaching classes here, no Princeton Review or Kaplan. Just come in on a Saturday, bring your No. 2 pencils, finish the test, and then get ready for the game that night.

In steps Dr. Rafferty. One night I get a phone call from Dr. Rafferty, a local dentist who had graduated from the Harvard Dental School many molars ago. Harvard College had asked him to do some academic scouting in the area. He had been to the school, seen my records, and bluntly asked me if I would like to go to Harvard. Without a moment's hesitation I said yes, and several months, several interviews, and reams of application materials later, I was in.

It seems that Harvard College had charged itself with an affirmative action mandate (though I'm sure they didn't phrase it that way): to increase their geographic diversity by looking for candidates in places they normally overlooked. That's why my name popped up. In their usual review of applications, Harvard would never have given me a first glance: I was no different, on paper, than a bazillion other supplicants at the crimson gate. Yet because the admissions office decided to cast a wider net with a smaller mesh, they gave someone a chance who would never have been admitted to the club if judged simply on the merit of objective scores and balance sheets. To use a science analogy, because they decided to scan the heavens in infra-red rather than their standard visible light, they found new objects to study and thus expanded the diversity of their knowledge.

Contrary to what most people believe, affirmative action began as an effort to erase racial and gender preferences by broadening the pool of potential applicants beyond white males with certain pedigrees. In other words, the purpose of affirmative action was not to exchange one bigotry for another but

instead to find people whose merits, under the old search procedures, might not have come up on the screen.

Seen in this light, affirmative action is based on the solid American democratic principles of equality of opportunity and the abolition of social injustice. Why does this make people nervous? Why does it send black intellectuals scurrying to the White House to devise ways to sugar-coat the power of the principle? Why can't the 39 percent of the people who answered the recent *Los Angeles Times* poll that affirmative action goes too far see that, in fact, it hasn't gone far enough because minority groups (including, ironically, the 53 percent of the population called women) still get off the carousel without the brass ring, even after three decades of civil rights battles?

Now, the President can bunker down with whomever he wants to craft a dodge-and-weave siege defense and hope that the Republicans won't savage affirmative action too much. But they are going to savage it no matter what President Clinton does, and doing what he is doing is only lending the Visigoths a hand. Instead, he should mount a vigorous defense of affirmative action on its own merits - it's strong enough to answer the summons - and call into question the Republican's assumptions, tactics, and integrity. He should educate people about the truth and not allow the Republicans to dictate the debate.

I am what affirmative action is about: an effort to include those who usually don t get included in the rituals where power, money, education, and chances get handed around. If everyone deserves a fair shot, but everyone is not getting one, then someone has to step in and, as Captain Picard would say, make it so. If we as citizens forgo this responsibility, if we as citizens don't demand that our government defend equality and justice in our name, then what's the point of having an American democracy and being an American citizen? Case closed.

At Home: Mir Wonder

I admit I must have been a bit of a sight in the parking lot of the Porter Square Star Market, standing there with binoculars looking west/northwest for a pinprick of light that might very well get lost in the sodium vapor and neon haze of this busy strip mall.

But faith sometimes gets rewarded. There it came, right on time, just as the newspaper said it would: Mir and Atlantis yoked in their graceful Newtonian arc through the sky. I only had three minutes to watch this telemetric ballet until it disappeared into the Earth's shadow in the south, but it was three minutes enough for a taste of wonder seasoned with a little bit of awe.

When I brought my eyes back down to the parking lot and blazing signs and the scurry of people on endless errands, it all looked momentarily unfamiliar; then I realized that *I* was momentarily unfamiliar, slightly altered by that three-minute slant of light across the sky.

All around me the usual carousel of life continued on, people's eyes fixed horizontal, their minds occupied by the earthbound details of making it through another day intact. But seeing that small pod of oxygen carry a handful of my fellow humans from horizon to horizon lifted me, momentarily, out of all this into a simpler realm. For a moment I did not have to worry, calculate, suspect, evade - the delight of being "out of the ordinary" was nothing but *itself*, unadulterated, the way a very young child must feel the astonishment of tasting ice cream for the first time.

That's why coming back to earth temporarily shocked me: how much *else* have I missed, have we all missed, in being harnessed to our lists, our ache for success, our subtle fears, our tender flaws? The uncommon surrounds us all, ready for notice, but how unpracticed we are at being extra-ordinary.

It would be easy to feel smug or cynical at a moment like this, but I felt something quite different. We may be all housed in our separate stations orbiting in our various gravities, like the cars circling for parking spaces around the fixed Star Market. But equally true, we are all likewise vulnerable to the wayward debris that can smash our thin hulls and eject us into nothingness.

It's that common vulnerability that draws us together as a species because richer or poorer, stronger or weaker, we all go down together to the same fate. Like Mir/Atlantis, we need to share the oxygen so that we can all enjoy the

common, and occasionally the awesomely beautiful, delicacy of each other's lives.

Serendipity

The night before, the Earth had hurdled from winter into spring over the vernal equinox, but in the morning a snow squall spit the length of Elm Street in Somerville. People hunkered into their coats like turtles into their shells, and the cars cut the slush with tires that seemed to hiss in anger at the betrayal.

I can't say I was feeling particularly enthused. I sat at my desk, trying to wring out some words for a poem that sat inert on my computer screen - nothing. At the back of my mind nagged another piece of information I had heard just that day: Researchers had found that men with pessimistic outlooks on life tended to die earlier. Hmmm. I have my share of the blues and the greys, and as the wet snow scoured my window and the poem hung digitally rigor mortis'| on my SVGA, I couldn't help but feel the thread of life fraying at the edges a bit.

So I did what I often do at times like this: I stared out the window. Across the street, on the Kennedy School playground, a bunch of boys crowded underneath the canted lip of the basketball rim. They'| shucked their coats, of course, throwing them on the wet ground, pre-adolescent blood hot enough to withstand meteorology. They had a ribless rubberized basketball, standard public school issue; they heaved its orange and pebbled hide up twice their height to fall through the net for an occasional score.

They really didn't have a game going - more like a mosh-pit free-for-all. One kid would lob it up, another would rebound; he'| shoot, another would shag it, and so on. Sometimes they dribbled, sometimes not; a few mock-wrestles, with a ninja kick thrown in for good measure. Their breaths plumed, filled, like cartoon balloons, with the scuttlebutt of their exuberance. I couldn't see their faces well, but I remembered back to when I was that age, wanting to get outside to play as quickly as possible no matter what the weather, my cheeks rouged with the cold, my whole body thrilled with its vitality. What did rules matter here, the game? They just wanted to *move* - that was the order of business. For a few moments they could shuck their training like their coats and pinball around without a single justifying reason. And so they did, ignoring the fine pelt of sleet, the throat-drying cold crass wind.

A bell ragged through the air, and they immediately turned toward the school, like filings to a magnet, dragging their coats and backpacks and chatter inside. Within a few breaths the place emptied out - except for one boy holding

the ball, wrapped in a Celtics jacket. He dribbled once, twice. Then balanced the ball, shoulder-level. Cranked it over and slightly behind his head. Crouched, sprang, snapped. A perfect arc proved the net. Then he was gone, too.

It was hard at first to know what to make of the sudden lift my spirits took. Ordinary day for them - they did his every day, as far as I could tell. The snow still spat. Phantoms in winter coats still pushed on to the "T" at Porter Square. The cars still honked in disdain at each other. The early crocuses were still getting smacked around, likely to die off for their effrontery. And the studies still showed that pessimistic men flame out earlier. Yet that one concentrated moment when a young boy in a Celtics jacket took the time, rounded it in his hands, settled it against this fingertips, then loosened it to follow the grace of gravity unaccountably made the day lighter, less dense, its hours suddenly attractive and not cavernous.

Cleared the computer screen, and the electrons flew their speed of light to follow the thought. Atropos was put on hold for the day. Renewal comes in a Celtics jacket - now that's a point to ponder and savor, evidence again that what comes from the blind side often gives the clearest vision, only if we can make ourselves blind enough to see.

Spring had finally arrived.

Boston

I recently moved to Boston from Manchester, New Hampshire. I did this voluntarily, though some of my friends couldn't believe that I would exchange the sylvan comfort of the Granite State for beans, cod, traffic bloat, and the pleasures of being cold-shouldered and shot at. Yet despite their disapproval and dismay, I still made the traverse south, flying in on I-93 with a smile as bright as a new shoeshine.

I like cities; I count myself an urban enthusiast. And Boston has a lot of pluses that other cities don't. It's a city built for the feet, easy to navigate by walking. Its architectural vista changes by the block, giving the strolling observer a rolling sense of history and evolution. It serves up a tasty cultural meal that can satisfy any appetite, small or large. And so on. It's not hard extolling the virtues of the City on the Hill.

A harder sell, however, concerns loving cities at all. Historically American moralists have considered cities sinks of sin, despoilers of beauty and virtue. To them, "rural" equaled "redeemed." The modern version of this is found in the exodus to the 'burbs or the upsurge of walled-in housing developments, accompanied by a refrain about how urban centers harbor nothing more than criminals and money changers.

All true to some extent - but only half the story. Without the enormous concentration of energy and people and goods generated by cities, we would have far fewer choices and far less security in our lives. Cities act as both magnets and dynamos; they attract everything from everywhere, recombine the elements in their distillery, and spread the new possibilities like seeds. Whenever I have the chance to take in the city, I try to see it not as a tourist would, as if on temporary assignment, or as a sermonizer looking for lecture grist. Instead, I try to see it as Walt Whitman might, as an endless litany of risk and fascination, a catalogue of the dreadful mixed with the delightful. I would even go so far as to say that it's the city, not the country, that makes us better people, if only because the daily gauntlet of city life requires us to dig deep to survive. Facing an MBTA crush at five o'clock, I have to try very hard to maintain a civil voice in my mouth and thoughts. But making that effort makes me behave as a better human being. It would be easy to damn someone to hell in a hiss under my breath. It's a triumph instead to let the irritation pass and give my seat to the older woman clinging to the metal post.

Without cities we'| be lost. Without Boston I'| be bored. Call me crazy, but I'm glad I'm here.

Going Batman

The movie's producers probably did not intend it, but *Batman Forever* offers an excellent allegory about global capitalism, visual imperialism, and the deconstruction of the modern self. (If this seems far-fetched, don't blame me - the movie was so bad I had to think of *something* during the long dark boredom.)

A segment of the movie where a helicopter drags Batman through the skies while he clings to the end of a chain got me thinking about these weighty topics. The copter crashes through an advertising billboard, swoops between tall buildings, and eventually crashes into a Statute of Libertyesque monument, with Batman dangling like a lure at the end of forty-pound test. Apparently, technicians had crafted the sequence digitally, and no live animals had been harmed in making it. The result was more than just mere animation; it had the look and feel of an actual helicopter in an actual city. We were approaching the realm of *Star Trek*'s holodeck.

Computerized scene creation is not new in the movies. I remember seeing a television show that demonstrated how the magic-makers completed Brandon Lee's movie *The Crow* after he died by grafting his face and body into a number of scenes he never physically performed. They did the same in *Jurassic Park*, slapping the face of the young girl onto the body of a stunt double. In *Apollo 13*, the graphic artists created the entire lift-off of the spacecraft digitally, not having to resort to NASA footage or filming an actual launch.

Which led me to this. The corporation that put *Batman Forever* together, like any corporation, wants to cut labor expenses because, frankly, humans cost a lot to take care of. If somehow they could create a process where the wages of the traditional laborers - in this case, the actors - can be minimized or even eliminated, then they can realize more profit with lower labor costs. (One would have to assume that Bruce Wayne, as head of Wayne Enterprises, had been doing this all along to keep the shareholders happy.)

Enter the computer, the equivalent of the robot arm in a Detroit auto factory. Sooner or later, the computer will be able to shoot an entire movie filled with actors without using actors. Instead of auditions and union rules and temperamental contract negotiations, movie producers could simply turn to the gee-whiz kids in front of the 21" screens and ask them to cook up, say, a *Madame Bovary* with a Streep-like quality and a hook for clothes merchandising.

Movies, then, would become like other giant industries, slashing jobs to acquire more profit - in fact, shredding the expectation that businesses should provide jobs at all. Instead, like many temp workers, actors would be forced to sell their faces and voices to centralized organizations who would, in turn, sell these images to the studios for manipulation in the computer rooms. And when the technology got good enough, even this could be eliminated since the computer jockeys would simply draw whomever they needed to fill certain scenes. (Perhaps, then, we'| have fan clubs for digital stars, a lá Max Headroom.)

Fantasy? Paranoia? Don't forget that the central theme of *Batman Forever* is the threat of a corporate take-over of human imagination by a technology that extracts people's dreams. For the moment Batman saves us from corporate zombie-ism, a triumph of principle over greed.

But like most Hollywood endings, the conclusion shares nothing with reality.

We already live in a world of corporate Artful Dodgers pickpocketing our sense of self and selling it back to us to get us to buy more products (no doubt aided by technological renovations created at Wayne Enterprises). It won't be long until it's not just actors whose faces have been replaced. Before long, the real riddle will be who owns the face staring back at you in the morning from your mirror.

In The Wee Hours

As a freelance writer working out of my home, I try to keep a fairly strict schedule: so many hours for actual writing, so many hours for reading and research, so much time for drafting query letters, so much time for sleep, and so on. Dividing up the day like this makes it easier to resist the tempting domestic comforts just outside my office door: those cookies in the cupboard, a little snooze in the middle of the afternoon.

But every once in a while, either because of a rebellious biological clock or an over-busy mind, I find myself wide awake in the wee hours of the morning - that ante-meridian limbo where time seems thinned out and less sure of its grip, where it's possible to float for a while unharnessed from schedules and appointments.

At first I try to "make the best use" of the time, firing up the computer and diving into my current project, or cracking open that book on economics for one more try at understanding some arcane statistics. But luckily this impulse passes - my body, with its own wisdom, rejects turning these hours into an extended work session. This time is a kind of gift, where "should" and "ought to" have no pull whatsoever.

I take a walk over to the all-night Star Market, not to buy anything but just to observe who would do their shopping at such an unencumbered hour: the guy off second shift, young adults wheeling home after a party, elderly people shedding sleep as they get older, a few drunks and zomboids, the aisles clogged with stock clerks cramming new product onto the shelves. At the 24-hour CVS the bored clerks gossip, the store empty, the fluorescent lights and garish banners eye-achingly bright.

Back in my office I take out what I call my "bit book," a journal of random jottings and notions, and start to write, pleasuring in the longhand feel of the pen against the page after a day of keyboard and monitor. On Elm Street the occasional car sizzles by; its doppler fade leaves the air still and resonant, like a drum head. As I write my sense of "time passing" dissolves - I am in that Zen state where I am doing only one thing with mindfulness, without the fishhooks of a thousand distractions pulling my flesh in all directions. It's a fleeting, but bracing, sense of wholeness.

I pull out that book of poetry I never seem to make time to read and swaddle myself in the words. I put on some music and simply sit and listen to it with

full ears, not just as background. I write a letter to a friend with a direct voice rather dashing something off as an obligation. Without "time's wing'| chariot" breathing down on me, simple things incandesce with real pleasure.

But even this interlude must end. Standing out on the little balcony, I watch the eastern sky soak up the approaching sun's light, and with each change in tint and brightness I can feel the schedules and obligations slowly re-command the day. There's that manuscript that has to be in the mail, an interview to set up - and definitely a nap in the afternoon. But for a while, at least, I feel at peace, a sense of proportion repaired. A pretty good jump on the daily grind.

Incidental

I wrote a poem about it, so I might as well start off with the opening lines to set the scene: “Damn! / I could feel the enamel shear, / the popcorn kernel skittering throatward / after calving the molar.” There it was, in the palm of my hand - shard of a tooth I had lived with for almost forty years, beige, topographical, orphaned.

So off I went to my friendly Gentle Dental in Porter Square, seeking repair and comfort. That, too, is in my poem: “The dentist was sure and blunt: gold crown, 600 bucks, best bet… / he said that people have copped a crown on white bread, / no one’s fault, give your teeth a break (ha, ha) -” Gold crown. It had - well, might as well say it right out - the sound of *aging* to it. I could begin to imagine bridge work, mandibular complications, crimped gingiva, whistles and sprays through Letterman-like apertures. I suddenly felt like I was slipping down the ebb, already gumming out my last will and testament.

I am forty-two, in good physical health, spiritually comfortable, intellectually reaching blossom. But like everyone else on this planet, I have been losing bits of myself from my very first hours on the planet: skin, teeth, blood, thoughts, money, memories, time. For the most part, this has never bothered me: skin has always come back to refinish the bruised knuckles, new thoughts have always replaced the evaporated ones, time has always come to hand to be kneaded and baked. I always knew there was more water in the well.

But this gold molar has made me feel differently. Teeth, after all, are important to our self-esteem, and any defects in them can erode our sense of power and accomplishment. Bad teeth can embarrass someone to the bone, and, as Shakespeare pointed out, no philosopher can endure a toothache patiently. Freud knew this; dreams where teeth were in danger signaled, to him, that his patient had deep anxieties about life.

Whatever else may be in decline in our bodies - the knees, the bladder, the eyes - if we can still scythe through that ear of corn or gnash a filet of steak down to its amino acids, then pleasure and possibility have not entirely disappeared.

So losing a tooth and acquiring a counterfeit has moved me through the usual neuralgias about mortality, very J. Alfred Prufrock, with my pants rolled and eating a peach. I have gone through the usual musings about frangibility, humility, vanity, decline, etc. That much I expected, even anticipated, because sometimes a little non-toxic self-pity can feel pretty good.

But I didn't expect to feel effervescent about it, and I didn't understand why until I took my train one morning from Porter Square to Mattapan. At the bottom of the triple escalators at the T station is a bookrack where people drop off and pick up all manner of printed materials. On the cover of some tattered back issue of *Sky & Telescope* was a blurred but vibrant picture of a comet streaming through the cosmos.

And it struck: That was I. The comet. Not a sad collection of unpawnable parts but a heavenly body. The tooth, all the broken bones, the botched adventures in life, everything - streaming behind me in a brilliant arc of white. True, all life is entropy. But there's a sluggish entropy, where things just rust, and then there's a scintillating, stellar entropy, where the friction of living *through* the world, not just in it, pares down everything so that loss becomes light, decay becomes daring.

I like this image of the comet very much. the idea that a journey is at the center of life, that becoming less can refine the spirit. And it's a lot more satisfying than those somewhat grim jokes about being over the hill and toothless in Seattle. The end is the same, of course, a small parcel of bones, a deliquescence of memory. But how much better to have all the accouterments flashed off as you approach the sun! So I'll take this gold crown as an icon of the light sliding off me as I traffic along, and with each bite relish the nourishment still coming my way.

The Other Dirty Little Secret

When the Republicans and their fellow-traveling Democrats roll out the legislation that will turn their Contract with America into a Contract on America, they are really lobbing shells into the community where I have worked for over the last year: Mattapan. When they talk about the stereotype welfare recipients, I see individual faces of women and children and read their names as we enter them into our database. When they wax on about the need to "reform" (read: gut) entitlement programs, I see the lines of people waiting to fill out their fuel assistance applications or looking for help to find a job. When they endorse deleting affirmative action programs, I see people, overwhelmingly dark-skinned, who have little enough leverage as it is in a world which regards their skin color as character, and will now have even less. What the Republicans want to do to Mattapan resembles the neutron bomb: it will leave the property behind but evaporate the people.

While many may buy the Republican dogma that they are trying to restore the American spirit by prying off the dead hand of government, in Mattapan, we know exactly what they're doing in Washington. We know that their real agenda is a bloodless but nonetheless savage class war, waged on behalf of their handlers: contributors to Gingrich's GOPAC, Raytheon arm-twisting for its own form of public assistance, health insurance companies, and so on. How else to explain simultaneous actions such as angling for capital gains tax relief and a $500 child-care tax credit for families making $200,000 a year while decimating food programs for low-income children and rushing poor mothers into the reserve army of labor? The connection is clear: more for them that has, nothing for them that doesn't.

"Class" is not a term often used in American political debate, considered a relic of an outmoded Marxism, and "class warfare" has been avoided as well because it doesn't square with the American belief in the myth of a wide-open playing field where anyone, regardless of prior restraints, can "make it" (with the corollary that not making it is a personal, not a social, failure). Americans by and large like to believe they live in a classless society because this absolves them of having to think about relationships of power and especially about how the privileges of some impoverish others.

One of the ways Americans avoid talking about class is by focusing on race, but they usually don't realize that race is just a smoke screen for class warfare

because at the heart of the race question is still who gets to have access to the seats of power. For instance, if the recent drive to destroy affirmative action were simply about race, then gender would be irrelevant. But women are categorized with minorities as the undeserving parties while the Justice Department gives its support to a court case where white men are fighting to get back the power they feel has been taken from them. Affirmative action is not about race, it's about sharing power, which is why it's under assault by those whose self-appointed task is protect the battlements from the barbarians.

But this is not news to the people in Mattapan because they live in that "other America," a class built by conscious if not always witting design, America's own apartheid. The people we deal with work hard, raise their children as best they can, hope to own their own houses, have dreams about modest but solid success - they are no different than their counterparts over the line in Milton. But so rarely are their stories told and their lives illustrated that the powers that be can afford to ignore them or, when necessary, whip up a frenzy against them, knowing full well they can treat our clients in Mattapan as something "other" and alien and get away with it.

W.E.B. Dubois said in 1964 that the "color line is a great problem of this century," and people have taken this to mean that race, not class, is our dirty little secret. However, he went on to say that behind race and color was a "greater problem": "civilized persons...willing to live in comfort even if the price of this is poverty, ignorance and disease of the majority of their fellowmen." In order to maintain their privileges, these persons have "waged war until today war tends to become universal and continuous"; race and color are simply one "excuse" behind which the war is prosecuted. Dubois, as usual, had it right, and when we open our doors each day and hear the stories people tell us, we see the coming casualties, we see the war clouds on the horizon.

Socializing

Newt Gingrich obviously is not one to do things by half-measures. Instead of calling the media merely "liberal" and "elite," he's gone the extra rhetorical mile and damned them as "socialist." Imagine the surprise and disgust that rippled through the shocked American public as he revealed to them that *The Boston Globe*, *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, and the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* are hotbeds of Marxist, nay, even Trotskyist, agitation, and that their writers ring out a chorus of the Internationale at the morning editorial conferences.

Actually, like so many things uttered by his Newt-ness, he got it wrong because he doesn't do things by half-measures. The four newspapers he cited simply can't be the pinkish establishments he believes they are. After all, they're fairly large-sized conglomerates, pretty typical examples of the kind of concentrated economic power that Ben Bagdikian explores in *The Media Monopoly* and that Newt and his followers admire. If their editorial writers do occasionally push left-of-center points of view, as he accuses, their positions are usually more center than left and certainly never challenge the corporate structure that feeds and houses them. As H.|.S. Greenway, editor of the *Globe* editorial page, put it himself, "I do not believe that many of them would advocate state ownership or control of the means of production."

More's the pity, because American politics and American culture could certainly use a vigorous socialist movement to juice up the current atrophy of ideas that passes for democracy in |.C. and elsewhere. This does not mean, as Mr. Greenway put it, advocating state ownership of the means of production. In fact, socialism (if its diversity can be summed at all in a few general phrases) doesn't always tend that way, a point lost on those who believe that "socialism" and "Soviet" are synonymous. The Soviet model of socialism was, in many respects, simply the dark side of capitalism: both systems wanted to create large state structures to accumulate capital; the American corporate state simply proved more resourceful in doing this than the Soviet corporate state. No, in its history socialism (which presumably begins at the dawn of human society, where social bands of proto-humans shared their communal wealth to ensure their survival) has run the gamut from large-scale utopian enterprises, like New Harmony, to workers' co-operatives to communes to employee-owned businesses. Like capitalism, socialism has never had one unitary idea about how to generate wealth.

It's what a socialist society wants to *do* with that wealth that sets it apart from capitalism. In a socialist society, people's sense of well-being about their lives comes through what they share, not what they horde. And decisions about the sharing are reached through various means of consensus - not just by voting (assuming a socialist society would have electoral politics) but through democratic participation in the workplace, co-operative living situations, active social organizations. Where capitalism defines the individual as if he or she were a free-floating atom, and individual freedom as the chance to float around as much as possible, socialism tends to see the individual embedded in networks of context, in shared risks and benefits; freedom is achieved only when everyone has a chance to share in the wealth by sharing in the decisions that produce it. In many ways too detailed to go into here, an American socialist society would really fulfill the principles we have stated as essential to our survival as a culture: equality and justice through the democratic participation of citizens in the decisions that affect their lives.

We all know that Newt is waving the pink shirt here as a standard bit of political theatre - even if he really believes this, he's not going to revive the House UnAmerican Activities Committee any time soon. Newt is a monarchist; he gets upset when the vassals do not fall into line, and he's not above a little bit of insult to get them back into harness. However, since he broached the "S"-word, I think we ought to exploit the chance to really talk about this, assuming we can bring the term into dry-dock and scrape off the barnacles and canards littering its hide. Clearly the political debate as presently encoded in Republican and Democratic argot does not cover the realities that people experience in their lives. Talking about socialism, even if people decide it isn't for them, at least gives discussants a chance for a different take on what their masters are saying. And who knows, it may lead to some interesting, even radical ideas, equivalent to the eight-hour working day or Social Security or universal health care - all ideas with a hearty socialist pedigree.

Parental Dissent

Proposed bills filed by Senators Marian Walsh and Paul White and Representative Edward Teague would make schools obtain the consent of parents before a teacher could introduce any topic of a "morally or religiously sensitive" nature into the classroom. The list of topics includes pretty much every aspect of human existence, from birth (contraception and abortion) to death ("coping with or understanding death or other forms of personal loss or grief"). If a teacher inadvertently touches on one of these topics without a 10-day notice to parents, the parents can sue the school and force it to pay their court costs.

I was a high school teacher for ten years in a farming town in upstate New York, a school where parents, at least some parents, acted vigorously to police what we offered their children. That doesn't mean they were always right or always very informed, but at least they took the time to say *something*, and I could respect that. I could also respect their desire to have the schools teach what they loosely called "character," even though what they really meant was "Teach my children *my* character and *my* morals; make the school look like us." I, too, wanted the school to get kids to think about ethics and consequences of action and how to make choices between right and wrong - after all, we weren't just *training* kids, we were trying to get them to *think* for themselves so that they could be productive and enlightened citizens. So in many ways the parents and the school broadcast on the same wavelength.

But not entirely. I taught American literature, and in the textbook I had to use, the first pieces to come up, after the Puritan sermons, were the Declaration of Independence and various excerpts from Thomas Paine, Samuel Adams, and so on. Reading these and discussing them naturally led us to cover such topics as when should authority be obeyed and resisted and to what extent should people break the law to pursue a "higher law." I got calls from parents, some to me, some to my principal, that I was teaching "revolution" and "disrespect for the American way."

We worked it out, but the point of the story is this: If I had had to get parental permission to discuss this, and permission had been denied, or denied by enough parents to make the teaching of the class futile, then who would have benefited from such control? The push and pull of discussion in class, even the friction at home with parents who thought I was subversive, made for an

education, because it's only in laying out the contraries of ideas, only in the heat generated when oppositions rub themselves together, that the light of enlightenment shines down. I had to get the parents to trust me that what I was trying to do did not undermine their desire for moral character in their children. I had to get the parents to see that students thinking for themselves was cognate with character.

Parental wishes are important, but they're only *as* important as, not *more* important than, the education they supposedly want their children to receive. How could I teach *Hamlet* if I couldn't bring into the intellectual discussion human sexuality (Ophelia's for Hamlet, and Hamlet's for his mother), abuse (Hamlet helps drive Ophelia to her death), gender and sexual relationships (see "human sexuality" above), family life (Hamlet's uncle kills his own brother in order to marry his brother's wife), moral decision-making methods ("To be or not to be"), suicide (ditto), coping with grief ("How weary, stale, flat, and unprofitable / Seem to me all the uses of this world!"), or religious belief or practice (Hamlet's worry that suicide would condemn his soul to everlasting torment). In fact, how could I teach *any* great piece of literature or investigate *any* historical age if I couldn't involve these, and many other, touchstones of human existence?

Both parents and teachers want children to learn values and character, and talking about means to that end is healthy. But let's not miss the fact that real education - not propaganda or indoctrination but learning that promotes a zest for life - inevitably means that children will not think exactly like their parents or their teachers but will, if we do it right, think for themselves. And people who think for themselves, who take the time to find the truth and act on it, and who temper the truth with compassion and a sense of humor, are by definition moral.

So instead of legislating a false power to parents and building up intellectual firewalls, let us instead draw up a contract of common values that can guide the teaching we do in the classroom and in the home. Let's tone down the culture war lingo and realize that we have a common purpose in teaching all our children how to have enough inner strength to survive after they've left their schools and families behind.

"Rage, Rage..."

My friend's letters had mentioned the possibility as far back as the fall of last year, but now what had stood merely possible had become painfully probable now: the death of his father. He had come back to Brooklyn from San Francisco each time the alarum had rung: the complaints about vague pains and exhaustions, the initial physical exams, the test bore of a biopsy, the sentence of liver cancer, the metastasizing of the cancer to the brain, the long vigil at home, the final breaths. Because of the way nature had built my friend, I knew this whole event was wrenching for him, so I called as often as I could to see how he fared and offer what ear I could for his thoughts and feelings.

As we talked, however, it became quite clear that his father, enfeebled as he was, did not intend to follow the tragic script laid out for him by the expectations of those gathered around him: a graceful acceptance of the inevitable, a slow but metered decline into death, with his family encircling him. Even though he knew that the disease had no intention of breaking camp and going home, he refused to let the siege have its say. He lingered, tenaciously, not with a grim countenance, beads of sweat on the forehead, but with good spirits, a little scorn, and his trademark stubbornness. (It also helped that he didn't have to take pain killers: the tumor in the brain seemed to clamp off the pain, and so he could, unmorphined, keep his full wits about him.) Why should he follow out the tragedy to its appointed curtain-fall? What did he have to lose?

The phone calls got funnier and funnier as both he and his sister, in alternating conversations, would mock-groan about how the long the man hung on to life while the rest of them, lives on hold, waited for him to let go. His sister said she'| forgotten what her husband and children looked like, she'| vigiled at the bedside for so long. And my friend, a clinical psychologist, phoned, e-mailed, faxed, and phoned again to keep his practice going and the grant proposals on schedule. He said that they'| even started to joke with him about it, sitting in the bedroom, drinks in hand, asking him if he could please tell them, with a little more precision, when he intended to let them all get back to their land of the living. And he took it good-naturedly because, as my friend said, he was doing precisely what Dylan Thomas had told him to do: "Do not go gentle into that good night. / Rage, rage..." Well, perhaps not rage, but instead affection: why break a long life-habit that had brought, along with its share of misery and confusion, such a fine cargo of happiness and zest? It doesn't make sense to break up such a good match.

Of course, the sharp sense of overdue had its downside as well. My friend had learned how grieving requires its proper time and measure; interruptions in that process, for whatever reason, formed many of the reasons why his clients came to talk with him. His father's dogged fight, his blithe "No" in the face of the fated, had strewn sharp stones in the path of his family's grieving, making them wince and dodge and curse. Rather than allowing them to float through a caressing fog of feeling and land in a clearing laved with light, his resolve to stick it out to the end deprived them of that calm exhaustion of a strong emotion playing out its rhythm completely. Instead of a long ride in a limousine, they had a driver who didn't know how to use a clutch.

Which all goes to show, as my friend pointed out, that life never leaves off kidding you. Something as tragic and inevitable as the death of a parent comes along, definitely a one-time deal in life, and you bring out all the cultural, emotional, and familial scripts you own to cope with it. You lay out your suit, shine your shoes, and prepare your dirges. And then life blindsides you with a man who refuses to fulfill the chapter and verse: the suit gets stained, the dirges are off-key, and your heart falters between fiasco and love. You adapt, you cope, you grouse and steam, and in the process you create the "Do you remember whens" that will keep the memory of the man refreshed. There is no reason why the dying should be any cleaner or more precise than the messy, ad hoc, semi-understood living that proceeded it. Kübler-Ross may have her stages, but nothing ever proceeds that smoothly, or should. It's in the nicks and scrapes where healing takes place.

The last time I spoke with him, when he called to let me know his father had finally passed away, he said everyone was on his or her second drink and that they were reviewing the funeral logistics. Upstairs, the body waited for its preparation. Downstairs, the living lived. It doesn't get much simpler or opaque than that. Life goes on until it ends; as Lily Tomlin's Edith Ann would say, with her lovable lisp, "And that's the truth."

Abortion

Introduction

The push for writing this particular pamphlet came from a lecture by Bill Baird, given at New Hampshire College the day before Reagan was elected to a second term. Baird didn't convince me of anything I didn't already believe, so this doesn't come from any sort of conversion. Rather Baird's speaking about insuring the rights of women in an America that was rapidly voting in Ronald Reagan finally pushed me into sitting down and writing something. The havoc the issue of abortion has caused must stop. People like Senator Gordon Humphrey, who use the prestige and power of his position in government to advocate illiberal and undemocratic beliefs and actions, must be opposed.

Therefore, this pamphlet. By profession I teach, which means I have a vested interest in logic, clarity, and truth. I am also decidedly a liberal democrat (small "|" means without party affiliation), which means that most definitely I believe in the extension of political and economic rights to everyone, which also means strong governmental power to protect those too weak or ill-positioned to protect themselves against entrenched economic and social powers.

This essay does not pretend to be even-tempered or even-handed. Instead, I expose the weaknesses of the various arguments used to support anti-abortion stances and deflate the arrogance of pro-life groups who assume the "Truth" is on their side. Once done, I state what I see as the most central issue of the abortion debate: not the "personness" of the fetus, or the morality of abortion, but the imposition by government power of compulsory motherhood on women overwhelmingly poor and overwhelmingly minority. The anti-abortion stance is, above all, a kind of cultural imperialism, an attempt by a majority group to colonize a minority group and tell them what passes for right and proper. This must stop, and this essay is a shot in opposition.

Abortion: What Is It?

This may seem to be a naïve question. After all, the word is common and should be easy to define. But naïve questions are like first steps: all good journeys begin with them. So, the first step: what is abortion?

In medicine, abortion has been usually defined as "the termination of pregnancy at any time before the fetus has attained a state of viability."[1] If the fetus is removed "after" viability (that is, its ability to live outside the uterus, usually judged by age or weight), then it is technically "premature labor." Doctors also make distinctions between "spontaneous abortions" (accidental miscarriages, for example) and "induced abortions" (the procedure most people refer to as "abortion"), but both are technically abortions in usual medical terminology. Note that the term and its definition carry no judgment as to whether or not the fetus is a person. The term describes a medical procedure, not a human being. Also interesting to note, most graduating medical students do not take the Hippocratic Oath, with its explicit warning not to "aid a woman to procure an abortion," but take a modified pledge that does not prevent them from performing abortions.[2]

Legally, the term once meant "the unlawful destruction, or the bringing forth prematurely, of the unborn foetus before the natural time of birth."[3] The decision of "Roe v. Wade" by Supreme Court in 1973 struck down the illegality of abortion. Under "Roe," abortions done to save the life of the mother at any time in the pregnancy or elective abortions done during the first two trimesters of pregnancy are legal.

Combining the legal and medical definitions together, then, will give us a usable meaning for "abortion." Abortion is "the legal removal or artificially induced delivery of the unborn after conception when done for any purpose other than to protect the life of the unborn child."

Five procedures exist for doing abortions. During the first trimester of pregnancy the most common techniques for inducing abortion is "dilation and curettage" (| & C) and "vacuum aspiration." In | & C, the cervix is dilated and an instrument called a curette (a spoon- or loop-shaped knife) is used to scrape the lining of the uterus. In vacuum aspiration, the most widely used technique, the cervix is dilated and a "cannula," or hose, is inserted into the uterus. The hose acts as a small vacuum and draws out any material, including the embryo, in the uterus.

A third method is the "morning-after" pill, a form of the hormone prostaglandin. When taken by a woman shortly after she suspects she might be pregnant, it will induce contractions that resemble an early labor and which force from the uterus any egg implanted there. Controversy surrounds this procedure, not only medically (there are perhaps dangerous side effects to it) but legally as

well. Because a woman could take the pill in her own home, any restrictions on abortions would cause legal problems in terms of the invasion of privacy.

In the second trimester these techniques cannot be used as safely because the fetus is larger. In second trimester abortions, physicians usually will use a technique called "saline amniocentesis." A small amount of saline (salt) solution is injected into the amniotic fluid which encloses the fetus. The saline solution causes contractions which cause the fetus to be expelled. The fifth technique is the "hysterotomy," similar to a caesarian section. The physician surgically opens the abdomen into the uterus and removes the fetus. This procedure carries a much higher rate of mortality for the mother.

The techniques and the legal and medical definitions make up the meaning of "abortion." In what meaningful sense, then, can a person or a group be "pro-abortion" and "anti-abortion"? The obvious answer is that the person or group is not interested in issue of abortion at all, at least as I've procedurally limited it here. To one self-described as "pro-abortion" or "pro-choice," the argument is only partly about the availability of abortion. The over-riding concern of pro-abortionists is the woman's right to her own self-determination. A pregnant woman who does not want to have another child, or whose physical or mental health would be endangered by bringing the pregnancy to term, can only achieve what she wants by an abortion. To deny the woman the procedure is to deny her the right to determine what her life will be. This is the only sensible way to understand the label "pro-abortion."

To one self-described as "anti-abortion," the overwhelming fact of the procedure is the destruction of the unborn, which are considered by the anti-abortionists to be fully human people, and therefore deserving of protection under the Constitution. To them, abortion is a means of destroying a human life, and banning the procedure means the salvation of millions of lives from oblivion. (The religious overtones of my language are deliberate, since much anti-abortion energy comes from organized religion, most strongly the Catholic Church.) This is the only sensible way to understand the label "anti-abortion."

I will spend the rest of this essay exploring three assumptions of the anti-abortionists and show why they are doubtful foundations for thought and action. The three assumptions are: 1) the fetus is a person; 2) abortion is murder; 3) women (and men) who engage in abortions have no reverence for life. I will then outline what I believe is the real issue about abortion - compulsory motherhood - and lay down a challenge to anti-abortionists to come up with an intellectually

coherent answer that is palatable to a society that calls itself democratic and open.

The Fetus Is A Person

(NOTE: In the following discussion the words "person" and "human being" will be equal, though there are large technical differences between the terms. Also, I will be use "fetus" when referring to the organism inside the uterus at any point during its development.)

This declaration is, in essence, the center of the controversy around abortion. If a fetus is a person, then it is entitled to all the rights due a person under the Constitution. If it is not a person, then it does not possess these guarantees and there is no basis, other than medical, upon which to deny a woman an abortion.

What is a person? Many anti-abortionists claim that personness begins with conception, that is, when the sperm fertilizes the ovum. This sounds straightforward enough. But what is conception? Several points in the development of a fetus could mark conception.

Conception could mean fertilization, in which case removal of the zygote, or fertilized egg, even if done a few hours or days after sexual intercourse, would mean an abortion had been done. The moment the sperm enters the egg, the argument goes, a new being has been created, one that, given time and nourishment, will become an independent human being.

Yet fertilization can't be detected until the zygote implants itself in the uterus wall. Fertilization as conception, therefore, is a weak argument because it cannot provide the strong dividing line needed to separate a nub of biological material from a human being. A person can *believe* conception has taken place, but has no direct evidence until much later, a drawback in a debate often marked by rigid certainties.

Implantation, on the other hand, is directly detectable by the hormone produced by the "trophoblast" (the technical name for the fetus at that stage in its development). What recommends implantation is that is the first "but for": "but for" implantation, the progress of the fetus could not take place. For these reasons, implantation is the medically favored definition of conception.

However, even this certainty has problems. The fetus at this point can still split (or "twin"). If individuality is considered a key element of being a person,

then one would have to wait (approximately two weeks) after implantation to definitively say that conception has unalterably taken place (about four weeks after the last menstrual period).

Another candidate for defining conception is evidence of any one of the following in the fetus: awareness of or responsiveness to outside stimuli, spontaneous muscular movement, reflexive action, or a positive EEG (electroencephalogram, or a picture of brain waves). There are problems with this as well, since the definition is based on a determination of "death" voiced by the Report of the Ad Hoc Committee of the Harvard Medical School, done in 1964, and may have little to do with fetal development.

There is no consensus among informed people about when conception occurs. And since no consensus exists about when it occurs, there can be no irrefutable argument one way or another about when personness begins as well. The contention that being a person begins with conception, once seemingly so straightforward, has its twists and weak-nesses.

Does that mean no argument can be made about the personness of the fetus? Of course not. If it were as simple as showing that the moment of conception is ambiguous, and if people were rational creatures, then the debate would never have occurred because there would have been a tolerance of different opinions. But if anything marks the abortion debate it is intolerance of differing opinions. If conception cannot be the crucial "but for" of personness, what else is there?

What Is A Person?

In the last section I showed that the use of "the moment of conception" as the point-of-no-return in defining when a fetus becomes a person is not a solid, rock-bottomed argument. But even supposing that a clear dividing line could be drawn between pre-conception and post-conception, would that necessarily resolve the issue of the personness of the fetus? That dividing line would, by definition, state that a person was in the uterus, but would there be the kind of social consensus on that definition necessary for life in a democracy?

What is a "person"? "Person" is often made synonymous with "human being," but, as with all synonyms, some-thing gets lost in the translation. "Person" clearly has more to it than simply a biological collection of cells created

by 46 chromosomes (which is what a "human being" is). Often people who are on life-support systems, and who would not be alive without those systems, are referred to as vegetables. Clearly, while they *appear* to be human, having all the features and form of a human being, something is missing, something that might be called "consciousness." While consciousness is very difficult to define, its absence strikes us forcefully: the person has lost the ability to see the world and communicate about it, has lost the ability to know what his or her place is in the scheme of things. With people defined as mentally ill, the case is even more difficult. They are "conscious" in that they do have some notion of themselves in the world, but lack something that allows them to check out the reality in which they believe they live. But, in any case, it's clear that being a person involves having both consciousness (appraising the world in which one lives) and self-consciousness (appraising oneself). Neither one alone fully defines a person.

"Awareness" in this sense (to use a term that ties together consciousness and self-consciousness) is not an automatic part of our genetic heritage. We have capabilities, but not finished products. Awareness must be earned in negotiation with the world, and this requires time for development, tension, and thought. People are different "persons" throughout their lives, for each of our ages calls forth a different person. In this way a "person" is a cumulative process and is not something that is transmitted with the genes.

Anti-abortionists will often avoid the topic of awareness by saying that the fetus is a person because it looks like a person (as a tactic, they will show pictures of aborted human fetuses that, not surprisingly, look like humans) and it can feel pain (and supposedly a number of other things as well). But the fact that the fetus looks like a person does not make it a person. (Mildred Faye Jefferson, in a recent speech, said that "visuality equals truth," meaning that because the fetus looks human, it is human. But this means that everything we see we have to take as truth since we can see it, and this is simply untrue.)[4] Many animals with which humans are in contact have human-style responses and appearances, yet that does not make them persons, and no one, except speaking in a highly figurative way, would ever argue that they were persons.

The appearance argument is not really an argument at all. Instead, it's a strong emotional identification with the fetus (that, ironically, the fetus, in turn, can't reciprocate because it lacks the awareness to do so). Because the fetus looks like the people who are looking at the fetus, the fetus must therefore be like them. Add to this the strong affections surrounding children (fetuses are

also often referred to as "children") and what emerges is, as one woman said at a lecture I attended, the conviction that in one's heart one knows that that fetus is a person in the womb. Thus the argument of the fetus as person, in this line of reasoning, comes down to an assertion that the "heart" (wherever that may be located and however it may work) knows what a person is and can determine personhood. The person who uses this argument is saying that the fetus is a person because I want it to be a person, but avoids the essential point of what makes a human "human." Fine as a basis for private belief, but horrible as a basis for public policy, medical practice, and law.

As for feeling pain, many organisms feel pain, but feeling pain is not a way to determine what an organism "is." The fact the fetus can feel pain is not an argument for the fetus' "personness" because these incidents simply tell us that the fetus has a nervous system that feels pain. (In addition, the fetus' sensitivity to pain varies with its age; does its personness vary as well?) We may, as many people do, sympathize with the pain we think the fetus feels, but we must be careful in saying that this sympathy establishes the personness of the fetus. It establishes nothing but our ability to sympathize.

Others will try to argue scientifically that because the fetus has 46 chromosomes, it is a person. Unless we wish to argue that all that defines a human being is contained in that DNA, this assertion falls flat. What that number does is indicate a possible future condition. A person is a person not because he or she has 46 chromosomes but because he or she has more than 46 chromosomes: awareness, empathy, speech, and so on. The 46 chromosomes set the stage, so to speak; personness cannot be had without them. But acquiring personness is a matter of time, biology, and environment and cannot spring fully-grown from 46 bits of DNA.

But, some will say, the 46 chromosomes are a *potential* human being, and should therefore be treated as if they constituted a person. Often this contention is stated in a highly dramatic way (this particular version comes from Garrett Hardin):

> Two physicians are talking shop. "Doctor," says one, "I'| like your professional opinion.
>
> The question is, should the pregnancy have been terminated or not? The father was syphilitic.
>
> The mother was tubercular. The had already had four children: the first was blind, the second died, the third was deaf and dumb, and the fourth was

> tubercular. The woman was pregnant for the fifth time. As the attending physician, what would you have done?"
>
> "I would have terminated the pregnancy."
>
> "Then you would have murdered Beethoven."

As forceful as this story appears, it has two faults. First, the story argues that the blueprints are the same as the finished product. The expression of traits in a person is a very subtle balancing act between environment and genes; "who a person is," though dependent on the genes, is in no way limited to them. Therefore, the blueprints, the chromosomes, are a necessary but not sufficient basis for personness. Beethoven, born in a different time and place (therefore having different blueprints), may not have become Beethoven.

Secondly, the story could be twisted to say that we should encourage syphilitic and tubercular couples to have as many children as they could in hopes of getting another Beethoven. This is absurd, but it brings out the emptiness of arguing about the "potential" person being lost. If Beethoven had been aborted, we would never know what we had lost, for we can't be aware of losing something we never had, and it's meaningless to think we can. In fact, there are greater losses to mourn in this situation. Beethoven's mother like most women started life with about 30,000 immature eggs in her ovaries. She only had seven children. Therefore, 29,993 eggs never achieved "personhood." Should we mourn that loss? And as for the father, the 100,000,000 sperm he produced each day of his mature years - some 1,000,000,000,000 in all - never connected with an egg. Does that constitute a loss in any meaningful sense?

Drawing The Line

In all honesty, it is almost impossible to establish in any meaningful way a definition of the fetus as a person that pinpoints the hard moment at which life becomes objectively valuable. That doesn't mean the definition can't take place. Society always places arbitrary lines, just as with speed limits, or the age of majority. But the arbitrary line, if it's a matter of public policy, must not be fanciful but rooted in logical reasoning and wide-spread social acceptance.

Society constantly makes distinctions about people. Society imposes a line, for instance, between adolescence and adulthood, saying in effect that the John Smith who is 17 is different from the John Smith who will be 18. There

is no way to definitively say when adolescence ends and adulthood begins, yet society must have some mechanism to recognize the transition. No one is being fooled by this; every-one knows full well that a person 6,210 days old is not demonstrably different from someone 6,211 days old. But there are distinct advantages to creating the fiction, and therefore it's created.

Can a person, then, use this discussion about arbitrary but useful distinctions to argue that John Smith at 1 day is in some sense identical to John Smith at 6,211 days, that there is no *demonstrable* difference between the two? There is another way of stating the question. Society recognizes there are social benefits in creating an age of majority and feels that the advantages, in terms of economically independent adults acting as responsible citizens, outweigh any disadvantages caused by an arbitrary distinction between the ages of 17 and 18. What are the advantages of considering fetuses as person's from the moment of conception (assuming it can be timed), of drawing the line of "minority" at the fusion of sperm and egg? And what arguments can be laid down that would make the age of minority as tolerable as the age of majority to be American people, and, in this case, to American women?

The answer is, there are no advantages, and there are no reasonable arguments. Garrett Hardin has written[5] a science fiction tale outlining why this is so. He poses this situation. A 28th Amendment has been added to the Constitution, an amendment which gives the fetus all the rights to existence enjoyed by an adult. A lawyer is defending a client accused of murder under the 28th Amendment.

The lawyer is giving his final speech to the jury. After he has stated the reasons why his client did what he did, he has a demonstration to make to the court. As preparation, he gives background information on a new process of fertilizing eggs outside the womb so that they could be implanted in the wombs of infertile women. (This was written in 1974; the technology is routine today.) As he is speaking, he withdraws from a carton a flask of milky liquid containing, by his account, twenty trillion fertilized eggs. The flask was given to him by a doctor who specializes in the technique.

The lawyer, to help the court grasp that number, compares it to the number of people who have ever lived on this earth: eighty billion. The eggs he has in his flask represent 250 times the number of people who have ever inhabited the earth. He goes on to say that by the 28th Amendment, each of these eggs is a full human being; therefore, he holds in his hand more people than have ever

lived. With a quick motion of his hand, he dashes the liquid to floor and implores that the judge convict him of mass murder and let his client go.

Hardin's point is that the law has not kept up, and could not keep up, with the technological progress of fertilizing eggs outside the uterus. Yet if the law, based on an antiquated view of technology, is put into effect, it leads to a messy situation in which what had been thought so clear before has unintended disastrous consequences. As Hardin says, "we would be fools to pass a law that did not allow for this probable technological development." Now that the development exists, his argument carries a good deal of power.

Hardin makes this point even more strongly in a replay of the scene. Instead of spilling the contents of the flask on the floor, Hardin has his lawyer try another approach. He states that because the law makes each egg a person, the court is bound to cherish the life of each and every egg. To willfully kill them would be murder; the allow them to die would be manslaughter. He then places the flask on the judge's bench and says that he now turns them over to the court. It is the judge's responsibility to see that their lives are maintained.

The lawyer goes on to point out that each egg, if placed in a womb, will develop. How many of them could be developed that way? If, as the lawyer calculates, there are one billion women of childbearing age who might donate their wombs, would that be enough? No, because only one out of every twenty thousand eggs would have a womb (assuming that the women would be willing to carry the egg to term). For every egg, saved, 19,999 would have to die.

What is the crime here? the lawyer asks. Is the criminal the judge who will be unable to place all the eggs? Is it the lawyer? Is it the doctor who invented the process? Does the crime, he asks, reside in the early destruction of the lives, or in the creation of lives for which there is no place in the world?

Or is it possible, the lawyer asks, to think that there is no crime? The lawyer's words:

> Maybe both the so-called creation of new lives and their destruction at an early stage are completely without moral significance?
>
> Maybe the mistake is in looking for a crime at this stage of the life cycle. God knows we have more than enough to do trying to patch up the broken and spoiled lives of millions of human beings in the years after birth. Why, in heaven's name, do we anguish over these little eggs and embryos?
>
> Is mere life so precious? Or should our abiding concern be for the quality of life?

This second scenario is more profound because it forces two issues into the open, both definitional: what is "life" that it should be so strongly and fanatically protected, and what is "quality"? The lawyer is trying to show the consequences of drawing the line at conception as the creation of a person. If we do believe that, the lawyer is saying, and based on that belief enact a law which calls all willful destruction of embryos murder, then what we will have to suffer as consequences for that belief? An enhanced respect for the sanctity of life, one of the anti-abortionists' guiding lights, may in fact be undercut if they draw the line there. Hardin's story shows that if there are good consequences to abolishing abortion, those consequences may also be seriously undermined by the effects of that abolition.

Is there a resolution to this question? No, at least not in terms of the way it's stated: Is the fetus a person or non-person? That is unresolvable because it's stated unresolvably. Perhaps a better way to think of the problem is: What are the social, legal, moral, and economic consequences of believing one way or another? Such a pragmatic approach may offend the moralities of some, but I can see no other way to solve the problem. Inevitably our beliefs, if they are true beliefs and not postures, must be played out in the world, and we must try to calculate realistically what the outcomes will be of following certain paths. The fanatic has always taken the privilege to be blind, but the rest of us must see where we are going. And if in seeing we find that one path or another leads to destruction, then we ought to change the beliefs that lead us there. Considering the fetus a person is a dead-end path.

Abortion Is Murder

The most serious charge the anti-abortionists bring is that abortions are murder, the logical conclusion to the argument that the fetus is a person. Yet if the main point - the personness of the fetus - is weak (as shown in the preceding chapters), then a conclusion based on that point will itself be weak.

But for the sake of consistency, let's look at the argument and see where its strengths and weaknesses lie.

* * * * *

Certain elements are constant in a definition of murder: 1) *choice* - to some degree the murderer chooses to do away with one of his or her fellows; 2) *kind*

- murder involves human beings, and does not really apply, except through word choice, to other forms of life or behavior; 3) *malice* - there is intent to do harm, regardless if the murder is premeditated or one of "passion." If abortion is murder, then it must somehow touch these three criteria.

Let's deal with number two first, since it provides the link with the previous chapters. Proving that a fetus is a person is difficult, if not entirely impossible. Assuming, however, that a definition of person could be agreed upon that would satisfy the criteria set up by medicine, philosophy, religion, and politics, one would still have to prove, in an equally definitive way, that a person who chooses to have an abortion fulfills the other two components of murder: choice and malice.

Take choice. The common definition of choice implies that one is free enough of external and internal constraints to see clearly alternatives, and to select one above the others available. Yet in many, if not most, human situations, alternatives aren't necessarily clear, nor are all alternatives equally possible. A teenager who becomes pregnant suddenly has certain choices thrust upon her, and these choices do not hit her with equal force. In other words, the choice to keep the baby or have an abortion or to marry the father (if he is known) or to leave home don't all weigh the same. What governs how she'll choose will rest on a host of factors in themselves not clear. Choosing an abortion instead of some other course may, in fact, be the best choice among alternatives, especially if the girl has no prospects of caring for the child, the father may not be known or may not care to take care of the child, and the presence of the child will destroy, or seriously impede, future choices for the girl.

In this scenario, some variant of which probably touches all females who find themselves with children they do not want, the choice to have an abortion does not come close to the "choice" one makes in murdering another human being. Regardless of what someone may think about *why* a girl would rather not have a baby, one must agree that the decision to have an abortion does not resemble the sort of "choice" involved when one human being decides to kill another human being.

This is because malice is absent from the choice. Women may decide to have abortions for reasons ranging from disliking the simple inconvenience of being pregnant to a heartfelt belief that it is best for the child not to be brought into a world that will not care for it. But in none of these situations is malice likely to be there, the urge which says, "I will do away with this child because I simply

wish to do it harm, to spite it, to hurt it for the pure sake of hurting it." Therefore, even if we agree that a fetus is a person, the other two criteria for murder - choice and malice - simply don't enter the calculus. And given the slipperiness of "person," the charge that "abortion is murder" will not hold water.

A Reverence For Life

The argument about the fetus as a person, and the following argument that abortion is murder, are tainted by false information and unclear thinking. So is the basis for these assertions, the anti-abortionists' "reverence for life." This reverence for "life" is basically religious, that is, dictated by a specific set of emotional assumptions which have, as their root, God's word in the Bible.

This reverence for "life" has a curious half-life with the anti-abortionists. Not many anti-abortionist groups - "pro-lifers" - argue against the death penalty. And their picture of "life" seems strongly bound to the prenatal fetus and not the postnatal mother. Pregnancy can harm a mother, yet the "life" of the fetus so overwhelms the mother's safety in this scheme of things that the mother should not think of her own desires but of those of many couples who "long night and day to hold and love the children so many mothers are throwing away." The mother, regardless if she wants the fetus to come to term or not, must be a surrogate for those unable to have children of their own. While the anti-abortionists would contend that this in fact exalts the mother, it does quite the opposite. The fetus is not hers but "belongs to God, even though it may be in *her* womb" so that she is simply a receptacle. This attitude denies to the mother the freedom of choice that the anti-abortionists wish to give to the fetus by having it born into the world.

And many anti-abortionists, though not all, by allying themselves with conservative politicians, are willing to use governmental power to invade peoples' lives to achieve these births. Furthermore, by supporting conservative fiscal policies, they insure that life for the economic-ally poorest in the society remains nasty, brutish, and short, especially for children. Their reverence for "life" does not seem to extend much beyond the time the child is born, and it is extraordinarily insensitive to the class and racial consequences of their policies: most births in this country occur among the very poor, since the rich can afford to have abortions when they need or want to. Whether or not the people who hold a reverence for "life" intend it, their sincerity ironically degrades both the child and the mother: not all fetuses who become children will be picked up by

foster parents hungry for a child (especially if the child is not white), and not all mothers will survive the rigors of pregnancy.

But the irony goes even deeper. This reverence for life is neither pure and loving, as its believers would like to believe. The reverence for "life" is based on a dark and closeted view of human nature, a description founded upon God and His revealed nature through the Bible, a view which is in effect "anti-life" since it exalts God above all else, hates pleasure, and distrusts women. Let's explore each of these points.

Many anti-abortionists will cite text upon text to show that God commands that life not be wasted. Yet anyone who has even a passing knowledge of the Bible and some of the destruction attributable, not to man, but to God, could only describe His actions as murder and mayhem, not love and understanding. A brief reading about the plagues visited on the Egyptians or the occasion of the Passover (where, according to Exodus 13:15, the Lord slew all the firstborn of Egypt) or the loving Christ's warning that He was bringing a sword to separate the righteous from the wicked will show that God, whatever else He does, does not always love and protect innocence. God has often wasted life in His name, through His own choice and action. Life is not especially precious to God and people who base their reverence for life on His word argue falsely.

God's the Heavy, the Enforcer, the one who will punish the wickedness on the earth. Some very strong, if hidden, attitudes about human sexuality and responsibility feed this view of God as the punisher. At base is the belief that human nature is in its essence evil. One need only go back to Genesis for this. Adam and Eve were not human in the Garden, at least human as we might understand the term. They were creations, experiments of a sort, and they lacked the self-consciousness that makes humans know themselves. It was only after their sin of disobedience that they became human because they became aware of pain and time and their own deaths.

And, one must assume, they became aware of pleasure as well. Since the evilness of human nature dates from the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden, it also dates from their learning about pleasure. Pleasure presents a problem for strong believers in God: it is not God-centered but human-centered, it is evanescent rather than infinite, and, most importantly of all, it can declare independence of moral systems. This last point especially irks the believers in God because it is a direct dismissal of everything they believe. And, so the reasoning goes, anything that does not conform with what they believe to be

right must be a product of Satan, who is wickedness incarnate. Therefore, pleasure must be opposed.

This back-and-forth relationship between pleasure and the wickedness of human nature (each one causing the existence of the other) has always been a staple of religious belief, at least religion in Western societies. Anti-abortionists assume, because of the baseness of human nature, that any woman who wants to have an abortion is somehow trying to escape the consequences of sinful pleasure, and she mustn't be allowed to do this. It is hard to escape the suspicion that the anti-abortionists don't really value "life" as much as they detest someone getting away with something. And since it is woman who supposedly destroyed the purity of the Garden and who is the temptation to all wicked pleasure in the world, it is woman who must be punished most strongly of all.

The anti-abortionists' reverence for life is in reality a reduced view of human nature. There is often an unstated love of punishment in them, disguised as "righteousness." They often seem unable to understand or accept the whole range of weirdness that exists in the human comedy, and because of this they seem to want to cauterize it, to designate only a small patch of human experience as "proper" and declare the rest (which they cannot understand and for which they do not want to show tolerance) wickedness. Being against abortion is not so much a matter of "life" for them as it is a matter of control. They want to be sure that they still have the ability, in a world they perceive as increasingly chaotic, immoral, and indifferent to them, to say and do something and make it stick.

Woman

In the last section I said that the anti-abortionist reverence for "life" in part hid an anti-woman bias, seeing as how it was willing to risk the life of the mother to save the life of the fetus. This anti-woman bias was also tied up in a religious dislike of pleasure, in that it is usually only the woman who is punished for deciding to have an abortion and never the man as a co-conspirator. The man usually escapes retribution for his pleasure and does not have to suffer the burden of God's eyes on him all the time, as a woman does. This accords with the traditional view of women as temptresses and bringers of chaos; the only clog upon this wickedness is enforced motherhood, a kind of imprisonment that will do the woman good by teaching her to accept the consequences of her

actions and take the responsibility for being the sober person she should have been in the beginning.

Women, of course, are none of these things and should suffer no extraordinary punishment for being who they are. While it would be short-sighted to say that the abortion issue is solely a woman's rights issue, for it deals with larger social and moral concerns outside the woman's movement, a person can't deny that a woman's right to have an abortion when she chooses is a significant step toward equality for women in a society of which they represent more than half the population. This is why most women in favor of abortion do not define themselves as "pro-abortion" but as "pro-choice."

This is not to say that the "pro-choicers" are innocent of vagueness or confusion in their arguments. Not all of the assumptions listed on page 8 are sound or right. For instance, asserting that abortion is needed for rape/incest, danger to the mother's health, and genetically defective children implies that cases of this sort are many. This isn't true. It's notoriously difficult to determine if a child is defective or not before it's born, and those cases that can be determined are a very small percentage of the total births in a year. The same is true for rape/incest: the number of pregnancies resulting from rape or incest add up to only a small number - perhaps one in one thousand. And abortions done to protect the life of the mother - if, for instance, she has severe diabetes - again constitute a small percentage of the needed abortions in a year. Also, the assumption that abortion is "not emotionally upsetting" has been refuted by a number of studies, though it is not as psychologically damaging as anti-abortionists would like to paint it. And as for children being "unwanted," there is simply no way to prove "unwantedness" since, so often, what had started out unwanted ends up being wanted by the parents (though, again, this is not always a sure thing, as the anti-abortionists claim).

Yet for all of its diversions, the woman's movement has clearly seen that abortion is a woman's issue, one that directly affects a woman's quality and possibility of life. Gloria Steinem has perhaps voiced this the most strongly:

> The point is not what decision is made but who has the power to decide.... In allowing women to make a choice about whether or not to have an abortion, the Supreme Court has granted a woman (at least, to women who can afford to pay) a powerful to make a decision.
>
> It's for that reason that "Roe vs. Wade" has caused such an uproar among those who would keep women from exercising any power in this country. To be able to make the decision about choosing abortion not only gives the

> woman autonomy from men and the state, it gives her a means to challenge their authority by exerting her own decision-making powers over the most basic means of production, the means of reproduction. Furthermore, if... women are home all day taking care of children and working at home, they are going to have a much harder time joining either the workforce or the marketplace of ideas and thus will effectively be kept isolated from any real power base.[6]

It simply will not do, in the United States today, to see women as anything other than equal partners in the social, political, and economic ventures of the society.

But perhaps I am assuming too much self-evidence here. Why would women consider legalized abortion necessary to insure their equal access and participation in this society? The answer to this centers around pregnancy itself. Despite the endless folderol and romanticism woven around pregnancy across the history of humankind, it's quite clear that pregnancy, from the point of view of the woman, entails a kind of servitude. For numberless generations this servitude was expected of women. Only within the last century or so has this expectation been seriously questioned. Gradually many women have come to see that motherhood is not necessarily a "natural" condition, but is instead, in the words of Beverly Harrison, "a creative moral action to be undertaken in freedom, intelligently and with forethought."[7] The right to an abortion allows this creative choosing to take place, and consequently allows a woman a measure of control over her life that, traditionally, she has not had the sanction to have. As Ellen Willis has stated it, "to oppose legal abortion is to define women as child-bearers rather than autonomous human beings."[8]

A "pro-life" group which champions fetal rights over the rights of the already existing mother must accept the fact that it is also championing the involuntary servitude of women. An analogy with slavery might be helpful here. Little more than a century ago people in this country, and throughout the Western world, asked themselves the question "How can we justify compulsory servitude?" And the only question they could come up with was "By no means whatsoever." Can any other answer be given to the question "How can we justify compulsory motherhood?" Anti-abortionists may not see the situation in this light, but when the rights of the fetus override the rights of the mother, and the mother must either bring the fetus to term or be branded and treated as a criminal if she aborts it, then the woman is being forced to remain pregnant, which can only be considered a form of servitude. And, as with slavery, there is no moral defense that can be made except to treat women as something other than fully

participating members of society. When the issue of abortion is re-defined this way, then it changes completely. The question of when the fetus is translated into a person is irrelevant, since the real object to be controlled and defined is the mother. And the abolition of abortion is not a victory of moral rightness, but is the first of many policies outlining the management by the state of compulsory motherhood.

And how good will the state make on the obligations it incurs by forcing pregnancy on women? Will it vigorously prosecute all women (and their doctors and lovers) for murder if they have an outlawed abortion, thereby creating whole new classes of crime and criminals? Will it provide (as it does not now) sufficient money and people to insure that the children who they have forced to be born be properly fed, clothed, educated, and placed in this society? How will the state square this intrusion into the private lives of citizens with the Constitution?

Clearly the abortion issue, seen from this light, as the pro-choicers have been trying to get people to see it, becomes at once resolvable. Nothing in American society sanctions the involuntary subordination of one group to another. If the abolition of abortion creates such a system of subordination, then despite the arguments in favor of it, abortion cannot be abolished. This is the position the Supreme Court took in 1973 and reaffirmed in 1983 with its decision in the *Akron* case, which struck down regulations in the city of Akron, Ohio, that imposed restrictions and certain procedural obstacles to abortions beyond the first trimester. While the state has an interest in the regulation of abortions, that interest cannot impede the right of the mother to choose to have an abortion in the first two trimesters of pregnancy.

Does this insistence on compulsory motherhood end the debate on abortion? Of course not. But it does dampen some of the anti-abortionists' more fiery weapons. The fetus can no longer be the shield behind which anti-abortionists launch their fears about sexuality and the freedom of women. It can also no longer be the justification for the massive state control sought by these groups to impose their morality on the rest of society. If the abortion issue is seen as an issue of women's autonomy, then the fetus becomes irrelevant.

Obviously much more work needs to be done to explain this position, given the legal, moral, and social complexity of it. But it is an argument that the anti-abortionists would find hard to counter because it avoids their central bastion, the personness of the fetus, and concentrates on their urge for power and control. In any case, the abortion issue is as much a discussion of the right of

women as it is of fetuses, and any solution which diminishes the rights of the former in favor of the latter diminishes the rights of all.

Rest Stop

Where are we right now? What I've tried to do is show how some of the arguments play, looking especially at their weaknesses and inconsistencies. The most important argument, at least in the way the debate is set up now, is the personness of the fetus: at what point in its development does a fetus become a human being, deserving of all the rights due an American citizen? If that question cannot be answered in a way that satisfies logic, then the anti-abortionists do not have a strong base, because their argument that abortion equals murder cannot stand, and their reason for a human life amendment is gone.

Yet in many ways this question in unresolvable since there are enormous and legitimate differences on the matter. If the anti-abortionists insist that life begins at conception, then that insistence is an imposition of one set of values upon the general public and invites the "lawlessness" the imposition was meant to stop. Drawing the line at conception will result in coercion, and coercion will result in evasion of the law. The Prohibition amendment of the 1920s should be a clear enough warning.

Much of this entanglement, however, can be avoided if we change the question: not "How can we justify abortion?" but "How can we justify compulsory motherhood?" In much of the anti-abortion thought is an unvoiced set of fears about freedom and sexuality as well as a statement about the proper role of women in society. The definition of the fetus as a person automatically puts the mother in a secondary position, since the rights of the fetus are championed at the expense of the mother's rights. This secondary position has been what the woman's movement has fought against, and in adopting the abortion issue as their own, the woman's movement has made the availability of abortion a necessary condition to their continued fight to find equality in American society.

Compulsory motherhood eliminates the fetus as a central issue, for the person most involved in this debate is the already-existing woman. And compulsory motherhood brings out clearly the political and legal power the anti-abortionists wish to have in order to put into effect what they believe. Compul-

sory motherhood shifts the debate away from knotty unsolvable moral problems to the tactics and strategies of acquiring, and fighting the acquisition of, the power to turn one's private beliefs into a standard the public must follow.

Compulsory motherhood also brings out clearly the class struggle at the heart of the abortion debate. In a recent book titled *Abortion and the Politics of Motherhood*, the author, Kristen Luker, points up the class differences between the groups on either side of the question. She outlines the opposed world views of each side and supports this through data that show income, education, and career differences between the antagonists. She is somewhat pessimistic that the two sides can ever come together since their very notions about what makes up the world and proper behavior in it share little in language, morality, or history.[9]

Is it true that the two sides will not come together? Probably, unless there is a good deal of re-thinking of positions in a way that does not simply mean re-arranging prejudices. And this thinking is a matter of language. The language of the abortion debate reflects the sharp divisions of its users, and it is to language we will turn in the last section of the pamphlet.

Language

Part of the reason for the vitriol of the abortion issue is that the two sides have debased the language available for democratic political discourse and action. Aside from the fact that the "debate" about abortion is not a debate at all - one is not an anti- or pro-abortionist with the thought of being convinced to be the opposite -, the fight about abortion occurs in languages which come from different universes of thought and action and have no little or no common.

S.I. Hayakawa, in his book *Language in Thought and Action*, has two chapters which clearly illustrate why this butting of linguistic heads happens: "The Two-Valued Orientation" and "The Multi-Valued Orientation." Two-valued orientation is, in his words, the "penchant to divide the world into two opposing forces...and to ignore or deny the existence of any middle ground." The result of this kind of thinking is to enable people, as Aldous Huxley has said of propaganda, to do in cold blood things that they could otherwise do only in the heat of passion. And, to be even more precise about this, to enable people to confuse passion with logic so that an increase in sincerity is also seen as an in-crease in rightness.

As Jerome Frank says, in one of the epigraphs to Hayakawa's chapter, "Once we have cast another group in the role of the enemy, we know that they are to be distrusted - that they are evil incarnate. We then twist all their communications to fit our belief."

Multi-valued orientation, on the other hand, allows for, and encourages, grades of knowing and talking. In Hayakawa's words, a multi-valued orientation helps "keep open the possibility of adjusting differences, reconciling conflicting interests, and arriving at just estimates." This is rationalism, what the philosopher Karl Popper said was "the idea that the other fellow has a right to be heard, and to defend his arguments," a faith in the restorative and corrective powers of an open mind and the reason of others.

The debate about abortion, more often than not, is two-valued (though there may be, in any one situation, an infinitude of pairs). People who wish to convince the anti-abortionists that their arguments are, if not wrong, at least shaky, often end up saying "You can't talk to these people" when the anti-abortionists refuse to listen. The expression is truer than they know because the anti-abortionists not only do not accept the corrective arguments, they do not accept the essential ground rule that their beliefs can be questioned at all. They cannot stop being two-valued to become multi-valued, and thus people who debate from the latter rostrum are simply not heard.

This is not to say that pro-choicers are inevitably multi-valued, that they are the keepers of rationalism. They are often two-valued as well, at least insofar as they believe "Having no choice is bad, having choice is good." And the people who exclaim "You can't talk to these people" are often assuming a superiority about their positions without being aware that such a superiority, if untouched by any suspicion that perhaps they might be wrong as well, is really just a species of arrogance.

But not all two-valued thinking is alike. The essential intellectual weakness of the anti-abortion position is its foundation in Biblical religion. This is a problem because of the difficulties proving that God exists. This requires faith, and the irony of faith is that one must have it in order to know what it is. Inevitably the two values are either a person has faith or doesn't have faith; there are no half-faiths, no possibility of agnosticism. And if one doesn't have faith, then one doesn't have access to what is right.

As I mentioned above, pro-choicers also seem to rely on a two-valued orientation: Having no choice is bad, having choice is good. One may argue that

this does not essentially differ from how the religionist acts. But there is a subtly important difference here. The pro-choicer never argues that choice has the "self-evidentness" ascribed to faith. Choice and no-choice are never stated without some qualification, such as, Choice when properly informed, and, No-choice as imposition of someone's morals on someone else. They are never simply bald slogans. These qualifications lead to more such fine-tuning so that in talking about choice one is also forced to talk about choice under what circumstances, with what information, with what degree of political and economic freedom, and so on. And the same gradations can be applied to no-choice as well. They cannot be applied to religious faith.

Thus it seems that part of the reason for the high pitch of the abortion debate is that the opponents do not speak in the same tongue, with treaties about qualifying arguments and remaining flexible in the face of differences. One of the pamphlets I have in front of me says, in large bold type, "Are You Ready To Face GOLIATH? If you are all fired up and ready to face the `Goliath' of abortion, but would like to see other Christians join in the battle too, we've got just the thing to help!" The language is instructive. The abortion issue is not a matter of debate; it is war. This creates the irony of these most humanely intentioned people searching for a moral end by most inhumane means. (And the recent fire-bombing of a number of abortion clinics shows clearly that this martial call is not limited to rhetoric.) This war-vocabulary limits the anti-abortionist's ability to hear and weigh other points of view. Linguistically, the anti-abortionist, because of the way he has chosen to view the world, decides to make himself deaf, and this deafness, confused with an unveering faith in God's word, forces him to relegate all who oppose him to "the enemy."

Psychologically, this is related to work done by Milton Rokeach in his book *The Open and Closed Mind*. All human beings, Rokeach states, are engaged in two simultaneous tasks: knowing about the world, and wishing to protect themselves from the world. As the need for defense against disturbing information gets stronger, curiosity about the world gets weaker. The reason for this is that everyone has both a "belief system," which contains the things one believes, and a "disbelief system," which contains all the things one doesn't believe. Reasonably secure individuals enjoy their belief systems, but are also open to information about their disbelief systems. To be open to information about the disbelief system is to have an "open mind."

But the more fear invades one's belief system, the less one wants information about the disbelief system, the less able one is to make distinctions about the things one fears. It is just easier to lump them all together under "the enemy" and collect one's forces to do battle. As Rokeach points out, failure to see the differences among the things one doesn't believe in characterizes the "closed mind."

It in this way that the anti-abortionists and pro-choicers have "closed minds." This is not a moral judgment but a psychological and linguistic judgment. Abortion, as a topic, as an act of language, is impervious to resolution because each side looks at the world with different words, and there is no common language, no medium of translation, that can bring each side into the other's disbelief system with-out creating fear or disgust.

Does that mean that the contention around abortion is irreconcilable? No. But the debate and its language must shift back to the common customs of political democracy, back to the *unum* that gives the *pluribus* its freedom. The real issue is not whether life begins at conception (which is unprovable) or whether "life" is infused with divinity and is thus so precious that it should never be taken (which would be refuted by all the wars in history). The real issue is the freedom of choice in a democratic society, and it is upon that ultimately political question the issue of abortion must rest. This does not diminish the moral discussion that must go on about the quality of life, its definition, dignity, and enrichment. Without that discussion politics becomes simply a dumb-show of the mechanics of power.

But some distinction must be made between the moral and political discussions so that they do not paralyze or degrade each other. This issue cannot be approached with either the sometimes arrogance of the pro-choicers or the intolerance and anti-woman bias of the anti-abortionists. Each side must find a common democratic language to articulate differences of opinion so that those differences do not result in sectarian war-fare, political fascism, or cultural polarization.

Can this be done? Raymond Tatalovich and Byron W. Daynes, in a book on the politics of abortion, make two conclusions about resolving the abortion issue. For one, if consensus on the issue is to be reached, "consensus building will require that political actors in the differing branches of government (and, it should be added, in pro- and anti- groups) agree to disagree about the components of a political settlement." Second, "it seems doubtful that any

`best' solution to the abortion dispute can be structured if one evaluates public policy from the standpoint of morality or truth."

Is there common ground? Yes. Kristen Luker, in the book mentioned above about the politics of mother, notes several large concepts which cut across the battle lines and which may offer the contestants a common ground. All cherish the idea of the dignity and worth of the individual, as rooted in the religious and moral traditions of Western civilization, and as institutionalized in the American experiment in democracy. All can agree on the pain and sorrow of abortion. All understand that this issue touches on the deepest questions of human nature and human life, on its mystery as well as its glory. These are common concepts that people of good heart and mind could explore, not with the intention of winning the fight but of cooling the argument down so that some much-needed perspective can creep in and take up residence.

Secondly, many people, such as President Reagan, believe that politics and morality are two sides of the same coin. For many reasons, not the least being a fuzziness about what this "morality" is, this idea ought to be put to one side and the discussion take place within the more shared ground of American democratic politics. The true activity for people of good conscience, whether they believe in abortion or not, is to shift the debate back to exploring and explaining the tensions, both creative and destructive, between the *unum* and the *pluribus*. In doing so they will rediscover the single idea that a democracy's sole reason for being is to insure that *all* who live in it have the right to make whatever choices they deem necessary for their existence. Once that idea is lost, all is lost, and no one - fetus, mother, and society - will be fit to live with.

Endnotes

1. Cyclopedia of Medicine, Surgery, Specialties 35 (3d ed. 1965)
2. World Medical Association Bulletin 109 (1949)
3. Black's Law Dictionary 20 (4th ed. 1968)
4. Speech given at New Hampshire College, December 12, 1984
5. Garrett Hardin, *Stalking the Wild Taboo*, (Los Altos, CA, William Kaufman, Inc.; 1978), 47-53
6. Quoted in Barbara Millbauer, *The Law Giveth*, (New York, Atheneum; 1983), 248-249

7. Beverly Harrison, *Our Right to Choose*, (Boston, Beacon Press; 1983), 228
8. Ellen Willis, *Village Voice*, 31 December 1980-6 January 1981, 28
9. Kristen Luker, *Abortion and the Politics of Motherhood*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 202

Going 60

Introduction

These essays are of more recent vintage, having started when I turned sixty ("turned" as in "reached the age of," not "became rancid and indigestible"). They repeat old themes and at times contradict them (of course I repeat and contradict myself, but I claim Walt Whitman in my defense: " Do I contradict myself? Very well, then I contradict myself, I am large, I contain multitudes").

But I repeat and contradict so that consistency does not become a treasured accomplishment and that the line of reasoning, such as it is in any of my pieces, has as many bumps, warts, fissures, and dead-ends as reality itself. It should not be an entirely enjoyable feeling that something I said at twenty matches what I'm saying at sixty *unless* there is also a trace-line of evolution, doubt, and fracture that has tested the sentiment and still found it (for me, at least) worth grasping.

As always, enjoy.

Michael Bettencourt, 2015

Going on 60

I swore I would not do this, that I would not write about turning 60, that I would not catalogue and comment upon the thousand shocks that 60-year old flesh is heir to - back fat, love handles, less-than-prim erections, random mechanical joint aches, ear hair, nose hair, wavering hearing volumes, wavering vision sharpness, a supine appetite, and 991 more - and yet here I am writing about them. Why?

It's not that I find any heartening humor in these things, unlike the barrage of forwarded emails my mother sends me of the "You know you're a geezer when - " variety. Nor do I find any philosophic comfort in contemplating my aging - I don't find any particular wisdom emanating from it, nor any dispensation, as if I've lived a good life and it's time to let the generations behind me live theirs while I rest on my accumulated laurels, blah blah blah. And the complaining - I have fellow sexagenarians who complain about this and that connected to their aging, and it's depressing to hear the medical litanies, the regurgitated Bette Davis line about "growing old is not for sissies," the lamentations about nostalgia and timidities about technology and over-concern about meal times and gastric problems.

So, again, why?

For me, this coming decade feels fraught - I don't know any other word for it. Rather than feeling accomplished about anything I've done in my life, I feel anxious that I've barely gotten started on creating anything worth leaving behind. I feel that despite a laudable discipline in pursuing my various enthusiasms, I've never amalgamated them into something that someone else would find worth their time to cherish and promote. This makes me wonder if I lack something in myself as an artist, something human and humanizing, a simple touchstone that I have failed to have within me and thus within the work I do so that while people may find it linguistically clever and intellectually engaging, it never quite convinces them to turn that admiration into an emotional tie, something sub-dermal and un-cognitive that pulls them in and nourishes them.

(And does that matter? Is that a sign of failure? What does that tie validate in what I've done? Is the problem in me or in them? Is there a problem at all? These questions and others like them plague me as well.)

I find being me unrelaxing, and I imagine it might be that way for people close to me. I try to blunt this by paying close attention to people and making

vigorous attempts to be calming, organized, helpful - but it will out, how could it not? Time's wingéd chariot is very much at my ear, and I am trying both to slow it down and outrace it by pursuing the things I do in the way that I do them.

Which I know won't work in the end, but I do it anyway because I lack an openness about and a trust in life - life is something to be conquered, life is a matter of having done enough to satisfy some judge (and knowing that the judge will never be satisfied), it is about a kind of grinding discipline that has no real joy in it either in the moment or in the accomplishment. To just "let be" without a Plan B - not possible for me, which I think deprives me of serendipity - it all depends on my to-do list, which is the opposite of the serendipitous.

All of this is, at heart, a spiritual problem - a strange thing for an atheist to say, but true - "spiritual" in the sense of finding a satisfaction in living that can outsmart and fend off the oblivion that is living's sole and permanent certainty. This has been a problem for me all my life - to find pleasure and joy where I am existentially that feels like "enough," within which I can sit and feel comfort and completion and calm. (The rare time I feel this is when I've just enough wine to blunt the grind yet still be physically capable - the alcohol turns off the puritanical neurons and life feels expansive and unthreatening.)

But then (I think) - perhaps the jaggedness I feel in my life is meant to be that way, that that is the way I have to live because I am constituted as I am, and I should learn how to use it well rather than complain about the work and doubt and dislocation it causes me.

This conclusion sits well with me, but I don't know if it does because it's right or because I'm too lazy to do the necessary course corrections. It feels right because it feels real. I find myself most at peace when I'm working on a project like the "videos" I've been posting on YouTube for Block and Tackle because I have accomplished something new and interesting, thus pleasing myself. Yet I also feel annoyed that they don't kick off anything when we announce them - why aren't people more interested in something good? (And then I counter with, "Well, maybe they aren't that good because they're missing some essential ingredient, something that humanizes them and creates that emotional tie [see above]," which provokes a counter-counter about "It's as good as, and better than, most of the crap that's out there" - at which point the discussion has slipped away from the video and into the land of dueling irritations with a geezerish tone. Back away, back away!)

The only thing that brings some leaven into this counter-counter-counter is humor - something that self-deprecates without also diminishing the efforts and accomplishments, that is true humor and not anger masked, that can be ironic without irony's underlying despair and dismay. This is the only thing that ever brings me into a balance - it's my form of finding balance, though one that comes from a kind of see-sawing (jerky and almost ungovernable) rather than meditative harmony (which I always find temporary and unable to stand up to strong winds and noisy encounters).

It is true that I am still enough of a residual Catholic to want to find Eden, where all this struggle will end and peace will reign. I also suspect that Eden is incredibly boring and not at all conducive to imagination - and is, in its own way, as empty of ultimate meaning as I find in my life and life in general (though it can certainly have local meaning, and has to, or else why persist in living at all - a question to be answered at another time).

As the clock turns over to 60 and beyond, the only grace that will be a saving one is to find humor and apply it liberally and not take the serious stuff so seriously - or take it as seriously as it needs to be taken, give it its proper honor and respect, and use the humor to at least keep the despair at bay if it can't be blunted or amended.

Consider 60 a nice, safe speed - it will get you where you need to go.

(December 2012)

Je Suis Charlie: Why?

The massacre shocked, as all massacres should, no matter where they occur - though they shock in different ways depending on the degree of family one feels for the victims: dead French cartoonists garnered more sympathy than the swath of waste laid down by Boko Haram in Nigeria at the same moment, and therein lies a tale, as they say.

But these hypocrisies are just fish in a barrel: not interested. I was more interested in how people defended free speech, especially what some called "the right to blaspheme," that insult, not civility, is the foundation of one's right to proclaim freely. (But then there is the case of Dieudonné M'Bala in France - but just more fish in the hypocrisy barrel.)

So, according to the "blaspheme" meme, if a society wants to label itself "liberal" and "modern" and "democratic" and "a protector of freedom," then its citizens must not only swallow a high degree of insult to prove their liberal bona fides, especially insults to dear and fervent beliefs, but also not retaliate against it. Oh, one can retaliate in words or gestures or massive protest marches, but one cannot physically attack the insulters, one cannot make them "pay a price."

In this scenario, the society extends an insulation to the insulters that is not extended to the insultees. The insultees, however, are expected to honor this protection as a proof that they are members in good standing of the liberal regime and will follow Louis Brandeis' maxim of "the remedy to be applied [to bad speech] is more speech, not enforced silence."

But clearly not everyone chooses to play this liberal/democratic charade and instead choose to break the rules. This is what happened at *Charlie Hebdo*.

To me, the writers at *Charlie Hebdo* were poseurs, if not hypocrites (just as with *Jyllands-Posten* in 2005 with their defamatory cartoons of Mohammed). They wanted the glory and profit of being provocateurs but did not want to take responsibility for any blowback. But isn't provoking blowback the whole point of the insult? If you don't get blowback, then why perform the insult? And while in a liberal regime the blowback is supposed to be choreographed by the "remedy of more speech" so that no one dies, who says anyone gets to define what constitutes the "right" blowback?

In a skewed way, the massacre honored the insulters and their right to blaspheme: something they did triggered an actual effect in the actual world

and was not just mouth-music and posing done on a periodic basis for a paying audience. The exercise of the right had consequence: what more can any artist hope for?

One hopes that the consequence will be less than suffering and death, but death should not be ruled out as a validation of the freedom and the proper outcome of an inflammatory action.

But let's not go to that length: murdering the writers is understandable, but massacre is not really a sustainable counter-balance of the right to blaspheme. But neither is the "remedy of more speech" a useful counter-balance, especially for the voiceless in a society who have no megaphone for their "more speech."

Perhaps some speech should be penalized (the "yelling 'fire!' in a crowded theatre when there is no fire" approach).

Perhaps we should de-exalt free speech principles and instead have massive marches in support of non-speech principles (placards like "sometimes it's best just to shut up" or "if you can't say something good, don't say anything at all").

Perhaps, in the broader view, we denizens of the liberal democracy need to reëvaluate the rights-based underpinnings of our social arrangements, since rights are arid and pallid next to clan and tribe and family and faith.

But let's not exalt the insulters and sanctify their extinction nor expect the insulted to accept the insults with a charm and grace the insulters decline to exhibit. What happened at *Charlie Hebdo* was barbaric on both sides. At the very least, the disaster should force us to display less sanctimony and self-satisfaction and instead examine how we can expand free speech from the crimped "right to blaspheme" to a more civilizing effort to share ideas and the lives of the people who speak them.

(February 2015)

Float Tanks

A recent issue of *The Nation* had an article on float tanks - sensory deprivation chambers that people pay to enter in order to ream out the modern technological sludge gumming up their senses and their thoughts.

Since the article appeared in *The Nation*, it took the journal's expected politico/cultural turns. The writer, Neima Jahromi, brought in Thoreau to counterpoint arguments made by the tankers regarding the stresses of (and solutions to) modern corporation-curated life. He also mused about whether the sense of self-redemption that tankers experience could be a trigger for social changes that would reduce income inequality and the corporatist-induced urge toward overwork. Sherry Turkle and a group of like-minded writers appear speaking about the insubstantiality of self and social connections caused by clicking on too many hyperlinks and having too many open browser tabs and how we need to hit the off-button to get back to basics.

I guess. Maybe.

Though such speculation feels about as substantial as the water upon which the tankers float, in part because it simply reprises an old American superstition that the way to social reform is best done through the reform of the self - the e-z revolution, no barricades needed, the kingdom of God to come by and by. And we all know how well such self-focus has worked in creating an egalitarian compassionate society in America.

But underneath the silliness, or at least thinness, of tank-mentality and digital anxieties simmers a fertile uneasiness about balance in a life curated by corporate interests, an uneasiness which is, at heart, religious: what would human life be like if the kingdom of God on earth in fact arrived tomorrow?

I've just finished Reza Aslan's *Zealot: The Life and Times of Jesus of Nazareth*. Shitestorm of reaction across the Internet, of course, but the most interesting thing about the reaction is the idealism that drives it - "idealism" meaning, for me, a straining towards the perfect and the perfected by a species evolved (irony of ironies) through selection by imperfections, i.e., evolution.

This idealism, whether it adopts Aslan's revolutionary Jesus or the Pauline Redeemer as its herald, is at heart a hunger to understand the source and purpose of human suffering and to figure out what can be done to stop it, otherwise known as "the kingdom of God on earth."

Is this achieved by active political resistance? Is it achieved by floating in a dark tank? What is the proper mix of private and public moralities upon which to found the kingdom? Can the kingdom dissolve the territorialities of self that spark violent conflict yet still maintain the benefits of individual conscience and freedom? How much violence can we use to achieve peace before the violence overawes everything? And so on, and so on.

This struggle can even be seen in the recent knuckle-headed arguing over debt ceilings and government shutdowns because embedded in the shouting are notions about how much suffering government should or shouldn't blunt in the lives of the citizens. Governments are, from this angle, attempts to make the kingdom manifest in people's lives.

But the kingdom of God on earth in corporate America - a balanced life in a regime built on manufacturing unbalanced appetites - idealism achieved through our bought-and-sold political system? Maybe the tankers are right - best to withdraw to one's own kingdom and soothe one's own suffering. But they are right in the way that adolescents are wrong when teenagers think that they are the only ones to have ever suffered the travails of growing up. It's a limited perspective, and one destined to degrade after a short shelf life.

Because outside the tank, someone controls the water, someone controls the materials that make-up the tank - the electricity, the property, the time we are allowed to allot to any leisure, all controlled by not-you - "you" meaning not just the singular you but also the plural "you" of which your personal "you" is a part - the commons, the common-wealth, the kingdom - under assault by the "not," exploited daily for profit, privatizing the legacy, making you superfluous.

The American version of the species needs to stop amusing itself to death so that it can wake up and give itself a fighting chance to correct what needs correction and build a kingdom worth living in before the end-time finishes the work it is already doing.

Or it can continue to float on its own minor oceans, in the dark, encased, and soothe itself into irrelevance.

Ding! Time's up!

(October 2013)

Guns

Several recent essays about guns in *Harper's* and *The New York Review of Books* are notable for the way the authors have sacralized guns and gun owners/ownership, saying that gun users have rights that non-gun users are bound to respect and that the solution to "guns" in our society will come about when non-gun users begin respecting these rights and gun users act as stewards of the public peace by promoting what I can only call the "safe sex" version of gun usage.

This argument is absurd, of course, both as argument and as public policy. So, let's take it apart to see why.

First and foremost are these "rights" - what are they? The Supreme Court did say that gun ownership was a right, but it didn't say that *unregulated* gun ownership was a right. After all, the phrases "well-regulated" and "bear arms" appear in the same sentence, so the writers must have meant for them to have something to do with one another.

So the resistance by gun users in the name of Constitutional liberty to measures that mean to regulate them - or, more accurately, regulate things like buying/selling and information (through things like licenses, registration, etc.) - is hypocritical because they aren't really interested in protecting the Second Amendment but what I call Second Amendment Lite: all "bear arms," no "well-regulated."

This also means, as a logical consequence of their hypocrisy, that they must consider the 30,000 gun-related homicides a year a necessary blood sacrifice that the rest of must pay to protect their rights - why else would they do nothing to stop them?

Are these the kind of rights, and rights-holders, that any of us should be bound to respect, where gun-user self-interest (not to mention their fetishism about the gun-object itself) is tarted up as public interest and where someone else's pain is considered a proper homage to their beliefs? Not for me, and not for any state that would consider itself well-regulated and in service to the welfare of its citizens.

So, if these "rights" are not to be respected, what about the object to which they are attached? What, actually, is a gun?

Despite whatever else a gun is considered - beautiful machine, symbol of liberty - it is foremost a manufactured commodity that, like cigarettes, if used properly will only cause injury. Therefore, it makes no sense to treat something so dangerous with any kind of veneration when we should be treating it as we would treat any commodity that might cause harm, through the processes we have for product safety regulation. My toaster has to undergo such a vetting; why not something geometrically more dangerous than that?

In addition to product safety regulation, we should also treat guns as a public health problem, just as we did with cigarettes. The injuries and deaths caused by people using easily acquired guns have to be paid for, and there's no defensible argument against why that cost should not be borne, in part, by the companies that make the product that helps cause the injury, just as we did with cigarettes.

Therefore, the "rights" of gun users (and that includes the companies that make the guns) should not trump legitimate concerns about product safety and public health. That they do only proves the power of money and fear to stifle reason and action - and that's all it proves. Sacrosanct rights, individual liberty, the tyranny of government (more on this in a moment) - all a smoke-screen to hide the fact that gun users simply don't want to be told what to do with their manufactured commodities and that they believe their own self-interests in this regard are of a higher order than the interests of individual victims and the commonwealth at large.

Well, what about that tyranny of the government? What about the argument that the state wants to seize the guns of individuals and take away people's freedoms and that the guns are necessary to resist such despotism, in the finest American revolutionary tradition?

Really?

If the state really wanted to take away people's guns, it would take away people's guns. As the owner of the biggest gun on the block, so to speak, the state can pretty much do what it wants to do when it comes to expending violence against the citizens. Sure, there would be hold-outs and pockets of resistance, but the state would win, at least for a time, in part because, even though there 200 or 300 million guns in the people's hands, these gun users in no way resemble a "well-regulated militia." The thought that there would be coördinated push-back by citizens enraged by this assault on their rights is a fever dream.

But the state is not interested in taking away people's guns as a means of controlling them because it doesn't need to do that to control them. There are far easier and more effective ways to cow a citizenry than outright attack, and the state uses all of them right now, from oppressive surveillance to a friendly tax audit.

So, if gun-user rights are really expressions of self-interest underscored by an adolescent whininess about being told what to do; if guns, as products, are dangerous when used as instructed; if the idea that people have to have guns in order to resist tyranny is just a fever dream, what defense is left to justify not changing the situation concerning guns and gun violence in our society?

None.

Gun users, though, are right about one thing: it's probable that gun regulation will not stem the tide of gun violence, at least not in any meaningful way. Gun regulation is about gun regulation, but guns are not the source of the violence - that lies elsewhere in our society. The only way to turn that tide of violence is by basing our society on peace and justice instead of its customary foundations in hyper-individualism, capitalist greed, and willful ignorance (about history, about economics, about morality).

Now, if gun users wanted to work towards that end, I might be more open to respecting the rights they say I should respect about their using guns. But until they come around, then I have no recourse but to work towards making sure they and their manufactured commodities get at least the level of regulation that car owners, barbers, and dry cleaners have to undergo to do their business. Anything less than that (and I'| like a lot more) is just an insult to the people sacrificed to ensure that they get to play with their toys without interruption.

(July 2013)

On Skin Lesions, Geezers, and Hummingbird Wings

In November 2014, I had a benign melanoma lifted from my right calf. By "benign," I mean that it hadn't set out yet to kill me: thin, topical, lightly rooted. The Marvelous María Beatriz had scoped out the blackish insignia on my leg and shepherded me to the dermatologist's office to have it biopsied, then surveyed her contacts at the hospital to find the surgeon everyone loved who would do the removal (we found him, in the Breast Cancer Center, a soft-tissue expert).

With casual deftness he fileted it off, leaving what is known in his business as "the shark's bite," a divot that resembles what a shark (small) would take away if it opted for human sushi. He used dark blue thread for stitching, which gave the wound some horror cred. I (half-)joked with María Beatriz about getting a shark tattoo to surround the wound - this did not amuse her. (I have not given up the idea, though, since the scar has scarred up nicely.)

About a year earlier I had had two small basal cell carcinomas removed from my pate (the result, I jested, of an over-active brain), which, along with the melanoma, now made me a "candidate" for cancer (in a campaign I had no interest in running or winning). So now I do six-monthly check-ups with my dermatologist, where he does a full-body examination to see what has come to the light.

At the last session he saw two surface anomalies that he didn't like, so he scraped them off (first the Novocain (yes!), then the slice-slice, then band-aids, and off I go). I had one on the ridge of each wing-bone, so of course I teased María Beatriz that my two new wounds indicate the growth of wings (another idea for a tattoo, though petite - hummingbird, not eagle). Again, not amused.

I am sure he will find others at other sessions.

This body alters without asking permission. I am not a sun-person - I guard against the sun as much as I can, even down to long-sleeved shirts at the beach (when María Beatriz can drag me to the beach) - and yet I have had a condition often caused by sun-overexposure. Which announces that whatever precautions I take will matter less in the mix than biological elements that are not my friend.

Then there is the body in the backless paper gown offered to me by the sympathetic/efficient nurse. This body, as Spanish would say, has 62 years, and the architecture begins to slide. I am certainly in better shape (both as in fitness and as an actual shape) than many of my same-aged colleagues, and

if "62 years" has the timbre of agedness to it, I don't hear it since my self-awareness does not sound aged to myself. So this disjunct between the body in the backless gown with skin lesions - in other words, finite and friable - and the present-tenseness of a life living itself out as if the living out could and should go on forever.

None of this makes me feel "mortal," the "oh poor me" that one day I will not be here to say, "I will not be here." Boo hoo. My biggest fear is not absence but geezerhood.

I work with a sixty-five-year old woman whom I cherish in part because she displays Platonic Geezerness. She channels the discontents of the old against the new or the young or the synthetic/syncretic because she has chosen not to consider herself a citizen of the current time or cultural regime. There is liveliness within her - she's off to the ballet or concerts or good movies all the time - but instead of breaching her borders, they help her build bulwarks. Sometimes, conversations with her feel like life only has actuality if complained about, that complaining validates that one is alive and kicking (hard).

I cherish her in great measure because she reminds me of what I don't want to become: a faultfinder, a scold, a curmudgeon - a senior citizen. Just because I have a "maturing" body with a cellular wrecking crew doesn't obligate me to ease off on my enthusiasms or sign on to gravity's conservatism.

Quite the opposite.

Keeping the mind grasping and the attention bright takes effort, but probably no more effort than it takes to harden into a settled pattern. But the efforts differ in feel and weight. To lift and separate (ah, Playtex!) moves upward against gravity, but since gravity always trumps, the lifting and the separating can never stop. To make this effort feel less like pushing a rock up a hill, we devise philosophies and pharmaceuticals and distilled spirits, and with the aid of this infrastructure we do achieve moments of arrival at balance and peace.

To harden into geezerhood is not a passive process or an unavoidable certainty, a simple "that's just the way it is." To harden requires making a choice to feel fatigued and to let entropy be the lead dog, a choice to narrow and prescribe and judge and complain. When a person declares that he or she is just being "realistic" is the moment he or she is not to be trusted.

I pray to whatever gods handle these sorts of things to inoculate me against the hardening.

As for those hummingbird wings: I am going to push to get them because I can use all the lift I can get (they can beat up to 80 times a second, I hear).

(February 2015)

Revenge Porn

I read an article in the October 20, 2014, issue of *The Nation* about "revenge porn" (a term applied to both men and women, though the article focused on a site call Pink Meth, dedicated, if that's the word, to male trolls insulting women). Being *The Nation*, the ideas the writer examines are about regulating and assigning penalties for speech that damages (in reference to Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act of 1996) and the degree of a company's liability if it calls itself a "conduit" to and not an owner of a site.

(Wikipedia has a good page on Section 230, outlining the cases where liability has been assigned or denied to plaintiffs.)

But though this academicky focus might click with some, to me it felt cold and not to the purpose. There is a deeper and more carnal conversation here about courtesy and civility and maturity and sex in a culture like ours cross-purposed with liberal and capitalist and Christianized values and dependent on the legal system to referee their clashes. The legalisms that assist the anger and mean-spiritedness on display at Pink Meth and elsewhere have the effect (if not the intention) of debasing and then discarding the pain and damage suffered by the named and defamed. While this may be legally all right, or at least defensible, it isn't morally all right.

Now, as the article points out, there are laws which do deal with defamation and libel, but they place the prosecutorial burden on the libeled, and this seems to me a lopsided fight. Much better would be this. When one human being has made the choice to humiliate and damage another human being in the public arena by using items they shared when they were private and intimate, then that person should be punished from the outset, and the same thing should be done to the company that provides the space to post the material. They (meaning both person and company) have a right to speak, but neither of them have a subsequent protection from the effects of damaging the reputation and being of another person. In this way, the law puts itself on the side of the weaker party.

But this resort to law is only a stop-gap because underneath the behavior are attitudes in need of extinction, and the law can't do anything about those. Just witness the reaction to the video by Shoshana Roberts where she walked around New York City for 10 hours and filmed every *catcall* she received: in addition to supportive comments, she received dozens of rape and death threats for what she did. Or the recent legal efforts to institute "yes means yes"

codes of conduct on college campuses and elsewhere (Katha Pollitt, a Nation columnist, is very good on this) just to remind men that women are not fair game for whatever they want to do. Or Rush Limbaugh calling Sandra Fluke a "slut" when she testified in 2012 at a Congressional committee about contraception.

Despite or because of successes women have had in fighting for more equal treatment in our social, cultural, and political pitches, women are still not safe in our society. This is also linked to larger issues of gender, race, class, and safety for vulnerable people of all kinds (including children and the elderly), but the vulnerability is also what it is: an enormous failure.

But rather than continue along this Nation path with policy recommendations for what we need to do to bring the kingdom of heaven to the earth, I want to circle back to the particular and the carnal, back to the phrase itself, "revenge porn," and its condemnatory and conservative underpinnings.

The "revenge" part is clear - "I've been done wrong!" - but why the word "porn"? The materials in play become "porn" when the revenge impulse strips away the sentiment attached to them - "porn" is a way of saying that what was once fun and enticing and connective is now just trash, whose only use is for damage and insult through voyeurism and publicity. "Porn" is the way one person says to the other person, *You* are trash, and *you* will be treated accordingly, as a waste management problem.

"Revenge porn" oozes right out of the id of America's ambivalent squeamishness about sex allied to its lingering cultural Puritanism (and puritanism) - this observation about the alloy of the ambivalent and pejorative is by no means original with me, since it's been observed by many over the centuries. The best way to shame and destroy anybody in this culture is to tar them with sex, and it's a charge almost impossible to outrun. Venality of almost any other kind can be forgiven, and the forgiven one can have a second, a third, a fourth act. But not sex (Bill Clinton and Grover Cleveland excepted, and it's usually a man who gets any break).

"Revenge porn" is also a conservative behavior (no surprise there), using shame and punishment to correct "bad" acts, not unlike our prison system, which by design rejects rehabilitation as a penitentiary goal and goes straight for subjecting everyone to pain, shame, and suffering as ends in themselves. (So much for the Christian nation's belief in redemption.)

I suppose that trash-talking someone in the public square whom I think has injured me is a protected speech "right," in the same league as other hateful spew like anti-Semitism or racist insult. But once technology intervenes to amplify the broadcast, the protection afforded by the personal aspect of that right has been forfeited, and we are now in the land of defamation and damage. If we can't count on civility and maturity to restrain people's conduct and instead have to wield the law to rectify damages caused by that speech, then the only way to make the "right" secure is to hold those who host and post the stuff criminally liable (which means changing Section 230). This may make for a less-open Internet, as organizations from Google to the EFF argue, but so what? Why should a company get immunity from prosecution to post whatever it wants (and gain the economic advantage of doing so) and trump the right of people to be secure in their lives from the actions of aggrieved other parties (i.e., assholes)?

The ease of the technology doesn't excuse the human situation here, of jilted lovers, of adulterers, of mischief-makers, of angry people who have lost perspective. But the ease of the technology also doesn't incapacitate people from finding ways to blunt the damage and finger the perpetrators. Arguments about free speech, though salient, are not primary. The victim has just much right as the victimizer to seek punishment and inflict suffering, and the law should be on his or her side to do so.

(December 2014)

Viral

The January 5, 2015, issue of the *New Yorker* had a profile article on Emerson Spartz, what the writer, Andrew Marantz, calls "the virologist." What Spartz does with Dose.com (and did, through a slew of prior websites), is present aggregated content in ways designed to get visitors to click on something, anything. (A typical Dose headline is "See these 10 mug shots of real monsters; #5 will keep you up at night").

"Clickbait," another word for this practice, has a more felicitous cousin, "the curiosity gap" (Will Oremus at *Slate* also uses "share-bait"), but either term equals impulse-buying at the check-out counter, the trap that triggers a brain response like "I don't need it, I really don't have time to look at it, but, hey, why not, it's only a few minutes, and I really would like to see what's so horrible about #5."

Dose is about selling numbers (or "eyeballs" or "visitors") to advertisers for revenue. Spartz is not worried about or interested in quality: "The ultimate barometer of quality is: if it gets shared, it's quality." "Effective," "successful," and "good" are all words he swaps in and out, and in response to Marantz's request to name the most beautiful prose he had read, he replied, "A beautiful book? I don't even know what that means. Impactful, sure."

Spartz makes no apology about his business. "We considered making Dose more mission-driven. Then I thought, rather than facing that dilemma every day - what's going to get views versus what's going to create positive social impact? - it would be simpler to just focus on traffic."

Spartz echoes a moviemaking adage: a good movie is one that gets made. Questions about quality, "art," impact, and so on follow after, if they come up at all, and it's undeniable that any made movie employs hundreds of people and puts food on a lot of tables, just as any Upworthy-style website like Dose delivers millions of clickers to advertisers and businesses and does what a good capitalist enterprise is supposed to do.

Is Spartz wrong? Is meme-driven behavior wrong, another slough of despond on the road to perdition?

I think that kind of questioning peters out quickly. Not only does it sound like geezer-squawk, but we have just started this experiment of living in a digitizable world, and no one can foretell its effects and pay-offs (though many will claim

they can). It may bring dystopia or utopia or blandtopia, or it may lead to a world like the one in which we live, just a few hours more into the future.

Of more interest to me is a piece written by Sam Frank in the January 2015 issue of *Harper's*, titled "Power and Paranoia in Silicon Valley." Frank writes an intricate article, not easily summarized, but its heart is an argument about what kind of software coding will provide earthly plenty and political liberty. On one side are people like Peter Thiel, who founded PayPal with Elon Musk (now of Tesla Motors, SpaceX, Solar City, and the Hyperloop). These "apocalyptic libertarians," as Frank calls them, "take it on faith that corporate capitalism, unchecked just a little longer, will bring about [an] era of widespread abundance." Frank goes on to say that Thiel thinks this progress is threatened by the power of the "unthinking demos."

On the other side is Vitalik Buterin, who is working on a technology called Etherium, built around |.A.O.s, or "distributed autonomous organizations." Buterin describes them as ways of "figuring out how we can deinstitutionalize power; how we can ensure that, while power structures do need to exist, that these power structures are modular and they disappear as soon as they're not wanted anymore."

For example, as Frank notes, using a |.A.O., a group of friends or strangers, living in a neighborhood or around the world, could set up a mutual-aid society without involving an insurance company. They could even create a community digital currency, distributed equally among all members, and a digital voting system blockchained to ensure transparency as well as accept new members to expand the robustness of the enterprise and the usefulness of the community currency.

In other words, "decentralized contracts might become the building blocks of many decentralized forms of human governance, along libertarian or perhaps anarchist lines."

Both groups believe that "math, perfect information, and market mechanisms" can outflank the mess and grind of politics. They also believe that values and rules can be, and have to be, encoded in software as humans blend more and more into the digital networks around them (not as cyborgs but certainly as hybrids). Where they differ is here: Thiel believes in the power of an elite to lead this cultural transition to digitality, while Buterin sees the leader in Thiel's vilified "demos."

Dear reader, you are right to hear echoes here of past arguments about vanguards versus proles as the true source of transformative political power in a world of transformative technologies. What interests me most about this debate's current iteration is the reliance on code and coding - rational operational languages - to both mimic and create human values, human agency, and human improvisation.

(There is an affinity between coding and neuroscience, though probably far more sophisticated and intricate than equating soft-tissue neural networks with chained "if-then" statements. But they will mash-up sooner rather than later as coding becomes more biological and researchers distill the math underneath the neurons.)

Metaphors always mold the humans using them to describe their realities - as the saying goes, To a man with a hammer, the whole world looks like a nail. "Coding" and "software" are no less narrowing as metaphors of human behavior, but their balancing virtue is that they can ground arguments about technical changes in our lives and de-vaporize sentimentality about our human nature.

Each of us is a "coded" world (think of our DNA) living in a world governed by codes (ferreted out by exotic math like chaos theory). We are only at the start of seeing the codes' intricacies and overlaps, but unknotting them is mostly an operational act: faster computers to crunch more numbers using devilishly complex algorithms with swirling feedback loops and so on and so on.

Interpreting what the codes find, though, will still involve political conflict. Thiel and Buterin are wrong in thinking that the perfect mix of math, information, and market will bypass or delete political wrangling. Even the "cyberpunks, cypherpunks, extropians, transhumanists, and singularitarians" will still live in a material world of roiling emotions and hate-filled loyalties and fights over resources, with political power housed in human bodies who hunger, thirst, desire, and dream. They may bray that politics is just an engineering problem and humans are just a gear-house of tuned atoms and forces, but braying it doesn't make it so.

If I were a coder, I'| find a way to integrate political conflict into, not out of, the equations, as a force equal to all other primary inputs. And not a defanged politics but one that goes for the barricades. A vitalized politics is the only thing that can counterweight the "virality" so prized by the super-rich silicon

libertarians and their marketeers as their preferred means of controlling and disciplining the demos.

The *New Yorker* is fond of cartoons with a human or two stranded on a desert island with a single palm tree, and they prove a human reality: the only world where politics does not exist is the single human being on an island. Once a second body enters the space, the political dance begins about the palm tree and its coconuts and the best plan for getting rescued.

But far from being an error in the design, the dance provides another "code" by which we craft our human selves. Pushing against resistance makes a muscle strong, and the human brain needs contrasts in order to map edges and paths and possibilities that will keep the human brain (and the body that houses it) alive and kicking.

Let us defer the dys/u/blandtopia for a few more hours: resist the clickbait and begin to in-code your own freedom.

(January 2015)

To Clothe Their Nakedness

One can't take the New York City subway system every day and not become a fashion critic. No Fashion Week runways can keep stride with the thousands of choices thousands of people make every day to clothe their nakedness and go forth into our fallen world.

My use of the word "fashion" applies mostly to women, since the men colonizing where I travel (the Wall Street area) don't really display "fashion," if we mean by that word variety in color, shape, and function with a nuance of flair or humor. Suits, ties (sometimes), button-down Oxford shirts, and single-tone shoes - those are the Wall Street district male uniforms.

Many women seem to believe that skin-fitting tights - tights that look like (but aren't) jeans and tights that are just tights (or "leggings") - really do function as outerwear rather than underwear. I disagree, in part because tights do not clothe the nakedness but, instead, highlight it. I wish to know my fellow humans but not whether they are wearing thongs or to see flanks and buttocks stuffed into clothing like a chorizo.

But it's not just tights. There seems to be a constant warring between the amplitude of many women's bodies and their desire to deny that amplitude by shoehorning it into wide-hipped but narrow-legged jeans, topped off (or bottom-offed) by shoes with heels ending in a little nub of rubber or leather. The image is of an inverted pyramid trying to defy gravity and deny its bulk.

(And oftentimes low-slung jeans, where the back belt loop is stressed downward by a stretched belt and butt-cracks rise up with any forward bend. Butt-cracks male or female are a sight that makes for sore eyes.)

Knee-high pirate-type leather boots with those tights - also a wide choice for women. Not sure what effect they are going for, but I imagine an epée in hand as they stride down the concourse.

Some men handle this body-bulk thing differently. In the summer, many men wear cargo-style pants that come to mid-calf and tent-like jerseys (sometimes sports-themed) that drape but don't outline rounded stomachs and slack flanks. Of course, it also makes them look like children, especially when they top it off with a baseball cap cocked at some secretive angle and bottom it off with untied sneakers, but that seems a price worth bearing.

Low-slung pants on young men are another fashion choice that fascinates me since it clearly requires constant tuning. The pants have to be carefully cinched and balanced somewhere between waist and knees, otherwise, they will give in to gravity - usually bisecting the buttocks is the preferred low-water mark, drooped enough to show a good swatch of underwear. The back pockets hang many inches lower, so anything in them (like a wallet or phone) is out of arms-reach and requires a bend and twist to snag. And walking requires a constant up-pull of the pants and a kind of waddle since the wearer can't do a full stride (like the hobble skirts of old for women).

I always want to know more about how each of these people decided that morning about what they chose to wear. I know it's none of my business, and I know I shouldn't be making aesthetic and moral judgments about their choices, but still I am curious about how they decided that the way they look is their best way of displaying themselves to the world.

And then there are the hipsters with skinny jeans and pork-pie hats, the tag-ends of goth or punk (spikes-on-leather, distended earlobes), vintage clothes, various national or religious gear (chador, agbada, keffiyah), uniforms (armed forces, police, security guards, medical personnel).

But lest I think myself immune from my own critique, what do I wear? Of late I have simplified my work attire to three shades - black, white, and grey - with the three colors for shirts and black and grey for pants (white pants? don't think so). This way I can pull items from the closet and mix-and-match without thinking about it.

And why do I do this? Because my puritan humorless part, the sumptuary bend in my character, sees fashion as a cheat and a distraction. But since as a species we have required ourselves to wear clothes, I make sure that this fiat takes up the least amount of my time and attention, and it irritates me when I see what a sinkhole fashion can be for people, letting it shave away their precious ground-time on the earth for something decorative designed to create false impressions and pump-up one's pride.

And as I think this, I hear a voice from the wings saying, "What a scold you can be!"

And that's when I job in the jester from the wings, so that when I see people wearing things that make me shake my head and judge their choices, Jester

ridicules me for my narrowness, reminds me of my own imperfections, keeps my pride in check, and makes me feel less for thinking less of others.

My observation about clothing, like my observation about anything, is not really about the clothing but about myself. And the lesson learned? The Quakers believe that every human being carries the divine spark of life, and if you let that spark go dim or die out, then you can do cruel things without remorse. The Jester is my divine spark, the thing that takes the piss out of my high-handedness and brings low my pride - and lets me watch the human flow with a dose of loose humor and a dusting of affection.

Because it's not even there but for the grace of God go I. It is this instead: there go I in everyone that passes me by.

(May 2015)

"So Far, So Good"

In a play of mine, *Light. Fantastic.*, Clu Martin, a writer, in speaking with another character about why he, Clu, tried to commit suicide, talks about how the phrase "What is the point?" hounded him on the day he decided to do the deed. Clu, a recovering alcoholic with a redemptive ache periodically derailed by his appetite, had no idea how to answer the question. But "answerless" was not why he tried to check out.

As he examines why he tried to suicide himself, he finds that "answer" or "no answer" to the question is irrelevant, or at least secondary. What is primary? Each human every day is required by the conditions of his or her material life to choose whether to finish out that day. Humans do many things to counter/avoid/paper over this bruising necessity. But everyday life poses the question and requires a response.

This requirement imposes a terrifying freedom. We are free to weave any answer we want to fill the void opened up by the question while at the same time knowing that any answer we generate is, at best, a temporary fiction, thin as air. No wonder so many choose religion or philosophy or shopping to fill the void - anything to keep from having to face the daily certification of our vanishing.

Clu doesn't succeed in his self-slaughter, and by the end of the play he manages to cobble together contentment and place himself back onto the human carousel.

Clu, of course, stands in for me, and I had reservations about the positive-ish ending because I believe answering the question is a more tangled effort than (with apology to Descartes) "I decide to live each day, therefore I am."

Here is how the Clu in me views the tangle. If I choose "life," what I am really choosing is a narrative template called "life" that I use to mold my day-to-day. I certainly don't believe - can't believe - that "life" is a "gift" from "out there" (the universe, God, Dharma, Nature). This life-template is just improv fictionalizing, and I can never not be aware of the fact that I am making it up as I go along, and that it doesn't take much to make it all go to smash.

This pressurizes life for me, always being aware of what an improvised, and improvising, creature I am. I wish I could make peace with being Lear's "unaccommodated man," the "poor, bare, forked animal," and just go with the improvisatory flow - be a human *animal* instead of a human *being* (a human

version of my cats, who are primarily present-tense and unimpressed by goals or duties).

Here is the game I play with the asking - really, an actor's game. If things are in tune - good morning coffee, crisp, affectionate cats - then the primary emphasis falls on the first word, with a secondary up-lilt emphasis on the last, all said with curious inquiry: "What is the *point*?", with the follow-up, "Well, today, let us...." I take that template off the shelf and pour myself into that.

If things are untuned - troubled sleep, poor digestion, pressed for time - then the question comes out differently, with a primary emphasis on the last word and a secondary emphasis on the verb - "What *i*s the point?" - all said in an exhale of exasperation as the self pours itself into that template.

I can switch templates during a day, of course, which provokes its own vexation and dismay. One of the mysteries Clu tries to plumb in the play is the witchy neurochemistry of the brain and its connection to what humans like to think are their core selves - as he questions, just how sacred and fundamental should we hold the notion of a "self" if it can be shape-shifted in seconds by the pleasure molecules of cocaine or flashes of errant electricity among neurons? It is more the case, he concludes, that we live in a state of being *continually at the mercy* - with our greatest creative challenge possibly being answering "at the mercy of what?" and figuring out how to get out its way before it gets in ours.

The day may come when it's just too hard or too boring to take any template off the shelf and keep on pretending because "What is the point?" has no solid-bottomed answer, like "What does one plus one equal in base 8?" Instead, it's just a prod to make me decide to live for the day - and I'll oblige myself to make that choice until I choose not to feel the obligation - and then we'll have to see what happens.

I often wish I could do this business of living differently, but I'm not sure I'm built to do it any other way. But it is also true that each day I've been able to say "so far, so good" no matter how pointless or uplifting a day has been. With this observation as an ironic gloss, since irony, like quarks, is a constituent part of the quantum universe: A man jumps off a building. As he reaches the fifth floor, a man leaning out the window yells, "How's it going?" and the falling man replies, "So far, so good." Of course, it's the sudden sharp stop at the end that turns the delight of flight into destruction - but, then, that will happen to all of us anyway, so why worry about it? Why try to inoculate, ward off, or divinize it? Instead, enjoy the flight, even if it seems (or is) pointless, because the real task at hand

is for me (for you, for all of us) not to seem pointless to ourselves. Perhaps that is the only usable answer to Clu’s question, the only real counterbalance to the sudden sharp stop at the end.

(March 2013)

Red Rover, Red Rover

No, this does not refer to the game but to an episode of *The Mentalist* in season four (May 2012), which, at least for a pretty mainstream police procedural, raised itchy questions about the link between revenge, torture, and justice that also link to our current governmental acceptance of brutality in the service of liberty.

In the episode, a man is murdered by being buried alive - not interred in a coffin but locked in a metal box in an abandoned industrial building. All of Patrick Jane's attempts to get the man he knows is the murderer to confess fail because the murderer is perfectly amoral and thus presents no weakness that Jane can exploit.

So Jane (already driven partly mad by his search for Red John, the serial killer who murdered his wife and daughter) lures the murderer to a cemetery and stuffs him into a coffin in a freshly prepared grave, linked to the outside world by a video baby monitor that he stole from his fellow agent Wayne Rigsby, a new-minted father who had bought one for the baby's bedroom.

Being put into the same situation as the man he murdered finally cracks the veneer - the man is terrified, and Jane watches his terror on the baby monitor, refusing to do anything until the man admits to the murder, which he does, while Theresa Lisbon, his boss and friend, watches the whole thing in both horror and a sickened admiration.

The morality of the torture doesn't matter to Jane because legal process is not his concern - justice is. His bottom line is that no murderer should ever be allowed to escape the murder he or she does, and if legal principles get in the way of getting the truth, then the principles should be ignored in service to the higher purpose of making someone pay for an immoral act. Balance in the world requires it.

Yes, it's only an episode in TV-land, so it doesn't delve into the issues that it raises, but the issues are there nevertheless for review. What are these issues? Is torture justified if it extracts the truth (assuming we can even identify if)? What is the connection between legal rules (which are means to an institutional end) and justice (with its moral struggles about fairness, reciprocal punishments, payment of debts)? Is vengeance only personal, or can there be an institutional vengeance, done in the name of a "people," outfitted with policies and subject to

protocols? Does the end ever justify the means, or do illicit means always infect the end, even if the end result, by everyone's lights, is warranted?

However, as interesting as these questions are, they need to be given a "local habitation and a name" for them to have any weight, and that has to be the United States in this year of our Lord (and probably for many more years to come). I want to say that we are a lesser country after multiple years of visiting mayhem upon the world, but that would mean that we had once been a greater country and had fallen from some sort of grace, and I can't say that.

In fact, I don't even know what the word "country" means, since the United States feels more like a crazy quilt of festering lunacies and selective histories than what is usually meant by a "nation" or a "people" - certainly not something from which one could have a fall from grace.

I think we need to accept that if the United States is anything close to a nation or a people at this moment, it is one defined by and ruled by Patrick Jane's practice of vengeful cruelty - but without any of his redeeming, if ambiguous, accomplishments. This cruelty is not only practiced upon the bodies of foreigners elsewhere in the world - we practice it upon ourselves on a daily basis. Given the free-floating violence permeating everything in this culture, at any moment any one of us can be considered outside the pale and ripe for execution.

In one sense we have achieved what our rhetoric has always wanted us to achieve, to become a class-free and race-free society, except that now this equality means that everyone is equally in someone else's cross-hairs and one trigger-squeeze away from oblivion. We may think we have achieved a great Enlightenment-based society, but it really is closer to Hobbes' war of every man against every man.

I used to feel great dismay at this disparity between what America is and what it could be *if only it would come its senses and do the right thing!* (Sorry - got away from me.) Now, I don't think it has any senses to come to - anything that might have been used as a basis for some kind of regeneration of purpose has been sullied or falsified beyond repair, and all that fills the air is shrill complaint and poisonous threat.

I don't know what this means for the practice of being a citizen. I don't know what it means for trying to figure out a balance between public witness and private insularity. I don't know what to do, and I don't know how to handle not knowing what to do.

Red rover, red rover, send an answer right over - soon.

(February 2013)

Hitler and the Family

I worked in a Jewish fundraising organization. During a clean-up day in the office - a periodic taming of our kudzu paperwork - I worked with Hannah (not her real name), and we found ourselves discussing evil in connection with the January 7 (2015) attack on the French magazine *Charlie Hebdo*.

I contended that the assault did not prove that evil exists; she disagreed. She believed that "evil" and "good" were actual existences within people, part of their "natures," which inevitably (I guess) brought us to Hitler and the Germans and the Jews.

I offered (but did not push) that Hitler was not "evil" in the sense of something threaded into his physical DNA. He did evil things, in the way that that adjective names the moral nature of an act, but his "self" was not evil the way red silk is red. We should not drum Hitler out of the human family since what he did, others had done before, and any of us is capable of doing what he and his minions did given the right historical time and place.

We moved on to other topics.

Nothing is new under the sun when it comes to humans visiting suffering on other humans, and we are all capable of such visitations, just as we are capable of not-doing them as well. Whatever is hard-wired in humans is not so "hard" or "wired" that cultural invention can't, to some degree, re-mold it. (Whether this is good for us is another matter.) We may still be ambulatory sentient meat like any other mammal, but humans invent in a way like no other species on the planet - yes, to the point of inventing ourselves out of existence, but even that disaster proves the point.

We are plastic and elastic creatures who have built ourselves into an end-times corner using an economic and political system premised on excess and waste. Will we get out? Stay tuned! But a jeremiad is not the point of this musing, which is about belief and believing.

All humans need this form of faith: the morning sun will appear in the east. That is, we can depend upon material reality (at least at a non-quantum level) to perform in predictable ways. We don't know all the ways, and we don't always understand the mechanics, so we end up believing in something without a full working knowledge of it. But this is a provisional faith, a placeholder, until we understand all of it (and we will) through experiment and publication.

What seem to do us less good as humans are forms of faith that use ineffabilities - divinities or spiritualities - as their authorities. No one can do a double-blind experiment to nail down an ineffability, and even if a person touts it as universal in breadth and woven into the cosmic fabric, it is, in fact, just a personal fiction crafted to fit an individual's tics - less a proof than a wish or a dream.

Yet at least in this country, we often privilege dream faiths over materialistic faith. Two quick examples. The 2015 outbreak of measles in the United States stems directly from parental choices not to vaccinate their children based on a "right" they have to believe in and act upon an error: the now-thoroughly debunked 1998 paper of Andrew Wakefield in *Lancet* linking vaccines to autism. The right of parents to put their children and the children of everyone around them at risk because of their chosen ineffability trumps scientific fact and social responsibility for herd immunity.

The second example is the argument over fetal personhood, where theology employs politics to wreak havoc on women's lives. This is a campaign anchored in a certainty that is not certain: the "moment" when human life begins. Even though it is impossible to pin down with exactitude a universally agreed-upon specific "moment," whatever "moment" a speaker chooses (sperm meets egg or implantation in the uterus wall or a gleam in the parents' eyes) gets a protection as a "religious" belief that actual women suffering actual harms don't get.

(The denial that humans are causing possibly irreversible changes in the planet's climate, a denial based on whim or ideology or both, is a third example.)

We could investigate how and why dream faiths get such a pass, but that is not what interests me most. Using religious faith as the most forward of the dream faiths (in part because it gets explicit Constitutional protection), what makes a belief a religious belief? The answer: because I say it's so. That's it: my personal assertion. Nothing like proof is required. I can say I believe the most elaborate nonsense (e.g., Scientology) and get not only a tax exemption for it but also other legal exemptions, such as from laws against discrimination in hiring and benefits and service.

What should we do with the pharmacist who refuses to dispense birth control on the basis of a religious belief? Or the baker who won't bake the wedding cake for the gay couple because their being gay violates his religious belief about homosexuality? What should we do in these instances where a dream faith is invoked to justify insulting, if not despicable and illegal, behavior?

If the pharmacist wants to hold his belief, fine. In our country, the province of private theology is protected. He can hold it without fear of a rival religion burning him at the stake or the State sending him into exile. But his action violates the terms of the agreement he made with the State, in the form of his license, that allows him to practice his trade, and he should either lose the license or do his job. And if doing his job grinds against his religious belief, then he should find another job.

If the baker won't bake the cake, then she should be fined, or at least penalized in some fashion that announces to the world the source of her belief and the injury it has done to other human beings (perhaps the way johns' names were published in the newspaper after a prostitute round-up).

In other words, the harm suffered should be suffered by the holder of the belief, not the customer coming in with a valid prescription or the willingness to spend money on confections.

Furthermore, where the religious interest in imposing a private morality on a public world clashes with a secular interest in equality - that we are equal before the law and all equally protected by the law - then the secular interest should win the day since its goal is to promote a social good (equal protection) rather than honor exemptions to that social good (a religious belief).

In practice, of course, we can never draw these bright lines that bright. But in general I don't think we can deny that dream faiths, especially the style called religious faith, get cut some slack that materialistic faiths (such as science and skepticism in its various forms) don't. (Thought experiment: could an avowed atheist - Ron Reagan Jr., for instance - be elected to public office?) And a result of that sanction? A situation where, too often, people take righteous pride in holding inflexible (but unprovable) views about the nature of things and demanding the world conform to their dreams. Which brings us back to Hitler, one of the great dream-believers of all times.

But arriving at Hitler doesn't require a damnation of dream faiths (à la Richard Dawkins): that's too superficial. Any faith, dream or materialistic, reduced to purity, turns monstrous, whether it's a fundamentalist theology or a scientific socialism. Purity is an enemy of compassion and an eraser of complexity, and when we abandon complexity and compassion in the pursuit of the ideal, the bodies begin piling up. This is where the Hitlers come from, and this where we would come from as followers of Hitler if we were in that place and time committed to that purity.

There was a time when dream faiths had utility, during the earliest phases of human evolution. In fact, these dream faiths were the science of their times, that is, an attempt, using existing technology, to explain how and why things worked the way they did. These explanations, like any good science, helped people survive.

But it is also clear that what we call science or the scientific method increasingly reduced the explanatory arena of those earlier "sciences": we know, for certain, that gods don't throw thunderbolts and demons don't cause illnesses. Today, shorn of the power to test and prove reality (i.e., creation science is not a science), these faiths promote themselves as moralities that protect us against a science based, they argue, on cold rationalism and heartless calculation. (My father thinks like this: "How can you know right from wrong if you don't believe in God?")

Personally, I look forward to the further withering away of the dream faiths' power to direct our conversations about purpose and destiny. For an individual, they may have some utility as private, personal guides, but their conservatism and rigidity make them unreliable social, political, and economic guides. Despite their good intentions to improve our fallen natures, more often than not these faiths become scolds and inquisitors rather than inventors and nourishers.

(And to the degree that they don't turn curmudgeonly, these dream faiths begin to morph into secular metaphors to guide right conduct. For example, the Quaker notion of the divine spark in each human being becomes a useful way to talk about behaving as a conscientious human being; there doesn't need to be an actual spark in order to inspire people to behave as if there were a spark. At this point, the faiths become vocabularies we language-users can use for their metaphorical influence on our behaviors.)

However, for me at least, "science" doesn't automatically fill this instructional gap. The scientific method and its moral offspring like utilitarianism promise a false precision about how to calculate the good. The good cannot be calculated in the way an equation or algorithm is calculated - moral calculation requires an entirely different set of actions and authorities.

What are those? They all depend on the time and place in which the humans doing the calculations find themselves. Or, to use the vocabulary I've been using here, they depend on the materialistic faiths available to them, which for us current humans include items such as science but also the social sciences (including psychology), built-environment disciplines like engineering

and architecture, the digital technologies, and, to some limited degree, the arts (such as design and visual/graphic communication).

How all these faiths can combine to create moralities for us (that is, guides for right and virtuous action) goes far beyond this essay or my intelligence. But others have been making this amalgamation, fusing and mixing and promoting and practicing and building a repository of new approaches and possibilities that can be tapped when the current played-out and corrupt structures that govern our lives finally expire.

Our salvation as a species (not everyone agrees the species should be saved, but let us assume it should), given the cascading collapses going on around us, will not only require the wholehearted deployment of our materialistic faiths but also a companion politics that will enable their employment. (Our politics today cannot do this work.) The dream faiths, if they have any role, will be to encourage their holders to sign on to the program and see it as the fulfillment of their theologies' promises. Otherwise, they should just keep to their own gardens and not interfere.

To paraphrase the Roman playwright Terence, "being a human, nothing human is alien to me" - and that includes Hitler. But also another Terence paraphrase: "People can't be what they can be if circumstances don't allow it." Let us invent better material circumstances for ourselves, using what we have learned from our material faiths, since such circumstances create our essences, history creates our salvageable selves, time and tide create our moralities.

Stay tuned!

(March 2015)

Art for Art's Sake

Traditionally, this phrase means that artists should create art for its (and their) own sake and not because it has any "utility" (as defined by the current economic regime). "Art" satisfies itself. No usefulness need apply.

But I think that "for its own sake" does have a utility beyond self-reference: to keep us from killing each other in numbers larger than the ones we're already achieving.

As a species, we have proved ourselves to be, at a minimum, tribal and principled, and bloody-minded in putting that pairing into practice. Beauty, melancholy, contemplation, excitement, admiration - these and many other responses to art are effective distractions from the abattoir fixation of the species. They should be encouraged and subsidized whenever possible, acting as a kind of psychopharmacology to dampen our murderous synapses.

Yes, humans can do great and wonderful and altruistic and compassionate things. But the species seems not to have found much utility in making these kinds of acts daily and reflexive, so the Leviathan needs to enforce what people do not choose to do.

Invest in people making as much content as possible and scattering it everywhere. Keep the culture in a continuous ferment of content-making and content-displaying. Call it a renaissance of the arts, market it as a high display of the species' finest qualities and the culture's privilege in nourishing them.

Thus a perfect cover (since people like that sort of sentimentality) for the real purpose of the campaign, which is to blunt aggression and minimize assassination. (This campaign would be an amplification of Huxley's "feelies," or what we call the entertainment industry, which has already done a superb job dispensing soporifics through multiple devices.)

Rather than "amusing ourselves to death" (the title of Neil Postman's 1985 book), we would be doing the opposite. The values of the "life" we would be amusing ourselves into don't matter - let people create whatever they want to create, without judgment or review, and they can make whatever arrangements they want among themselves. Leviathan will still own all the means of control, violent and otherwise, so if a thousand Zuccotti Parks bloom (even as a musical - yes, such a thing exists!), the state can easily rein them in if needed. The sole purpose is distracting people into as much non-lethal behavior as possible.

In this way we might gain some backdoor social justice, since trying to get peace and justice in through the front door seems impossible these days: peace and justice have no lobbyists, no money, and no friends in high places.

Rather than equating "darker" with authentically human and thus reaping our wars, we can make clever frivolity our aesthetic template and fill our culture with loose laughter, moist sentiment, and toothless irony. This will keep the morgue an idle and boring place and our morgue-filling impulses in check.

Or not. But it's worth trying, since our current run as a species seems in jeopardy of being cancelled. (Hey - last man on earth. Now, there's an idea for a show!)

(May 2015)

Promised Land

I have just finished reading Ari Shavit's *My Promised Land* along with a forum in the September 2014 issue of *Harper's* titled "Israel and Palestine: Where to Go from Here."

"Israel" is a vexed issue, made more so by the fact that I work for a Jewish fundraising organization, where discussions about this (when they happen) also link to people we know in the programs that we fund in Israel. This personal slant often fogs what is already full of murk and fire.

Luckily, these talks don't take place often since the default position (which is no surprise) is full solidarity with Israel the state as well as the idea of Israel. One staff member was already sent on a solidarity mission organized by our European office, and my boss may be going on an upcoming solidarity mission organized by the Jewish Federations of North America. Other organizations, like the Conference of Presidents, are also arranging these trips, and Ben Gurion Airport bustles with people on their missions.

I am glad we do not turn this topic over very much in the office since it is hard for me to keep my peace. The current war between Israel and Hamas is not the real dispute but more a synecdoche of the tectonic clash of origin stories. Shavit points out that as much as Theodore Herzl and the promoters of Zionism wanted to believe that Palestine was the ancestral home of the diaspora Jews and thus should be available to them for their return, they could only believe this if they chose not to see the clear reality in front of them: the land was not theirs, it was settled and owned by Arabs and it was never going to be possible to just slip in and take things over without anyone noticing.

Thus, horrific clashes among Jews and Arabs during the 1920s and 1930s; the war in 1948 (for Israel, the "War of Independence"; for the Palestinian Arabs, al-Nakba, or "the Catastrophe"); the "founding" of the state of Israel; and then 1967, 1973, 1982, the Intifadas, and so on and so on.

I do have thoughts about what a solution might, or ought to, include, but of equal import is thinking about, as Shakespeare said, the fact that "the evil that men do lives after them." An origin story infused with a poison continues to secrete the poison over time, no matter how hard ideologues work to nullify it. The Israel-Hamas "conflict" is just one more secretion of the venom at the core of the Israeli origin story, which will continue to ooze and destroy until the proper antidote is applied.

Is there an antidote? Not now, given the language used by combatants on each side, language that has calcified thought and disarmed logic. There are antidotes, but they will require wholesale shifts in thinking and action about such matters as is Israel a state or a Jewish state, what of the Palestinian Israelis (or Israeli Arabs), how much of "Jewishness" should be defined by the ultra-Orthodox, should it be one state or two states, should Israel stop being an occupying and colonial power - the *Harper's* forum brings out dozens more questions like this.

The venom in an origin story will last forever unless very specific things are done to neutralize it. In our country, the enduring toxin is slavery (note the article by Ta-Nehisi Coates in the May 21, 2014, *Atlantic*, "The Case for Reparations") and the ethnic cleansing of the aboriginal peoples. Israel has its own septic origin story, and until it deals with that, nothing else can be dealt with.

(September 2014)

Museum of Air

Michael Sorkin, the architecture writer for *The Nation*, had a wonderful idea for museums, in an essay he wrote in the September 22, 2014, issue. And his idea for this museum is also a good idea for the soul.

His riff came off a memory of a small museum he once visited in Bandera, Texas, whose collection consisted of "stuff" - material excerpted by the townspeople from the flow between manufacture and disposal, items like "a two-headed calf in formaldehyde..., miscellaneous LBJ campaign posters, high-school football trophies and the first professional hair-dryer to be used in the town." He called it the museum of "whatever," with a collection based on "what the town's inhabitants found fascinating, consequential, weird or simply ready for the trash."

This memory comes in the midst of a musing on what he dubs New York's 64-oz. sugar drink approach to building in the city: large-scale confections full of architectural empty calories. This leads him, by way of Bandera, Texas, to the Guggenheim Museum, "enamored," as he says, "by its own multiplicity," determined to create a "Bilbao Effect" wherever it plants itself (Abu Dhabi, Helsinki), an effect based on image, not the contents within the walls:

> Nobody much cares what's actually in the building—what's important is that the "collection' is externalized in the form of new restaurants and bars, hotels and souvenir shops, and the sonorous *ka-ching* of cash registers and hushed swoop of credit cards. The efficient thing would be to dispense entirely with the internal collections, which are generally interchangeable and without any particular relevance to the idea of the local. Not to be a philistine, but if you've seen one balloon dog or Jenny Holzer, you've pretty much seen them all.

This is when he proposes a museum concept that conflates steroidal buildings, the vapidity of art, the dispensability of "stuff," and the sociable quaintness of Bandera, Texas, into something that both tickles my sarcastic side but also satisfies my puritan side.

He recommends that museums be built on the wildest schemes possible - "the crazier the architecture, the better" - with only one requirement: that they be fireproof. Dispense with collections, curators, guards, gift shops and cafés, parking, and all the other irritations of running a place of culture. Have a truly open admissions policy and encourage people to bring in...whatever. Whatever they find (in)consequential, memorable (whether of the moment or forever),

delightful - with no credentialed gatekeepers around to guard the gates, the sky's the limit (or at least the roof of the building).

Once things have reached the rafters, or, as Sorkin puts it, "once the collection becomes impossibly dense," torch it (thus, the need for fireproofing). After it's all reduced to ash and the ash is swept away, and we've enjoyed our dancing around the bonfire and the sharing of food and the drumming and chanting and those consummations that come with a good cleansing, then the collecting begins again.

The place fills with whatever is the taste of the moment is until that moment passes, and then once again, and once more, and so on.

The "art" in the building, of the building, comes from the coming-together, from the local, the shared, the active choosing, the non-attachment to things, the untutored "likes" and the fuck-you of whimsy. That art will never be found in "art" or the artistic enterprise or market value or the academy or critics and their appraisals or any of that parasitic infrastructure.

I like this notion of an institution of joyful cleansing, of sinless indulgence and relaxed ambitions and painless renovation. Like activating the nuclear option on the email inbox one day - just hit delete and not care. Or the Goodwill winnowing of the clothes closet. More letting go means better things to hold onto.

(September 2014)

Our Tolerated Addicts

I work a coin's toss away from Wall Street in New York City. Every day, as I trundle to work, I see the addicts huddled against the sides of buildings or strung out in the little park across from my entrance or even boldly walking down the street taking their hits.

I describe, of course, tobacco smokers, who pretty much get a pass from our otherwise censorious attitude toward about drug-users and their addictions.

Smokers may feel that they are second-class citizens, evicted from buildings, kicked to the curbs, and over-taxed, but their addiction is still given a lot of social support. First of all, they are not harassed by the police for "quality of life" infractions, nor driven deeper into the shadows to get their fix by cops on the prowl for "broken windows," nor arrested by the hundreds of thousands for possession and use and have their lives marred by a record.

Second, they can litter at will. Smokers can toss butts into the street and never get ticketed for littering or reprimanded for being slobs. Instead, the city will send along its street sweepers and clean up after them. This is not an inconsequential thing. Here is a citation from the May 2014 *Harper's* Index: "Percentage of all litter on U.S. roadways accounted for by cigarette butts: 36."

In a single state - Arizona - cigarette trash accounts for 38% of the 803 tons of crap workers winnow from the highways, or a little over 305 tons (610,000 pounds). Add to that the similar garbage stats from 49 other states and other U.S. principalities, and it's clear that smokers have a whole class of people dedicated to cleaning up after them without charging them a penny for their services.

Well, there are cigarette taxes, a smoker might say, and the high cost of cigarettes themselves. (According to the American Lung Association, the average cost of a pack is $5.51, though here in New York City it's $14.50 - like everything in this city, a high price for low satisfaction). But these are self-inflicted charges: stop smoking and stop paying.

In fact, just as smokers are subsidized for their trash habits, their health care (if you want to call it that) is also subsidized. Again, according to the American Lung Association, the United States spends over $300 billion a year in direct health care, lost workplace productivity, and premature deaths related to smoking. In other words, smokers may spend $14.50 in New York for that pack,

but the society pays $18.05 to take care of them as they destroy, and when they've destroyed, their bodies.

Are smokers bad people? I don't know if "bad" is the right word, but they are clearly selfish, parasitic, weak-willed, and irresponsible. They are, to some degree, victims of a culture premised on addiction, but they have also made a choice to addict themselves and are thus answerable for all the damage and adulteration they cause.

In this country, of course, we pride ourselves on holding onto destructive habits as a sign of our individualism and love of liberty (e.g., guns) and seem willing to go on paying a high subsidy (in money and bodies) to maintain our myths. But at least as regards smoking, this is a bane that can be eliminated if people exercise what are considered the definitive parts of the American character: self-reliance, freeing oneself from a slave-master, the power to captain of one's own fate, the desire to be honest and simple.

Instead of barking about second-classism, elitism, and the "war on smokers" (as one blog put it), smokers should back away from the public trough, resolve to do better and then do better, take advantage of the multiple services out there to help them stop, and get the monkey off their backs. This will save their bodies, save their souls, save a lot of money, and save me the annoyance of having to get past the smoke-fog at the entrance of every building in order to get inside the building and get some fresh air.

(January 2015)

To Police

The protests sparked in New York by the non-indictments in Ferguson, MO, and the borough of Staten Island of white police officers for killing black men has sparked an equal barrage of pundit-gab about the need for the police to regain the trust of the communities that they serve and protect.

Many years ago I worked in a weekend degree program in human services at New Hampshire College. Because we were approved by Massachusetts for their Quinn Bill, which gave police officers raises in exchange for earning academic degrees, we had a lot of police officers in our program.

The program, however, had a very leftist twist to it: we taught that human services were delivered to keep the lid on poor people asking more from a system that exploited and debased them, and the police (along with social workers and the psychological regime) were the hands hired to enforce the existing power arrangements.

Our goal was to present to everyone in the program alternate views of received truths and conventional wisdoms in the context of power relationships among the people who made up their individual commonwealths.

The mouthings by officials and others about "trust" and "police" and "communities" made me think back to the lively discussions we had in our classes about these very issues. Here are some of the things that came up when police and social workers and others in human services debated who they were and what roles they played in the world in which they earned their daily bread.

They agreed in general that the role of the police officer in an American urban setting was an impossible job *if* the police did not make clear to themselves who were the prime beneficiaries of their duty to "serve and protect." What they had to do for themselves was to answer the question "to serve and protect whom and what?"

And that answer was not a clear one, because the "whom and what" had multiple choices. Sometimes these choices ran in parallel, sometimes they butted head-to-head, and sometimes they had no organic connection at all. For instance, if a crowd is protesting what they feel is an unjust court decision - that is, exercising their constitutional right to speak to their governors - is it the duty of the police to support that right and allow people to march and speak or is it

their duty to break up the protest in the name of "security" (often a proxy term for protecting property)?

But while these discussions about conundrums were interesting, we wanted them to dig into the fundamentals underneath the incompatibilities. For instance, who are the "police": street officers and their superintendents or the whole edifice dedicated to "policing" society, called the "law" (which is not synonymous with "justice")? Do beat police really have a "duty" or is that just a dignified-sounded word covering up a dirtier reality? Is it reasonable to expect people to trust others who have guns and can kill them without provocation? What is crime? Why do we even need something called "the police" (and what are the human-nature assumptions underlying policing)? What are assumptions that feed the idea of the "thin blue line"?

And so on and so on.

Thinking back on those hours and reflecting upon present realities, here is where my thoughts have ended up at the moment.

In the program I felt compassion for the double-bind of the jobs the police had. They were asked to do social-worker kinds of stuff in order to better understand the people on which they would ultimately would have to use force. They were asked to be empathetic and brutal at the same time, and they were asked to be split-visioned, with one eye on their immediate territory and one eye on the political volcano scaled by their bosses and their bosses' bosses. In that situation, "serve" and "protect" were not useful guides and only added to the confusion of their role.

I think we need to give the police a break and make their thankless and dangerous jobs clearer and simpler. Let's name them the enforcers that they are and not muddle things by calling them public servants. Their job is to enforce a particular vision of social and political order which gives property rights primacy (along with the political and social structures that come with property rights).

In addition, this order should be premised on the idea that humans are imperfect creatures prone to sin often and that they need the strong hand of an impartial law to keep them in line.

When the people march in protest of this or that, the police's job is to channel the protests in a prescribed manner and anyone who strays outside the lines will be restrained and arrested. This can be done much less brutally and cynically than the way the NYPD does it, but it would be a difference of degree,

not kind. It is *not* their job to make sure constitutional rights are protected but to enforce public order, and this would be broadcast far and wide so that the people protesting know that the police officers will not be their friends.

In the communities they patrol, their job is to instill a healthy degree of fear of the power they wield. This doesn't have to employ the "quality of life" harassments that the NYPD uses to bump up arrest stats (since they only inspire dismay and resistance, not fear), but, again, a difference of degree, not kind. They don't have to act as the enemies of the people but as the impartial enforcers of the law, which has nothing to do with justice and everything to do with public order.

It will also make their jobs easier if they instill this fear in every community, not just the poor and black/brown ones. Folks in the nice reaches of the Upper East Side should also know that they will not catch a break from the enforcers. Imposing the social and political order of property rights doesn't mean that individual members of that club get a pass.

They also need better training on how to be effective negotiators in and defusers of volatile situations, and they need better weapons for incapacitating people when their mediations don't work.

Everyone will be better served, so to speak, if the law is applied with equal severity to everyone. That will do more to inspire trust in the system than anything else, the knowledge that we are equal before the law and that the law, through well-funded public defenders offices and courtrooms that move along rapidly and a reduction of the "plea bargain" option and alternatives to incarceration and so on, will be applied efficiently and painfully to everyone who deserves punishment.

What is the citizen's relationship with the police? It should not be "the policeman is your friend." They are to be feared and avoided, people with guns hired to keep the peace.

It would also be helpful to the police if they had to police less. Wherever possible, the state should help communities build civic institutions that deal with the public-order conditions in their communities. In this way the police are not called in for every disturbance and expected to keep a peace that the people within the community should have a hand in keeping for themselves. It would also dilute the mistaken creed that the "thin blue line" is all that keeps society from barbarism.

A useful analogy here might be the military (given how militarized police departments are becoming), specifically how an authoritarian institution operates in a democracy. Our soldiers are "hired," so to speak, to enforce American policy wherever their bosses tell them to go. They are not a "people's army," they are a standing army owned and operated by the American government which is expected to keep out of political involvement (because their institution has no organic connection to or roots in the democratic process).

The police should occupy the same position in the society (in part because they are already partly there: they've taken on the military custom of rank names and uniforms, and their training is military-like). They are hired enforcers, not expected to be part of the democratic process, not expected to be "of the people," deployed by their superiors to defend that day's vision of public order, and as impartial as humanly possible in deciding who gets the baton or the Taser or the bullet.

Like the military, service in the force would be limited to twenty years. (A certain number of people would be allowed to stay in for 30 years in order to provide upper-level management but that would have to be by some process of application and review, not just from automatic promotion. And they would be retired at the end of their tenure.) It is best to cycle people out of this kind of work so that they don't harden ideologically and can go on to do other things in their lives that can still provide service, if that's what they want to do.

We can still have our heroes in this configuration, we can still give our heart-felt thanks to these people who have been asked to do an impossible and thankless task. But they are not our friends, and they are not our servants. This set-up would not be pleasant, but it would hardly be less pleasant than what we currently have, where one side of the politician's mouth voices "we need to re-build trust" while the other side issues the commands that send the police into the streets to enforce an unequal and destructive public order.

I don't see how it can work any other way.

(December 2014)

The Thing About Vacations

Over Christmas and New Year's I was in Argentina with the Marvelous María Beatriz visiting family. As always, traveling is a mixed effort for me, since I enjoy the comforts of being planted yet also like disrupting the usual. Once I'm out, I'm okay - getting me out can take a bit of effort.

This is because I am not a big believer in the enlarging effects of travel. I don't think skimming through places while on vacation enlarges much of anything except one's expenses, if we mean by "enlarge" to broaden and deepen one's sense of being a world citizen, not parochial or tribal, more accepting of difference and protective of liberty, less ideologically hardened.

What travel does for most of us is allow us to indulge in things we don't allow ourselves during our harnessed and obligated daily lives. In this sense, travel does enlarge our appetites, both literal and emotional, and for the moment we can feel liberated. Well, liberated in a certain way, the way the rich must feel liberated by their wealth, where things are done because they are wanted to be done and one has a sense of possibilities without interference. If only we could live our lives in the daily run the way we live them on vacation. (But then it wouldn't be vacation, would it, but just life, from which we'| need a vacation....)

I do like how being on a vacation does offer some relief from my "I" by requiring me to pay attention and improvise, especially when there is a language involved that is not my own and I have to expend energy to follow (really, half-follow, quarter-follow) what is going on around me. One attains humility through exhaustion, an excellent way to reduce the ego and damp down the boil of brain chatter I often mistake for thinking.

Of course, for most of us, vacations are tied to work - it's the sop the job gives us because the organization knows that it can't squeeze maximum productivity out of a work-force without giving it a little rest and detachment (though that latter is getting more and more limited, since being connected is supposed to take precedence over being out of the office - you are supposed to sacrifice a bit of your own time for the good of the company without being compensated for it - the return of indentured servitude, though much milder).

So off we go to increase the GDP by spending money we mostly don't have to live life liberally, only to have to come back to the harness and lose all of the benefits of the living large.

This is why I *almost* choose each year to not take vacation days, since they're just a cheat, a left-handed gift (like casual Fridays), and by not using the days I make a choice, however stupid and adolescent, to live my life by my own rules. I usually end up taking some vacation days just to "vacate" the office (after all, is that not the root meaning of the word?) and shovel out the accumulated nonsense.

What is very disturbing to me is that the wealth created by all of the increases in productivity have been stolen from the people who have made the increase possible. The 40-hour week, the "job," the work ethic - we are still nailed to these concepts long after they should have been retired, and our time on this earth is still being sucked dry by ancient forces dedicated to control and exploitation. If we had a proper allocation of wealth, we wouldn't need the sop of vacations.

There can be a fair amount of self-blame here - "If only I'| played the game better, I'| have made more money and freed myself from the chains." And that's true - I could have gone that way, probably should have gone that way. Rather than teach people that a work ethic is good in and of itself for the health of our character and souls, we should teach children that the real game in town is to make as much money as you can legally so that you no longer have to work for anyone else - everything should be aimed at getting people to retire as early as possible and escape the exploitation. This doesn't necessarily mean that everyone becomes "retired" - a lot of people will actually go to work because they love what they do, and can love it even more because they don't have to do it for money. Others won't ever go to the office again (count me in for that!)

Of course this won't happen without bodies hitting the barricades, but it's refreshing to think about an alternative to the crappy set-up we have to live under today.

At lunch on Friday, January 2, at the house of our friend María Celia and Ernesto, the group conversation turned to morals, decadence, faith (there were two former nuns and a current priest in the house). I followed as best I could, and then eventually threw out a question meant to shift the tone of resignation and dismay at living in such a fallen world: if all of their concerns could be met and the world re-assembled to their satisfaction, what would that world be and (more important to me), what would each of them be willing to do to make that world possible?

The question slid to the side for a little while, but then María Celia brought it up again, and she said that for her it's all about creating a world of love, and I

added in that I agreed, which leads us to the strange questions of what would a politics of love look like, an economics of love look like. A little more conversation about this, then some lightness with more champagne, and the group photo, and the afternoon was done.

But, yes, the questions still stand: what would a politics and economics of love be like? How would the world be re-shaped if everything were re-directed to promote the welfare of women and children (because if the world is safe for them, it'll be safe for everyone)?

Would we need vacations, then? Of course. But then we might just call them "continuations" instead of "vacations." We might just call it being alive.

(January 2015)

Touching A Nerve

I just finished reading Patricia Churchland's *Touching a Nerve: The Self as Brain*, which is a balanced rendition of what Churchland calls "neurophilosophy," the intersection between neuroscience and philosophy, what one might call "philosophy made flesh."

Churchland is not a cheerleader for the "pop" uses of neuroscience, the vulgarized reports that "explain" human behavior by genes, neural networks, and evolutionary psychology. She is careful to point how much is still unknown about how the brain and consciousness works. And just because we might be able to locate ethics and agency in brain structures doesn't diminish our moral obligations to act in humane ways through the exercise of free will, even if that "we" is a bit ghostly and displaced.

One angle she does go to some lengths to dismiss is a spiritual explanation for human workings, a brain driven by a soul. Even if a soul does exist, she asks, of what is it made and what are the physics of its interaction with the human body? She acknowledges that she can't disprove the soul's existence, but neither can she provide a plausible description of how the soul might do its work and so discards it as a source of explanation. A brain is a brain, a body is a body, an environment is the framework for the living organism, and all three dance together to create the thing called "life."

Except tell that to my friend, whose book I'm editing as a favor.

The book is an account of what happened to him after he was diagnosed with kidney cancer and survived. Prior to the diagnosis, he lived the usual life of the upper-tier bourgeoisie, a stock analyst on Wall Street who eventually married, had children, and moved an hour outside the city to more land and a bigger house in New Jersey.

But after the onset of the cancer and the treatment regimen, motivated by fear and curiosity to do his own research about staying healthy and alive, he began to have visions of what he calls "the other side beyond the veil," eventually claiming to be able to communicate with those who have passed over as well as seeing (and being able to analyze) individuals' auras. He now feels confident enough about these and his other spiritual abilities to write this book and try to get it published.

As far as I'm concerned, this is all nonsense, but I don't tell him that because, really, what business is it of mine to do that? I want to help him write the best book he can, even if it's a book I would never buy or endorse. (My compassion is thankfully trumping my sarcasm.) He deserves the chance to convince others, and it's up to the others to manage their own responses - I have to give them that right since it's a right I demand for myself.

And while I do think that the spiritualism that informs his book is unfounded, it forms the basis for his book's real aim, an entreaty to live a better individual life so that many others can also live better individual lives. His argument is this: if the fear of death can be exposed as an illusion, if we can access these other spiritual realms that show us that life continues and does not end, then the corrosive acts that come out of that fear, from hubris to the devastation of the planet, will stop. We will be able to recognize the essential oneness that unites all creation, human and non-human, and act upon that recognition to build a life with balance, harmony, and mutual respect.

What to make of the life-journey that brought him to this hope? Whatever else it is, it is a work of art, prompted by a vision, brought to light through self-discipline, geared to shift the human condition. "Good" or "bad" is irrelevant here - what matters are the morality and idealism behind his impulse. The book is "gospel," in the original sense of that word: I want to share the "good news" with you about the good life.

In many ways my friend's book underscores Churchland's point about the complexity of the intersection among brain, body, and the world at large. If the spirit realm is suspect as a scientifically verifiable "outside" reality, it nevertheless exists as a realm within the embodied brain, making it "real" (as all brain-body-world interactions are) even if not experimentally demonstrable.

And even if his spirit world is a product of brain chemistry and electricity, so what? It is no different than any other product of brain chemistry and electricity, especially those ones we privilege as "art" or "profound" or "proper." His propositions are, as *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* says about humans, "mostly harmless," and they're certainly better than the "visions" of billionaires about the betterment of the race or the mean-spirited ideologies that govern our politics today.

Rather than simplify human life, Churchland's book and my friend's book show just how knotted and obscure things are within the realm of the human. We are, as beings, complicated choreographies of inner and outer materials;

our beings are a kind of commerce, a result of multiple transactions and incessant trading. We may want to believe that there is an "I" somewhere which is irreducible, but the reality seems to be that whatever "I" shows up on a daily basis is the outcome of a negotiation among chemicals, electricity, the subway commute, the past, and a hundred other elements, most of which this "I" does not sense or recognize.

The lucky ones may be ones whose "I" is pretty similar from day-to-day. Or perhaps the lucky ones are the ones like my friend, subjected to a life-shock that re-boots the whole system. Or the ones on Lexapro or Zoloft whose "I" gets shifted from one that feels like an opponent or an anchor to an "I" that feels more like a proper "I" (and where does that feeling of "proper" come from?). We all have an "I," but there is nothing easy or dependable about it.

As a writer, of course I believe this is a problem of language - our vocabulary about self is based on ancient notions that Churchland's science constantly revises and undercuts, our critical language is limited by judgmental notions, and our moral language has been infected by our economic regime.

But even if we had a language appropriate to the density of our selves, there is still the contingent nature of it all - that we are here, and then we are not, and this is something that language can never completely disarm. I don't blame my friend for wanting an assurance that there is more at the after-party, that in fact the party never ends but just shifts costumes and customs. Doesn't work for me, but it comforts him, and so be it.

What I appreciate about Churchland's approach is that it reflects and respects the fragile bluster that each human being is upon the face of the earth, that we are animals suffering the fate of animals even as we go down imagining we aren't in hi-def dreams of perfect worlds.

This is where my friend's path and my path join for a short part of the journey: if we could just remember that, in the end (using the words of Lewis Thomas from his essay "Death in the Open" from *Lives of a Cell*), "everything that comes alive seems to be in trade for something that dies...[and] that we all go down together, in the best of company" - if we can remember that, that we are all alike in the face of dying off, then we can drop the fear-mongering and divisiveness and make manifest the spirit realm embedded in the folds of the three-pound brain.

Then off he goes to his “other side” while I stay here and write and ponder and look forward to the cats coming to sit in my lap to share their present tense with me.

(December 2013)

Torture

The results in the Senate report on the CIA torture program should surprise no one. Nor should the failure of the torture to draw out anything useful. The CIA's distinct overall legacy is that it is terrible at doing its job. They are constantly surprised by events they fail to predict, despite billions of dollars invested in people and machinery, and they should be abolished simply based on its dismal performance evaluation.

And the torture itself? That comes from the usual toxic brew of the "American exceptionalist" ideology (Fox News' Andrea Tantaros' rap that "America is awesome"), inept imperialism, a sentimentalized Christian righteousness, and our corrupted democracy.

Not everyone, of course, condemned the findings. In a smarmy interview in one of the subway newspapers, the families of the "victims" of September 11 spoke fiercely how about anything done to these guys was completely justified (there's that Christian righteousness) and that they were okay with the program.

Cheney, Bush, Tenet, and the whole neocon wrecking crew went on the offensive as well as about the report, with Cheney the best/worst of the bunch with his mix of hurt feelings and steel-jawed virtue as he chewed the scenery on *Meet the Press*.

However, convicting people for war crimes over this won't change anything. Nor will the mouth-music of a million *mea culpas*, from the President on down, change anything. Even abolishing the security apparatus (saving billions of dollars and thousands of lives) won't change anything.

Nothing will change until the creed of American exceptionalism changes (i.e., "America is *not* awesome!"). We're not awesome in any regard that matters to a good human life, and things at which we are awesome (e.g., torture) don't do us or anyone any good in the world.

The first pillar that needs to be knocked away is the militarization of our society, from the crude economics of the military-industrial complex to the veneration of military power and the warriors sacrificed on its altar. We may need a "military" (we can debate that - the framers of the Constitution certainly did, about Article 1, Section 8, Clause 12), but we don't need *this* military with its kudzu-like suffocation of investment and initiative. Let's honor all the people

who have been chewed up by this machine, but let's not feed it any more people, foreign or domestic.

Second, America has spent a century or so trying to be an empire, and it is time to end the experiment and rack it up as a failure. We have neither the ruthlessness nor competence to lord it over anyone, and our effort to do so has only made us unable to lord it over ourselves, giving rise to adventures and failures and impetuosities that have done nothing but cause suffering and resentment.

Third, and related, if we can get rid of our imperial delusions, it will be easier for us to accept that, at least for the foreseeable future, American will remain a hyperactive adolescent running around with a gun in its hand rather than being the mature leader of the free world that we think we are. The American dream machine *is* awesome at producing round after round of content that helps the world amuse itself to death, and we should stick with our strengths in this regard. We have a long way to go before we can consider ourselves mature, sophisticated, civilized folks offering sage advice to the world.

All of this spade-work is negative, though, only clearing the field for the real planting. The true question is this: What *can* America be awesome at? And for that question, I have a single answer.

From time to time the media report on reports that rank countries according to the quality of life: infant mortality, educational achievement, societal health (mental and physical), and so on. And without fail, America is never awesome in these reports, or, more accurately, it's negatively awesome, far down in the ranks for things in which it could be leading the pack.

This is where I think America should be awesome, be exceptional: in making this a country where living is not a collision sport with enormous collateral damage. We should be awesome in every index-item that develops and furthers the good life (as defined by Robert Skidelsky and Edward Skidelsky in their 2012 book *How Much is Enough?: Money and the Good Life*). We don't need to be awesome in conducting foreign wars, bankrolling oppression, or trying to sit at the head of the table for every negotiating session. We do need to be awesome in ensuring that our citizens have the means to lead healthy, satisfying lives.

This is not nanny-state sort of stuff. A healthy citizenry can also be an engaged citizenry (especially if we can get money out of politics), in whose name things can be done that bring honor to the nation rather than shame and danger.

An easier life will be a better life for everyone, not only for American citizens but also for all those people in other countries who now will not die because America will stay home and tend its own garden rather going off on military escapades.

How would this philosophical and spiritual shift happen, since we have spent so much time going in the opposite direction? (So much easier to prescribe than lead!) I don't know, but I do know it won't catalyze in a large way until there is a "Nixon in China" moment, until someone who has the authority to make it stick gets up and says, "You know, we've been wrong about who we are and what we think our purpose is in the world. No harm in admitting this, so let's admit it so that we can get started doing things in the right way," followed by a full-court press of beginning to build the new road.

Until then, we can only do what we can do within our individual selves and within the communities that matter to us to get us off the death-road and onto the life-road, to make the ordinary exceptional and pop the balloon of "exceptionalism" whenever we have the chance.

(March 2015)

Micro Triggers

Microaggressions and *trigger warnings* - these are terms of art these days on college campuses, at least according to a new article in this month's *Atlantic*. And on some of the political blogs to which I listen and in other magazines that I read. It seems we are in a crisis of "political correctness" and witnessing the death of free speech (again).

Let's try to be clear about terms here. "Political correctness," used in its usual condemnatory way, generally means that the condemners are complaining about not being able to say what they want to say without getting some blowback. And it usually means saying insulting things. In fact, it seems that the "right" to insult is what they think free speech means.

Others, of course, argue in favor of minority/marginalized voices being heard and note that the charge of "political correctness" gets trotted out whenever some group on the margins starts getting uppity, much as the trans community is doing today. And they're right - these voices should be heard and, generally, when the power structure feels threatened, it trots out canards like being PC.

But does having the right to be heard mean an attached right to be respected? Some people link these two ideas together and get angry when others don't make the same connection. But there's nothing in any free speech doctrine that mandates that the marketplace of ideas respects anyone's ideas - the purpose of a marketplace is to test things out to see what has value, in full knowledge that not all things will have value, and not all things valued will have equivalent values.

The response to this fact of adulthood is *microaggressions*. Microaggressions are completely defined by the person naming them. Any reaction to an idea or insight or observation that does not accord with the speaker's notion of its value, or any reaction to him or her just as a person - in other words, I think your idea sucks or where did you come from? - is deemed an aggression against the speaker.

The follow-on action to the perceived insult is to ask the authorities to penalize that behavior. And if it isn't, the hell of the aggrieved will be loosed upon the world through social media.

Trigger warnings work differently - they are announced warnings that the material being covered in, say, a literature class may trigger a traumatic

reaction in those who suffer from [fill in the blank], and such people can excuse themselves from dealing with the material.

Again, woe to the professor or convener of a meeting that does not issue such a warning, or issue the right kind of warning, or issue the warning with enough lead time, and so on and so on.

The end-game of deploying these terms is establishing a zone of comfort in which people do not have to risk being dismissed, disrespected, or disproved. It is the ultimate crib under the care of the ultimate nanny.

This PC phenomenon is not new, but that doesn't mean it should be scanted or dismissed - people have paid real consequences for being on the wrong side of this issue. But how should it be addressed?

This is the point where I would, in former days, wheel in my Enlightenment arguments about glories of logic and the gifts given by rational debate and measured thoughtfulness.

Truth is, though, this won't get addressed because of petty fears and the pleasures of indignation. Colleges are too geared to the student as customer to tell the customer to go somewhere else. (See the recent article in *Harper's* about this.) This also means that whatever truth there was in the canard that colleges are places where people should go to have their minds sharpened and ideas vetted by risking error, silliness, and humility is gone. It also means that whatever truth there was in the notion of free speech as essential to robust debate is gone as well - in a robust debate, you may very well get bruised and buffeted, which is now out of bounds.

There is also a larger frame here. A docile, infantilized student body is just perfect for our form of hallucinatory capitalism - the search for comfort has been lucrative for businesses willing to satisfy the quest. And let's face it, most of "the people" (as in of, for, and by) lack the knowledge, wisdom, and self-governance to be effective citizens, and they've gotten this way through a combination of bad education, media siloes, and a personal choice of sloth over risk. Better that we don't have a "robust debate" these days and just continue with the participatory fascism we have (to use a term coined by Lewis Lapham).

I commiserate with those who still make the argument that colleges should be places - havens, really - for the exercise of our minds and spirits, but that is not the way this road will travel. Capitalism commodifies everything, but it does so in different ways. Some things are drafted into the value system of the market

and some are done to coach people in the proper supportive behaviors. This is what this round of PCness is about, which is also a sign of just how much the marketplace of ideas is now just a marketplace.

(August 2015)

(Almost) No Government Support for the Arts

(The following comments only apply to the state of our state here in the United States.)

As with religion, so with art: taking the state's money means you're on the state's payroll, and like any boss, the state will act the way a boss acts towards an underling.

For the artist, then, as for the religionist, taking the money means making a choice about the cost of compromise to principle and to practice. And that choice always means a sacrifice: nothing is ever achieved, good or bad, without blood being shed.

A shining example of this is the obit of PBS in the October 2014 issue of *Harper's*. Being on the government's dole has only gutted the idealistic aims of PBS' founders until we are left with doo-wop pledge drives and obedient news media.

The state has no obligation to support "the arts" - it is not a core function of the state, in part because it is not in the state's interest to have a restive critical-minded citizenry. However, if a state decides to support art, then it will most likely support art that calms and delights, not pokes and prods, a logical policy, given its interests.

Where does this leave "art" (if I can use this single word as a stand-in for a complex social reality)? Again, a comparison with religion is apt. At one historical point, religious belief and political belief overlapped enough to be considered a consolidated belief-system.

But once these systems got separated by war and economics, a personal, private relationship with God rather than a collaborative but corrosive relationship with Caesar became the only way to preserve the purity of the beliefs. This doesn't mean that religionists won't try to dance with the secular political devil, but inevitably, the political state will never become the theocracy they want, and the political religionists end up being co-opted and then discarded, their beliefs sullied and weakened.

The lessons here for artists are these. The best art is created in private, and the artist should not ask the state for assistance to do this. If the artist, however, wants to do something more open and collaborative, on the public's dime, then the art produced should calm and delight, not poke and prod. Give money to the Roundabout Theatre in New York so that it can do revivals of old

plays and musicals. Give money to the Metropolitan Museum of Art so that it can bring in an exhibit of Impressionists. Give money to The National Endowment for Humanities to chart endangered languages. Give money to a local studio in Harlem so that it can present art created by people in the neighborhood. All of this is edifying, and no taxpayer or legislator should find this kind of support offensive or unmerited.

However, if the artist (person or organization) doesn't want to work under these constraints, then there is only one other process and metric for success (however that is defined): the marketplace - art as a business and conducted as one.

True, even businesses get state largesse, so perhaps here is how the intersect of art and state can work, since the state does have an interest in having as many of its citizens gainfully employed as possible and not hanging out in coffee-shops with free Wi-Fi plotting revolutions.

A small theatre company gets a grant to incubate itself - but it is only a starter grant, not renewable. (Or the grant could be for one year with an automatic renewal for a second year, but then nothing after that.) The same could be done for an individual artist wanting to start a career. Reports have to be sent in on how the money is used, but beyond that, the artists are free to build a base for themselves as best they can, and after a set time, they are on their own.

Larger organizations, as outlined above, can get continuing support, but it needs to be a minimal percentage of their budget, an amount that if it were withdrawn, the institution would still survive.

At all levels the expectation is that the person or the company or the institution will support itself, thereby gaining the self-respect that comes from self-reliance and minimizing the scrapes and scuffs that come from artists continually rubbing up against politics and forced to act like Oliver Twist asking for more. The state will avoid divisive arguments about "government funding of the arts" since the funding will be a miniscule part of the overall state budget (as it is now) and will only be disbursed, on a smaller scale, to jump-start enterprises and, on a larger scale, to support art that does not offend, intimidate, or confuse.

In other words, the less that the state and art have to do with each other, the better. Art is a legitimate economic and social activity (although a difficult one in our philistine society), and like any other legitimate activity, the state should encourage its development.

In fact, the best way the state could do this would be to fund art programs in schools to build a citizenry knowledgeable about art and its history and practice. This would do more than any system of grants to help artists find success because they would be able to preach to a choir primed to hear what they have to say.

The state in our United States is an inconstant patron of the arts, which only engenders fruitless debates about obligation and taste. Make state support of the arts more constant by making it minimal in amount, limited in duration, and aesthetically agreeable - in other words, so that the art the state promotes furthers its own interests. This is both a sound policy and a stimulating caution to all artists interested in maintaining their independence and perfecting their practice.

(November 2014)

Contra Dictions

I've been reading through Susan Sontag's *Against Interpretation* for the first time (I am such a late bloomer!), since for so many years I've seen it referenced and cited. Much of it I've skipped, mostly the essays on individual artists whom I skimmingly know and don't have time now in my life to learn about. But I have read the pieces on camp, style/stylization, religiosity, to name a few, which are very well-written but, for me, intellectually annoying.

In an afterword to the 1996 edition, Sontag, quizzing herself on whether the pieces still hold up thirty years later, agrees with herself that they are by and large substantial pieces that can be read with profit long after their historical time. This means, for me, that the cultural exceptionality, even exclusivity, she attributes to the artist and the work of art is a foundation for how she viewed the world both in the book's original incarnation and its reincarnation a generation later.

But, really, are artists and their works (however those terms are defined) all that special, even extra-special? Are they the cultural barometers, the makers of new sensibilities (a favorite Sontagian term) that both ripen people's perceptions and their understandings of these perceptions, nay, even social (if not political or economic) revolutionaries?

Hard to say, isn't it? The answers greatly depend on who is allowed inside the pantheon. A February 2014 *Harper's* article on romance fiction noted that that the $1.4 billion market for these books is $700 million ahead of the profits of the "inspirational" category and $1 billion ahead of "literary" (which would, presumably, include Sontag). *Fifty Shades of Grey* was self-published by E.L. James and made $95 million in 2013, more than any other writer in the world.

If one wants to measure the "effect of written works on the sensibilities of readers," clearly James outstrips Sontag by several major-league miles. But one wonders if Sontag would dub James an authentic artist, right up there with Albert Camus, Simone Weil, and the others she dissects in her essays. Mostly likely not. But why not?

Probably something about a lack of serious purpose, about writing to formula (the HEA, or "happily ever after," must always appear in the romance novel), about privileging content over style, a reliance on the pedestrian rather than the rarefied - Sontag would probably go on in that sort of vein.

But that critique would miss the point because what the romance novel does, outside of its techniques and formulae, is create in its readers sensation through spectacle rather than cogitation through argument, which places it squarely in the artistic mainstream these days (at least as how we live it here in New York). Sensation through spectacle (which Sontag authenticates, in her essay on camp, as a legitimate artistic approach) is pretty much the reigning aesthetic in the Broadway houses these days, where people can exit the lobby moved in multiple ways but not necessarily motivated.

And even in the side-venues as well. A Freakonomics radio podcast form September 2012 features commentary from people attending a production of *Sleep No More*, a multi-sensory mashup of Shakespeare and noir staged in an old warehouse in the Chelsea section of New York. The audience put on masks and wandered through elaborately rigged actor-populated environments over six floors, told nothing more than they have to wear the mask, don't talk and don't use a cellphone, and that "fortune favors the bold."

The people interviewed about the show talked about how the masks freed them to do things they might not normally ever do in a theatrical setting, allowing them to be transgressive, and in being so, experiencing the amalgam of fear and thrill that comes with transgressing.

But - let us not forget - fear and thrill in *measured* circumstances, sensation without real risk and alarm. Felix Barrett, the artistic director of Punchdrunk and co-creator of *Sleep No More*, said it well: ""It's completely safe, it just feels almost fictionalized. We fictionalize a state of tension that feels slightly unsettling and threatening when actually it's not."

Really, there's nothing wrong with any of this - really. A woman interviewed for the piece said, "It just felt good. It was right, in the moment," and that's exactly what it was - what it was and nothing more than what it was, feeling good in the moment. So, not wrong - but also probably not useful.

But it's not just the feeling but the context of the feeling that's important as well. And that context, looked at wholly and full-faced, is terrifying in a real, and not an aesthetic, way.

Enter an extensive piece by Richard Smith in Truthout, dated January 9, 2014, and titled "Green Capitalism: The God That Failed." His thesis is pretty simple: "The results are in: No amount of 'green capitalism' will be able to

ensure the profound changes we must urgently make to prevent the collapse of civilization from the catastrophic impacts of global warming."

Page after page of argumentation follows, and while there may be disagreements along the margins of this or that piece of evidence, it's pretty hard to deny that unless we change how we do human business on this planet, we are screwed.

A vital part of Smith's argument is that capitalism cannot be the savior of itself because it is not built to do that sort of work - salvation goes against capitalism's grain because the salvation would require an ethic of abstinence and restraint that directly contradicts the system's imperative to grow and expand.

He also offers suggestions for the changes that need to happen, but those specificities are not the important point here. What undergirds the piece is the call for a new regime of sensation to meet the challenge of our species' imminent demise, one composed of an austerity shaped by a love of content and evidence, prompted by anger and logic, and focused beyond the gratification of the ego.

And so back to the start of this essay: artists and their work but now in the shadow of possible/probable collapse - what is it that they could do? Or should we accept Oscar Wilde's dictum in The Picture of Dorian Grey that "All art is quite useless," and just allow artists to do whatever they want to do without expecting them to do anything of any instrumental value or consequence, except entertain us as the place goes up in flames?

(Wilde, in a letter to a correspondent, explained that "art is useless because its aim is simply to create a mood. It is not meant to instruct, or to influence action in any way. It is superbly sterile, and the note of its pleasure is sterility.")

I want to end this essay with some sort of quippy conclusion that creates the sensation of profound pronouncement, but I can't come up with it because this course of thought seems to end only in questions without easy or actionable (or any) answers. I am very curious to know how others might come at these ideas - please write a response and share your thoughts about art and the end-times. [michaelbettencourt@outlook.com]

(February 2014)

The Squirrel and My Cat

On April 6, 2013, I was attacked by a squirrel on my back deck while having lunch with the Marvelous Maria Beatriz.

Yes, it is true.

Our next-door neighbor, Tom, picked up an abandoned squirrel pup last year and raised it over the winter in a cage. This spring, he began releasing it into the backyard to explore and do squirrel-things, which he announced to us he was doing as we ate our excellently prepared sandwiches and drank our excellently distilled beverages (a cold Dogfish Head beer for me, a staccato prosecco for her).

Or, to say this another way, he had released into the world a creature that had no fear of humans.

The squirrel came up the stairs to our deck and paused. Given our domesticated attitudes towards animals in our urban environment (that is to say, we forgot they are wild creatures), we thought out loud, "How cute." He climbed up my arm and sat on the nape of my neck, chittering. Still cute.

And then he wasn't as he got it into his squirrel-brain that he should attack me, which he did with great relish, giving me a good puncture wound on each pinkie finger and a trellis of scratches on my hands, forearms, and the top of my head. After his first sally, I threw him away from me; he climbed onto the railing and launched himself for a second attack. The only way I could get him to loosen his bite on my right finger was to grab his jaw from behind his head with my left thumb and forefinger and squeeze hard, like trying to squirt a pit from an olive.

By this time Tom has come up the stairs, and I hand the critter off to him while MB is helping me stanch the blood flow and get ready to head out to the emergency room. (Wildlife note: squirrels don't carry rabies, though Lord knows what else was plaqued on his claws and teeth - and as we learned later, Tom hadn't ever taken him to a vet, which made sense since he wasn't supposed to have a domesticated squirrel in the house in the first place.)

I am something of a novelty in the emergency room since my ailment, such as it is, trumps the mundane cold or sprained joint. By this time, I've stopped bleeding, but both of my little fingers have swollen and are throbbing, and I'm thinking, "Now begins the tetanus." (Then I remembered that I tetanus shot a

few years ago after I almost chopped off the tip of my finger with an axe, but at this moment I did not feel the anti-tetanus in my blood. Silly boy.)

Three hours later we're out with a prescription for my anti-biotic, and three hours after that we've finally found a 24-hour pharmacy where I can get it filled. (We did get to finish our sandwiches after the hospital, so a little bit of break in-between.) So, six hours spent post-attack - and we have to let the police know about the animal because the hospital is going to call the police as well, as mandated.

The squirrel, it seems, is going to be in a lot of trouble through no fault of its own. Once again, humans muck up whatever they touch.

I'm writing this with Cordelia in my lap, warm and purring and completely trusting and completely non-feral (though cats can shuck off their domestication quite easily - just ask the millions of dead song birds wasted by unhoused felines). Even if we pick her up to cradle her (which she does not like), she never turns savage. She twists and turns and mewls and pushes, but she never attacks - why should she? She knows, in whatever way cats know these things, that we mean no harm, that we'll never mean any harm to her.

This is not the squirrel's life, and it shouldn't be - he shouldn't lose his fear of us because we are not to be trusted - we think we can re-design whatever space we walk into for our own comfort and benefit, even if we have shown to us time and time again that we suck at such interventions and usually only bring havoc even when we think we're bringing improvement. Humans so much want to think that they are better engineers than they are, but whatever improvements have been wrung from the natural world have come at a cost that now threatens to wipe us out.

Squirrel, I don't hold anything of what happened against you. But don't come up on our back deck again because I will give you a reason to fear human beings and bring you back to your senses so that you'll get out of the cage and back into the trees and away away away from us.

(April 2013)

What Is An Economy For?

I had a clashing of texts recently: *How Much Is Enough?* by Robert Skidelsky and Edward Skidelsky, two opposing reviews of the book (in *The Nation* by Jackson Lears and *The New York Times* by Richard Posner), and the magazine *Good Housekeeping*.

The Skidelskys' book is, in the end, about happiness - more specifically, dealing with the question "Is happiness anything that can be created by a capitalist economic system?", something distinguishable in kind and degree from pleasure, contentment, satisfaction, "maximization of return," and so on. Their answer is mostly "no" since happiness, defined by the duo as a good life well-lived, is antithetical to capitalism's constant self-devouring drive towards growth fueled by the manufactured instability of desires.

Posner disagrees with their critique, seeing the leisure created by increased productivity being squandered by a species more likely to engage in bloodsport than cultivate their humanities. Capitalism, as iniquitous as it is, is a discipline, a governor on human frailties, and as such a great producer of inventiveness and abundance - even if much of the latter does not go to the producers of it.

But even Posner can't explain away the irritating ache that the Skidelskys provoke by asking the question - the ancient, pre-modern, pre-market question - that has driven much philosophical inquiry: what is the purpose of all this human motion and ingestion and respiration and inquisition? This is a question that capitalism cannot answer, founded as it is on open-ended want and the imperative to never say no.

Good Housekeeping, which the Marvelous Maria Beatriz and I get as a free something for doing something we no longer remember doing, and which resides usually in the bathroom within easy reach for a quick skim, is a capsule of these strains. On the one hand, it equates happiness with laser-focused self-fulfillment through cosmetics, exercise, positive thinking, fashion, freedom from clutter, workplace etiquettes - simple things that help one make the calibrations necessary to keep oneself in harness in order to continue being a productive consumer and laborer in the capitalist order.

On the other hand are the articles and fictions about emotional bonds to family, deep and deepening loves, the "thingness" of *Hints from Heloise* and good food lovingly prepared - actions and items whose value resides in part in

the haven they provide from the onslaught of consumerism and the acid dissolve of constant advertisement.

On the one hand, be a good citizen of the capitalist regime; on the other hand, resist the dissolution of things held close and dear that create a thickness of self and a narrative with heft.

Is there a way out of this jam? Aside from shunting oneself off to the monastery or nunnery, the only solution is constant resistance to the Borg of capitalism. Resistance is not futile - in fact, it's the only thing that will save the soul. Perhaps we need to reconfigure Timothy Leary's "tune in turn on drop out" for our desperate age as _____ - I'll let you fill in the blank. Just be sure to fill it in.

(November 2013)

Boiling Off The Lard

For my current project, I am stitching my better essays on theatre into a book that I will self-publish and then send to each artistic director in New York City. I don't expect anything to come of it (i.e., an offer to read my work), but I have no reason to let these essays go on gathering digital dust on my website and at Scene4. "No-expectation" frees me up to do this because the satisfaction comes from spending time with my own work, not (or not only) from the audience's response. The thing-done-for-itself is a rare thing for a human being to do.

I set up a guide for each piece: the words had to fit on a single sheet with one-inch margins and double-spaced. This would force me to speak straight and not use a word more than needed - keep the tracking lean and tight. (With the essays boiled down like this, I could also use them for podcasts, where two minutes of my voice runs about one page.)

Honestly, I thought the edits would be small because, well, hadn't I written them so well the first time? I found out how wrong I was.

The lard in them, especially in the older bits: shocking and shameful. And the sage-like and round-tone style I deployed now sounds slack and know-it-all. I don't chide myself for this - I was who I was then, and now I am not, and the work needs to voice new needs and new goals. But, man, still what a shock!

So, cut, prune, rinse, scale, scrape, buff, hone - stunned at how much bulge I could get these works to shed - but every syllable peeled off brought the writing closer to making real sense rather than just making a show of making sense.

I won't bore you with any demo - but I want to understand this link between my getting older and a more plain style. Adjectives and adverbs once hung out as a sign of art now fall to the side so that the line can unfurl with more ease and less crease. The younger man would have gone for a pearlescent moon, but now such a trope is just too much cologne in a small space. "Moon" will do just fine and clear the air. And I am fine with that.

Lean feels honest. Lush feels jaded. Lean leads. Lush distracts.

Perhaps "the great slimming" has to do with having less time to live (though every day can be our last day, no matter what our age). Or maybe it's just an analogue of losing my hair, which has actually helped me look better (the comb-over never fooled a soul). Or part of the urge to divert most of my clothes to

Salvation Army (thinking of Thoreau's cabin with its bed, desk, and chair). Or that I no longer feel polite enough to sit through bad second acts or finish inept books or grin and bear nonsense, especially my own bad second acts and inept books and nonsense.

Or it is finally unraveling the Buddhist conundrum of non-attachment to the world - not that I am detached or indifferent but that the attachment to anything does not govern me by desire. I can split the link between the desire and the desired, look upon them both as jeweled and glorious animals that do not need to be owned in order to be enjoyed. At peace if not necessarily at rest.

From wherever hails this lean towards leanness, I greet it and show it because it helps me be serious without taking myself too seriously, helps me be sober without sobriety, helps me remember that the root of any useful wisdom is planted in clumsiness, folly, and bad judgments (of which I have much and many) as well as not being suckered by the canard that style equals substance and a gesture is enough.

Thoreau (again) says it well: "...to cut a broad swath and shave close, to drive life into a corner, and reduce it to its lowest terms..." I am liking those terms.

(July 2014)

Memento Mori

On Sunday, August 26, 2012, something happened.

Of late, I have lost all my mirth - speaking Hamlet-ish. If not that, then certainly I've taken on a grouchiness, a testiness, towards many elements of the routine life, including the very routineness of life itself. A shifting, as I thought of it, over the border into geezerhood.

I needed to shield myself from this grind, shield the ones I love from the grind as well, since they've done nothing to deserve this abrasion and dismissal. But I couldn't figure a way to do it, couldn't find the chink that would allow me to wedge in the lever-tip and pry off the whole crude stunted artifice and chuck it away.

So, I took myself on errands to the store, just to get the loved ones out of firing range, and the solution came to me unbidden, as these things are wont to do - during the washing of dishes, say, or the pulling of weeds.

What if that day - Sunday, August 26, 2012 - were to be my last? And I knew fully that this ending was coming. Knew that at midnight, all would be over - not in pain, not through self-violence or outer violence, but just finished. Lights off. Bells' reverberation stilled. How would I spend this day? (I gave myself one restriction: the day had to keep the character of any usual Sunday that Maria Beatriz and I would spend - it had to stay ordinary.)

Perhaps "unbidden" is not entirely true: the coming death of my sister's dog, Gabbie; my own thoughts about the mortal coil; the sometimes suffocation of ambition for my writing. But however the neurochemistry works in situations like this, it crafted a from-left-field suggestion that, because unforced by will or anxiety, made sense out of disparate parts.

So what happened?

Almost immediately - not a rush, really, more like a slow sifting, came a feeling of gentle-making humbleness. But it needed help to take hold, since it had to work through a thick veneer of bitchiness, and so I kept repeating to myself some variation of "Remember to remember - this all ends today, so pay attention in case you can take it with you." Over the day the humbleness worked its way through as the self-reminder took on (dare I say it?) the tenor of a prayer - not of supplication but of commemoration - memory-making - because even

the smallest gesture turns precious when the experience of it may be the last of its kind.

And so patience returned. And the noisiness in the head dimmed out. And it was as if I could breathe again, see again, hear again, love again.

We biked, we made pizza, we cleaned the apartment, we checked our emails, we read in bed, we fell asleep. I remember looking at the digital clock as I turned off my reading light, seeing that it glowed "10:30" and thinking, "An hour and a half to go - and it has all been excellent." I knew, of course, that most likely I would be up the next morning, but I pretended anyway that that was not the case, that in 90 minutes I would no longer be there. And the thought that I had lived the day as best I could with the one I loved the most brought immense comfort to me - the humbleness had worked itself all the way through. Her breathing was the last thing I heard before dropping off to sleep.

People often talk about living each day as if it were their last, but it's not something that can be done by an act of will or reason. Something has to break (open) for it to work, something has to agree to let sadness and love work together to wash away regret and anger and turn fear (of loss, of pain) into focus. Above all, at some level, the coming end has to be believed, even if the odds are against it - the power of "what if" will make us feel the truth of "this is the end," the same energy that creates art or prayer or excellent food well presented, a rehearsal for what we know (we know!) is coming.

Monday was the same, but it was different. I am the same, but I am different as well. I lived a day as if it were my last. I am still breathless about it, still breathing about it.

(August 2012)

Mini-Aurora

On Labor Day this year, the Marvelous Maria Beatriz and I, using some free tickets for AMC theaters, went to see *The Dark Knight Rises*. I wanted to see it because I am thinking of writing a new piece with the shooting in Aurora (Colorado) in mind and thought it would be good to see the background image for that event. (Otherwise, I wouldn't bother - Christopher Nolan became a laborious film-maker once he had large budgets in hand: after the sleek *Memento* and just about the time of *The Prestige*. But another topic for another time.)

So off we trundle, going to a theater complex we usually don't frequent, at the Newport Mall in Jersey City. We don't go there because, for want of a better term, it's "low-class": place is not as clean as it could be, the smell of melted cheese and nachos wafts through the air, and one can barely hear the movie over the rattling of ice in super-sized drink cups and the crackle of hand after hand digging into the super-sized bags of popcorn.

And mobile phones - lots of glowing screens in the crepuscular dark.

Sigh.

I am sure every reader of this piece has a mobile phone peeve, if not several - for the MMB and I, one of ours is phone use during movies. Being who we are, we don't shy away from asking people to put their phones away, often several times during a showing, but it gets harder and harder to do so when the response is invariably a snarl-back that anyone would infringe upon their sovereign right to act like jerks in a public space.

I don't want to get into any "decline of civilized standards" screeds - that's not the point of this piece, at least directly. The point has more to do with the shooting in Aurora - as shocking as that was, we shouldn't have been surprised at all.

To my left, with one seat between us filled with her shopping bags, sat a young girl, maybe 14 - to her left, as we found out later, sat her father, though at the start of what I am going narrate, he was off buying "supplies" for the movie.

Lights come down for the barrage of pre-feature trailers (a part of movie-going I happen to like - I think trailer-making is its own genre of movie-making), and out comes her phone for the texting. So I lean across the seat and ask her to put the phone away. She said she's texting her mother. I said she should step outside to do that. She said that the movie hasn't started. I said that for some of

us it had. She said she would take two seconds. I counted out the two seconds for her (I admit, a bit of jerkish behavior). She turned the phone off. We all go back to watching.

Some minutes later, out comes the phone again for another text. This time, the MMB, sitting to my right, crosses in front of me, and much more forcefully than I did, in a much less requesting tone, asked her to put the phone away. (You must picture Maria Beatriz to imagine this: a four-foot-seven former nun now a social work manager at a major New York hospital, often referred to as "sweet" or "darling" by her co-workers but carrying the nick-name from her childhood of "leche hervida," or boiling milk: she can summon the fierceness when needed.)

The girl, after offering back the snark appropriate to her station in life, puts the phone away. Calm on the Western front for the moment. At some point between this and what I'm about to narrate, the father returns (who, for the record, also pulled out his own phone several times to check, I assume, his stock investments - we said nothing because, well, who wants to spend his or her entire time at the movies not-watching the movie policing phone use?).

There was also some back-and-forth between the daughter and father which I could see out of the left-corner of my left eye, with some finger-pointing and body-language pointing at us. Just about the time Bane, the movie villain, blows up the stadium (and a good chunk of New York City as well), she pulled out the phone again. So, it being my turn, I lean over to her and ask her what is so important that she needs to use the phone now.

The father sprang into action by throwing his super-sized soda in my face and standing up to yell at me not to disrespect his daughter. (Note: Mayor Bloomberg's campaign to restrict sizes of sodas may have a beneficial effect in situations like this.)

Out of the corner of my right eye I see Maria Beatriz book up the aisle in search of a manager - leaving her bag behind. In front of me the father and daughter are gathering up their grub-stake (which included a skateboard - I assume hers but given the adolescence of his response perhaps his) and heading up and out the opposite aisle. I stand drenched, stunned but not particularly frightened, more concerned about Maria Beatriz's whereabouts than anything else - and weirdly, if only briefly, worried about whether anyone else nearby got splashed. So I grab Maria Beatriz's bag and pursue her.

So, here's the choreography in the lobby: Maria Beatriz is gunning for the manager on one side, I'm trailing her on the opposite side (damp and bag-laden), and the father and daughter are behind me, with him barking at me (though all I could really hear through the fog of urgency was "disrespect" and "daughter" - but I got the message).

At this point I was getting really annoyed with the whole situation because, on a lower frequency, I knew what was going to happen: the staff would call security (who would arrive too late) but not restrain the patrons because they're not allowed to; the duo would scuttle away, leaving Maria Beatriz, the staff, and I sort of picking our butts while everything de-pressurized; I would be more busy making sure Maria Beatriz lost her fear and anger than, say, plotting revenge scenarios; and the sugar water would be getting stickier and stiffer as it dried.

And that's pretty much how it worked out.

After I laved off what I could (and finding out, too late, that the bathroom only used these strange hands-insert air dryers, not paper towels, leaving my forearms and face moist, though the hands did get nicely treated), we went home (two free passes in hand, courtesy of the abashed manager) and began the process of understanding (abetted by two lively gin-and-tonics on the back deck).

What did happen?

That depends upon whom the spotlight illuminates.

For Maria Beatriz, her musings focused on how quickly she morphed from the person described above into a seething berserker, rage-filled and battle-primed. In part, yes, because she was protecting a loved one but also as a component of her character, the demon beneath the civilized veneer - and she did not like this one bit since it contravened her preferred notion of herself as Buddhist and compassionate.

In other words (at least to me), it made her more interesting to herself.

For me - when I recalled the sequence of things - I don't remember any moment when I felt *scared*. There wasn't an instant, say, when it crossed my mind that the man might have a weapon and that I was in danger because, I think, there was a *trust* underneath that saw the situation as silly and as unnecessary rather than as a prelude to pain. I didn't grow up in violence, I don't engage the world through violence, so I don't expect the world to violence me as a matter of course - which is, I guess, the welcome legacy of a happy childhood.

It also occurred to me, both at the time and later, that codes of courtesy, which are also rules about self-governance, substitute for law enforcement, and when someone doesn't have those codes, or is ruled by more self-centered codes (machismo or paranoia, for instance), then one has to call in the cops. Courtesy is more efficient than policing because policing is always a hammer that sees the world as a nail, but courtesy also requires a commitment to a personal face-to-face - to an intimacy that crosses tribal borders - and it also requires that pleasure be taken in a small degree of self-denial (e.g., it feels good to me that the person goes through my held-open door before I do). This is something that more and more people have lost a knack for, or more likely a taste for, individuated capitalist atoms that we are.

And then, of course, the topic of violence itself, given the movie we were watching and the reason why I went to see it in the first place. I would not say that the movie and the father are linked causally - that the violence on the screen prompted the violence in him. It would be nice if it were that neat, because then we could make reasonable restrictions on the creation of violence as entertainment and keep a great load of crap from being broadcast.

Nor would I say that movies like this and their downstream ilk, like video games, dissolve moral fiber, creating a permissive atmosphere that encourages [enter conservative jeremiad here on the decline of western civilization]. Plenty of other forces with more powerful solvents, such as the capitalist system itself, have done this erosive job. The "circuses" part of "bread and circuses" is just a simple spoor thrown off by these forces, not a generative perennial root of them.

But there is a link somewhere among this father, the Aurora shooter, this movie, and a general sense that American society is, as Yiddish would say, facocked (in any one of its variant spellings), no matter how diffused or vaporous the connections since no society can be so compartmentalized that what happens in the east has no effect on the west. Societies can be, and should be, very leaky.

Perhaps here is a starting point, in a counterfactual. I'm glad the situation had not been reversed, that Maria Beatriz had been the one attacked, because I am quite sure I would've been on top of him in a heartbeat (though I've never been in a fight in my life), feeling both enraged and exhilarated and without a care as I gave or took whatever lumps came my way - in an odd sort of way, liberated. From? From ordinary life, ordinary guilts, the ho-hum terrors of mortality, the

grind of responsibility - in other words, the aggravating weight known as maturity, as adulthood.

And maybe that's the starting point of this link: violence, even the vicarious but also certainly the actual, is an effort to feel vitalized, adrenalined and connected, if only briefly. It is also supremely egotistical, mercifully freed from the hectoring of compassion and obligation. What a relief not to have to answer to anyone or anything! And then the next question: what is that we have done (and not done) in making the structures of how we get our living together as an American "we" that makes such (human) behavior practicable and frequent?

I don't know if I have the powers to tease all of this out - but, perhaps, dear readers, you do, in which case, please offer what you can to all of us.

In the meantime, Maria Beatriz and I will go to another theater as soon as something comes along worth seeing.

(September 2012)

Neuroself

Since November 2013, I have taken, each day, 25 milligrams of what I call my "chemical balancer." I started the regimen because all "natural" approaches to lightening the dysthymia, melancholy, "blues," and their cognates that have always afflicted me would not work. I never reached full-blown William-Styron-style depression, though I had my days where I "swam through asphalt" - the moment-to-moment slog to remain vertical and unsuicidal, muscle habits pushing the body through one day and into the next.

Now post-chemical, with the weight lifted and the question "What is the point?" no longer pinging me, like a lost dying black box from a drowned airplane, I have come to an even greater appreciation of the beauty of our undivine material existence and the mystery of the random nature of a self.

Once the medication did its work (by the second day, the weight had evaporated almost completely without leaving any side effects behind), I had the mental and emotional space to re-view myself, or, rather, my "self." We choose to think of our "self" as an essence, the "I" as the hard nugget that denotes and anchors one's being. Some locate the self in spirit, others do not, but all feel that the self exists in some independent fashion, that there goes along a body and a self, connected but not cognate.

Not so. Even the most cursory reading about neuroscience will show you that "mind" or "self" embeds in the brain (or, really, the brainbody, since we should consider the system as one entity). Our essential "kernel" of self stems from a delicate electro-chemical balancing act, and the "I" issues from the way the brain monitors itself - in other words, consciousness coined by neurons and synapses.

Neuroscience, and the affiliated study of neurophilosophy, have only just arrived on the scene, so to speak, provoking both extravagant claims and debunkings, celebrations and anguishes. The former: we will map psychology to brain and thus predict and control behavior. The latter: the same thing. The truth lies in between because the brainbody, like the weather, defies easy modeling and predictability, and brain science really stands at the beginning of whatever paths it will take.

I can only say, based only on my own experience, that I like the self I have today better than the self I had in October 2013, a self created by the way the medication has moved things around. I also know that this self does not result

solely from the medication, that a self comes out of the interaction between the environment and the brainbody - or, rather, the environment and the brainbody make one system. But in the end the word "I" stands in as a shorthand, a thumbnail, for the intricate and buzzing electro-chemical linkages moving through the world.

This means that I reject, have to reject, enjoy rejecting, any super-natural or sentimentalized origin for the "I." Not only do such claims coarsen the beauty of what happens within and without the confines of my skin, they reduce rather than broaden our ability to explain what goes on within and without.

Of course, language plays a definitive role here, not only because our lexicons define both the reach and limits of our thoughts but also because we need to create a new lexicon to express the sometimes literally (as yet) unsayable things neuroscience uncovers. These new languages will also create new selves, the new selves will create new metaphors, which in turn will publish new understandings for people to share and digest.

On a more local level, so to speak, within this being that bears my name, the chemical additive has reduced the heaviness of some things, which has allowed other things (i.e., previously muted congresses of synaptic networks, imprinted in flesh) to carbonate and inspire. The same being but not, the same self but not, despite appearances. I don't yet have the language to speak about this clearly enough, to translate the subdermal intuitions into usable prose. But, like the neuroscience that underscores me, I enjoy living as a work in progress, with still available possibilities for shifting and cycling. I just find that employing the words and imagery of a self, of the "I," as a choreographed physics rather than as a stolid pip liberates rather than frightens me. Much like the for-better-or-worse digital shifting in our lives, which has melted away institutions while, at the same time, loosening the grip of the gatekeepers, the neuroscience of the self, this neurophilosophy, has re-established the miraculousness of our meat, lending us new ways to move our gatekeepers aside and stand open to what the shifts will teach us.

One last thing. Some have asked me if I feel like a cheat for taking the drug, often saying in the same breath that they don't like to put things into their bodies that affect them like this and will only, they say, take an aspirin if the headache gets really bad. (Endurers of pain always think they have more virtue than others.)

I reply by asking them if they eat food when hungry, drink water when thirsty. Yes, of course. Do they feel better because of it? Yes, of course. Because you have changed the chemical balances, right? Yes, but, well, that's natural. That's chemistry, I give back, regardless of the delivery system. So why not a pill that alters a different kind of hunger? That pill only cheats in the way that food and water cheat death. Argument done and won.

It will take us humans a while to figure out how to erase the ersatz borders our language has drawn around our physical and mental parts and feel comfortable with the indeterminacy of our essences. It will take us a while to see everything about our beings as nodes in a complex weave of shifting physics, from quantum to cosmos (much like the Internet but without all the corporate sludge in the system). But it can begin, as it has for me, with something as small as 25 milligrams, the size of a seed or a parable, and by giving thanks for finding a way to win the losing battle against my demons.

(April 2014)

About Block & Tackle Productions

After more than a decade of projects together, Michael Bettencourt and Elfin Frederick Vogel joined forces to form Block & Tackle Productions. In addition to producing Michael's plays with Elfin directing, B&T Productions also looks to collaborate with other playwrights and directors and explore different media for dramatic narrative, such as live-streaming theatrical productions, recording radio-play podcasts, and creating short films.

Whichever project B&T Productions pursues, it will create theatre narratives focused on our present times and where every part of the production - design (set, lighting, sound, media), performance, script, the brand of beer sold in the lobby, and the pre-show music - relates to and nourishes every other part. As often as possible, B&T Productions will do this in collaboration or conjunction with like-minded theatre-makers.

Elfin Frederick Vogel (Producer/Director) - Elfin has directed over thirty productions in New York City and regional theatres, from classical plays (among others, *Othello*, *As You Like It*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Measure for Measure*, *All's Well That Ends Well*, *Three Sisters*, *The Cherry Orchard*) to 20th-century plays (*Six Characters in Search of an Author*, *The Real Thing*, *Exit the King*) and new plays, among them *Only the Dead Know Brooklyn*, *Excerpts from the Lost Letters of Hester Prynne*, *No Great Loss*, *Four Plays*, *The Sin Eater* (all by Michael Bettencourt), and *Moral and Political Lessons on "Wyoming"* and *Reckless Abandon* (by Vincent Sessa).

Michael Bettencourt (Producer/Writer) - Michael is an award-winning playwright and screenwriter. As always, special thanks to María Beatriz. All his work can be seen at www.m-bettencourt.com

Block & Tackle PRODUCTIONS

www.blockandtackleproductions.com