Michael Bettencourt

Collected Essays: Volume 6
Scene4 - 2020-2024

Block & Tackle Productions Press

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Co-Founders Elfin Frederick Vogel and Michael Bettencourt

www.blockandtackleproductions.com

To María Beatriz - always in all ways

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Introduction

The following essays come from my long-time association with the online arts journal Scene4 (scene4.com).

I have contributing for well over two decades, thanks to the superb editorship and friendship of Arthur Danin Adler. Here's a little bit of history about the endeavor from Mr. Adler himself.

Michael Bettencourt, 2025

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Avanti Scene4

In the late 1990's when the spread of the internet was just beginning, we had a bulletin-board/list/usergroup called Actors Workshop. It was a lively discussion of all things theatre that attracted some fine writers with wit and gusto. Then it began to attract writers and other artists who wanted to talk about other arts, and media, and culture in general. And it grew and the writing became terrific.

So I and a couple of other writers decided to try to morph this into a publication, which we called: Views/reViews, a kind of informal newsletter that began to evolve into a more prescient magazine-type. It grew, and in 2000, I decided to launch it as a print magazine. It's title: Scene4scene.

We couldn't do it...because print magazines had become exhorbitantly expensive. So I decided to take it to the web until we could, not as an "ezine," but adamantly as "A Print Magazine On the Web," which means that the reading experience was everything, the writing, the layout and feel of every page.

It was conceived as white type on a black page (which also enhances graphics), no advertising to interrupt that experience, no links in the text to lure the reader off the page. Without florid advertising on the page, we relied on a few patrons who helped finance the magazine. Within a short time we dropped the word "scene" from the logo and renamed it just Scene4 Magazine. The concept has remained intact to this day.

For me, the magazine is a work of art that has given me 25 years of joy and fulfillment.

It abides.

2024

B2

(January 2024)

One of our backdeck feral regulars, B2, seems to have gone missing. We are worried; we are resigned.

We named him B2 because he is an echo of our Banquo: both are large-bodied, thick-furred black cats with striking green eyes.

We also believe he is the father of our Seamus and Fiona and another member of our backdeck bunch named Calaca (now-neutered) by way of the (now-neutered) Bandida.

He wasn't (isn't? is the present tense still warranted? I shall use the present tense as a form of hope). He isn't a chummy cat; as a tom, he occupies space with his heavy body as if it belongs solely to him, though the two females (Calaca and Bandida) do not hesitate to whap him a few good strokes if he gets too close or hogs the food too long.

There are non-feeding times, though, when all by himself, he comes to the back deck for what we call his retreat. He settles himself into one of the deck chairs or, if it's a sunny winter day, he stretches out on top of one of the shelters and just sleeps. For hours. Of course, we can't know what he's thinking (if there is a cat form of that process), but we surmise that, street life being tough and unforgiving, he values a safe and secure place where he doesn't have to be vigilant and combative with cortisol fragging his veins.

He has never once let us near him; when we come out to do the feeding, he retreats to what he considers a safe distance and watches the proceedings. What he has been able to do, over time, is to retreat closer: his version of domestication with benefits.

There are times he appears looking very much the worse for wear: a hank of hair dislodged, a nasty scratch on the cheek, a bloodied eye. But he seems to have an industrial-strength immune system – lesions heal, fur returns, he's on deck for a meal.

We have no way to find out has happened to him. When he is not here, we don't know where he hangs out. We have seen him on top of the garages that back a row of apartments on the street level below us, but he hasn't appeared there at all. Because cats are such creatures of time and place (especially if the food comes along often and abundantly), we can only conclude that he's no

longer around: either because he headed out to other pastures or because he has passed away (there are so many damages that can happen to street cats). We hope the former; we fear the latter.

If he has died, then we should properly mourn him, let grief and sadness inhabit our days for a time, certify that this sentient creature existed in our hearts and was not just a cipher, a DNA whimsy, a discard. And so we have been doing that, letting the loss sift into us and settle.

We guess that Calaca and Bandida, being cats, haven't noticed his absence or, if they have, have not bothered themselves about it. But, of course, we can't confirm that, not being fluent in cat ourselves. So this pang is just for us, this weight is just for us, this absence, redolent of the advent of our own, is just for us.

We did not know him long enough to be truly attached to him. We feel the pity any human feels when the light that is life, and a life so singularly helpless and appealing, is simply and curtly snuffed out. There is no question we had to choose his death: he recognized nothing about himself from the seizures, about us, indeed about anything. He was no longer an animal with a semblance of attention and spirit, just a switchboard for erratic impulses, a gameboard for chaos. Yet again that does not draw off the brine in the wound, that here was something so precious because alive, so wondrous because so common, that now no longer shares anything with us. Pick the metaphor: the dousing of a candle, the shutting of a door, the moving finger moving on. The words add no balm, are just a failing struggle to grasp this reality of now you see me, now you don't. Keats' death is one of those situations in life that is fraught with knowledge and yet offers no lesson. His death is simply the way things are, not cruel, not merciful, simply done and over with. What lesson can be drawn from that, what comfort?

There is an ache that comes with the death of an innocence like Keats, an ache that comes from knowing we have no tribunal to reverse the decision, and that gentleness is no guarantee. Death shows us just how alone we really are, how unsure our hopes for surety must always be.

Yet I can find no balm in this resignation, no Stoic grace. The heart, my heart, always arcs in remorse for small and delicate things that must perish.

Free Will

(February 2024)

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According to James Gleick, a tranche of physicists, neuroscientists, and philosophers argue that "free will" is an illusion, a feeling that people have about the actions they take, but not more than that feeling.

He says this in a review of *Free Agents: How Evolution Gave Us Free Will* by Kevin J. Mitchell, a neuroscientist and geneticist at Trinity College Dublin, who has written a book-length refutation of the idea.[1] As Gleick writes, Mitchell argues that "it is neither an illusion nor merely a figure of speech. It is our essential, defining quality and as such demands explanation." In Mitchell's words, excerpted in the review:

> We make decisions, we choose, we act. These are the fundamental truths of our existence and absolutely the most basic phenomenology of our lives. If science seems to be suggesting otherwise, the correct response is not to throw our hands up and say, "Well, I guess everything we thought about our own existence is a laughable delusion." It is to accept instead that there is a deep mystery to be solved and to realize that we may need to question the philosophical bedrock of our scientific approach if we are to reconcile with the apparent determinism of the physical universe.

The declaration that free will is an illusion arises from, to me, a misunderstanding of "determinism." Mathematicians and physicists declare that the laws of the universe are set out in equations that trigger steps that follow ineluctably one from the other; as Gleick says it, "A determinist believes that whatever happens had to happen" and cites Pierre-Simon Laplace's declaration that if a person could know the forces acting in nature on the positions of all things at a given instant, "the future as well as the past would be present to its eyes."

But Mitchell's angle on the matter puts the doubt to this because he looks at the agency that creatures have, from the paramecium to the person, as coming out of evolutionary necessity. "The universe may not have a purpose," he is quoted as saying, "but life does," and the purpose is the survival of the individual self in whatever chemical and electrical form that that self has. To survive, organisms gather information about the world around them, and the

storehouse of information become the source for decisions—causes of effects—and while it might be possible to say that the information determines the decisions, there is nothing inevitable about what happens, no "must" that must be fulfilled.

What defeats the inexorability of the determinists in the end, according to Mitchell, is the very world they say is inexorably driven by their equations and laws. When physicists tried to test Laplace's hypothesis, they ran up against the Heisenberg uncertainty principle, which exists whether humans are around or not, which means that there was no way they could precisely know all the forces acting on all the objects and their positions. Schrödinger's equations—think of his poor hapless cat waiting for the collapse of the wave function—show an ineradicable indeterminacy at the root of reality. "The upshot of these views," says Mitchell, quoted by Gleick, "is that the future is open: indeed, that is what makes it the future." He goes on to say,

> If we could really glimpse the future, we would see a world out of focus. Not separate paths already neatly laid out, waiting to be chosen—just a fuzzy, jittery picture that gets fuzzier and jitterier the farther into the future you look.

As Gleick concludes, "He wants to say, yes, we live in a materialistic universe; yes, the laws of physics apply; yet the future is not written, and living things have the power to change it."

But free will implies some kind of mechanism in the organism that the organism exercises to change its conditions. On the level of a nematode, for instance, the organism makes changes in itself in response to the conditions in which it finds itself, but no one would argue that it is exercising a will in this instance.

However, in more highly developed organisms—us—with our intense and volatile processing of information in both brain and body on a moment by moment basis—Mitchell describes it as an assemblage of "wet, jiggly, incomprehensibly tiny components that jitter about constantly"—many of the decisions we make—maybe even most—are made without any conscious exercise of governance: we breathe, digest, and so on without the executive function of the brain sending a communique to the appropriate parts of the body.

This high degree of involuntary action in our day-to-day quest to survive seems to prove to what Gleick calls "the free-will deniers" that action and conscious will do not coincide, and that conscious will, rather than being a

process employed by us to do something, is just a way to describe an experience of acting as a person who acts, not an actual historical deed: in other words, a delusion.

But as both Gleick and Mitchell point out, the human encounter with acting is deeper and richer than the description of a creature propelled by hapless forward motion offered by the free-will deniers. Mitchell calls it a "more naturalized concept of the self," a self that is an entire organism with a set of embodied histories that must be understood as a whole. To quote Gleick:

> We do things for reasons based on our histories, and "those reasons inhere at the level of the whole organism." Much of the time, perhaps most of the time, our conscious self is not in control. Still, when the occasion requires, we can gather our wits, as the expression goes. We have so many expressions like that—get a grip; pull yourself together; focus your thoughts—metaphors for the indistinct things we see when we look inward. We don't ask who is gathering whose wits.

As Gleick describes the working of Mitchell's "more naturalized concept of the self," our cerebral cortex comes up with options, always subject to fluctuations and noise; the brain then evaluates these options (up-voting and down-voting among its various regions) based on goals and beliefs built from experience, stored in memory, and more or less malleable; and all this is mediated by the representations of self that we have built up over time through the countless instances of engaging with the world in order to survive. To quote Mitchell:

> The various subsystems involved are in constant dialogue with each other, each attempting to satisfy its own constraints in the context of the dynamically changing information it receives from all the other interconnected areas.

Not at all a passive shuttlecock badmintoned around by the laws of physics.

So, why would there such an effort at this historical time and place to deny that humans are as they are? Good question, escritor.

If we can plot "free will" on a continuum from left to right, with one end being no free will (that is, no capacity for independent decision-making) and the other being, well, God (the ability to make any decision at any time about anything and make it stick), the leftmost station would be occupied by Robert Sapolsky, who in Determined: A Science of Life without Free Will, published last year, states that humans have no free will, none whatsoever. Everything I do has been determined since the Big Bang: "We are nothing more or less than the

cumulative biological and environmental luck, over which we had no control, that has brought us to any moment."

The problem with this, of course, politically speaking, is that those who believe that history equals biology will then use that equation to argue that the way things are is the way they should be. Following from that, then, is that any effort to "correct" things are patently wrong and thus can be legitimately repressed. On the right, this is the land of Social Darwinism and eugenics and racialist ethnographies (i.e., white is right). On the left, it is the land of identarian politics and orthodoxies about systemic oppression.

In other words, going down the Sapolsky road can end in a society where everyone is slotted, and their fates are foreordained. A world frozen into its categories in which Hobbes' state of every man against every man for control of resources becomes the daily grind.

But just because Sapolsky argues that his science says what it says doesn't mean that humans have to accept it at all and can argue and mobilize against it. Now, Sapolsky might counter that that resistance is also fated, but he cannot deny that the resistance changes things because whenever humans act upon the world in which they live, they change things—in other words, they make the world indeterminate.

Again, Sapolsky might argue that that "indeterminacy" is itself determined by all the prior activity, but at this point, it's clear that the concept of determinacy, by trying to explain everything, explains nothing and therefore obligates no one to believe in it and act upon its principles.

Mitchell points out that the physicists point out that indeterminacy rules in reality. Now, introducing an element of indeterminacy or randomness or unpredictability into the system doesn't guarantee that the organisms in that reality have free will, but it opens up space for such a thing to exist and be exercised.

So, what is this free will we're talking about? First, I would drop the adjective "free"—there is only "will," that is, the power to make a choice to make something happen in the world.

I think will means two things. One is what is described above: a process of gathering wits where, at the end of the process, the human makes a choice to take a path (right or wrong is not important here; the fact of the choosing is).

I think the second element of will is resistance. Determinacy and indeterminacy are both equally threatening to the human organism, and will as resistance is the attempt by the human to bring clarity out of the chaos and ensure safety for itself, a process that is both necessary and neverending.

In the exercise of its will, the human changes the world. This is not just a philosophical statement but a statement rooted in biology—just not Sapolsky's biology. Our brain/bodies (our conjoined subsystems, as Mitchell describes them) are built, as far as we can tell, like no other organism on the earth: we create realities that do not "exist" to our fingertips but yet do exist and exert influence upon us—paracosms, fictions, languages, cultures, and so on—that have resculpted the planet and outpaced natural selection.

We exert will all the time, if by will we mean the power to reshape and redeploy reality, but that will also has a continuum, from the autonomic to the life-or-death.

Sometimes that will, as Mitchell notes, is not directly guided by or available to us, such as automatic breathing or digestion. But the truth is, I don't need to be aware of those decisions being made, just as I don't need to know all the subroutines being run in my word processing program as I type out this essay. I just need them to work so that I can attend to the life-or-death things at the other end of the continuum.

Of course, we can believe what Sapolsky peddles, but there's no gain for human happiness or security in doing so. Humans are a dynamic element in the life of the planet, and what we humans do or don't do has consequences. We can box ourselves in by determinacy and relieve ourselves of moral responsibility or we can will ourselves to act in a way that honors freedom, creativity, empathy, purpose, and all the other values that give human life its strange and seductive beauty.

Yes, we can be cruel, selfish, deadly, barbaric as well as honorable, loving, generous, sweet, but we are not fated to be any of these—they are all the result of choices we make within systems we create on a planet that responds to what we do. This does not mean that the "we" in that sentence is something like a pilot in a cockpit, a master of destiny. But neither is it an autopilot following an algorithm. As Gleick says in his review:

> Even on our best days we're subject to delusions and confusion. We act without thinking, from habit or reflex or instinct. We behave impulsively, for no reasons we can discern. Yet unconscious decision-making is still decision-making. And sometimes we do think. We reflect, ponder, dither, weigh alternatives for some time before choosing to act.

Humans make their own destinies, though, as Karl Marx pointed out, it's a tricky dance to balance "the tradition of all dead generations" with "creating something that did not exist before"—but we do do this, all the time, and it will be a tragedy to let Sapolsky and others trick us out of exercising our freedom to express our will.

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[1] New York Review of Books, Jan. 18, 2024.

Irish

(March 2024)

For 19 days in 2023, from July 28 to Aug. 15, we made our first trip to Ireland, picking up a car in Dublin (after staying in the city for three days) and driving around the perimeter of the island, also spending time in Derry and Belfast in Northern Ireland, and ending in Trim, just outside of Dublin.

It was a grand trip, and we did all the Irish things visitors do: the pubs, the pub crawl with musicians, visiting every ruined abbey, castle and church, traversing the Giant's Causeway and the Gobbins, the Game of Thrones tour, more pubs and "trad" music, oohing over the 40 shades of green, bicycling on Inishmore, the Irish Rebellion walking tour (lots of rebellion stuff in Dublin), having our faces lashed by the Atlantic on the Dingle peninsula, many sips of many different whiskeys. It was a packed-to-the-gills trip, which we reprised between Boxing Day and New's Year with a visit back to Trim and Dublin (to experience the island when it wasn't deploying its best weather).

It is hard to say, exactly, what feeling "Irish" meant during our time there, though we would have said that that was what we felt because of the Guinness and the countryside and lovely accents (even in Belfast) and the EPIC museum saga of migration and return, and a generally vague but comforting feeling of being "in touch" with something ancient and elemental and, if not timeless, at least timelong and tested, holy and romantic, as O'Toole names it.

Then I read Fintan O'Toole's excellent *We Don't Know Ourselves: A Personal History of Modern Ireland*. He uses the timeframe of his own life, from his birth in 1958 to the declawing of the Celtic Tiger in the late aughts, to discuss what he sees as the Irish habit, formed over centuries, of willful not-knowing to keep things calm and unchanged (even when that wreaks havoc and destruction).

He explores, for instance, how everybody knew about the absolutely rapacious way children were treated by the government (through the workhouses and reform schools) and the Church (through the laundries and sexual abuse), yet did nothing to reform anything, preferring to keep things quiet so that the state and Church could maintain their powers (and thus keep "holy and romantic" society stable). If something did boil to the surface, such was the training in subservience that it was thought insulting and impolite to bother the priests

about their corruptions: with that kind of attitude, the suffering of children lost out to a noxious decorum.

The Troubles figure in as well, a separate but related exercise in viciousness and barbarity, where the IRA and their fellow travelers deployed myths about Irish rebelliousness to blow people up. (The Protestants had their own version of this as well.) I've read bits and pieces about the long war on the island, but O'Toole brings home just how savage it was—not even really a war but a series of vandalisms designed to maim and murder, "full of sound and fury, signifying nothing."

This was an Irishness that two Americans on holiday did not see, could not see, since it was not an Irish that Ireland would want us to see, preferring that we drink our Smithwicks and tap our feet to fiddle, banjo and the pipes and rhapsodize about the greenery and stand in awe at the entrance of Newgrange and feel the force fields on the Hill of Tara.

Which we were quite willing to do, and did, with great joy. But O'Toole's book shows that the travelers' Irish is a skim coat over the deeper Irish, which has its many darknesses and defaults and is not so nearly attractive. Which is also to say that this is the condition of any society these days and not necessarily a reason for disillusion or rejection: being corrected is not a betrayal. But I do have to say that finishing the book did temper my initial impulse to want to pull up stakes and move to the emerald isle, which was a good thing because, after all, for how long could we live in the traveler's Ireland before it dissolved and we were left to face the face that the dissolution exposed? Not for long at all.

Will we go back? Of course we will. Much we have not seen and want to see, and we've made connections with people that we want to nourish (both the connections and the people). But O'Toole reminds me—again—how easy it is to let our enthusiasms drive our judgments and how important it is to cultivate the habit of standing corrected without being disillusioned so that one can take in the fullness of a place and enjoy a fullness of response. That is the best gift given by traveling: balanced eyes, large heart.

Sad Story of the Death of Cats

(April 2024)

On Feb. 26, 2024, a Monday, Banquo, our youngest, passed away suddenly. In a flash — gone.

In the morning, I found him spread on the kitchen floor on his right side breathing sharply – panting, mouth open, tongue darting – and every 10 or 15 seconds spasming, as if he were trying to cough up something. Which is what I thought he was trying to do – our cats are renowned upchuckers.

I picked him up and placed him in a favorite spot on the arm of the couch, and even tried to offer him some food, but he moved off the couch to the living room floor and laid down again on his right side, rapidly breathing, spasms.

I called the vet, described the actions, was told to get him in immediately. Which was a problem because I had just brought the car to the shop that morning and had no wheels. I looked up bus schedules for the one bus that goes to Hoboken – not soon enough – and ended up calling Alane, our neighbor next door, to borrow her car (which woke her up – she is a late morning sleeper). She handed me her keys, and I went back to Banquo to get him into a carrier.

As I was pulling the carrier from the storage room, Banquo gave out three distinct, sharp meows – howls – one after the other. I picked him up from the floor and placed him in the carrier – but now, thinking back, I believe that is when he passed, that those three howls were his way of signaling that he was gone. On some sub-level I knew that that was true because his body sliding into the carrier felt heavy and unmoving, and later I wished I had recognized that fact and realized that there was no hurry now, that I should hold and rock him, cradle him in a proper goodbye.

But, instead, driven by anxiety and the imperative of getting him to the vet, I got him into the car, raced him there. (So maddened was I that, frustrated with the slowness of the traffic on Washington Street, I parked the car five blocks away and hoofed it, running with a 20-pound cat in my hand – I was not in shape to do that.)

Got to the vet, handed off the carrier – and, in the examining room, with Banquo's long form laid on the examination table, on his left side, Dr. Sprague announced that Banquo had passed. Most likely, he had been dead the whole time from taking him down to the car to handing him off to Syna, the assistant.

How? His guess was congestive heart failure, given the conditions I had described, not unusual in heavier cats – but it was a guess. (Part of my brain wanted to know the answer, part said it didn't matter.) Then they left me alone with him, told me to take all the time I needed.

Weeping, just weeping – harder than I've cried for anything in recent memory, even the death of my mother or Beatriz, María Beatriz's mother. I stroked him again and again, spoke to him (in sorrow, a good memory of holding him as a kitten, his gentle nature) – I easily could have stayed there all day, petting him and sobbing over the loss.

In the brief moment from when they took the carrier to the examination room and then called me in, I texted María Beatriz in Argentina, having to give her the news on the fly. We connected by video through WhatsApp (while I sat on the street bench in front of the vet hospital so as not to disturb everyone in the waiting room), and her pain and agony at the news had the odd momentary effect of calming me as I tried to soothe her and give her details. Only momentary, though, as we wailed together across the miles in between at losing such a lovely soul, our longtime friend (he was with us for 12 years).

After the call, I sat again in the room with his body, murmuring to him, stroking his length, apologizing – honestly, it could have lasted all day. But life does not stop being ironic just because a beloved had passed – a voice in my head saying, They probably need the examination room; aware that I was missing the monthly staff meeting because I'd had to bolt from the house; the assistant handing me the invoice for his coming cremation and saying that I could pay for it whenever I was finished – the intrusive but also oddly comforting rib-nudging of daily life.

Finally, I left – I didn't want to, but I did. (I did take a picture – not sure if I'll keep it.) Paid for the cremation, was told that his ashes will come to us in a small cedar box with his name on it – and a death certificate.

Walking back to the car, I called María Beatriz again to update her, and the two of us clung to each other across the virtual space as I'm walking and weeping down Washington Street, aware of the public weeping, not caring if anyone noticed or took note, the empty carrier in my hand, forced to continue on instead of retreating into the pain and memory and giving him a proper grieving.

Here is what I hope. I hope that when he died, he had no pain and that he did not feel abandoned or betrayed. That he knew that he was loved, honored, even revered. That he felt no terror as he passed.

The other three cats do notice that something is different – well, at least Seamus and Fiona. Cordelia never had much to do with him, seeing as how she is in her own world of eating and sleeping. But for the other two, he had a presence with them. Seamus and Banquo had their own gay relationship, laying themselves on top of each other and enjoying whatever it was that they enjoyed in each other's company. And when we petted Banquo, Fiona loved to come over to flop against him and get some petting as well. Somehow, the petting for her was always better when it was shared with Banquo.

We'll build a memorial space for him in the new house so that he makes the journey with us as we had planned for him to do. We need his presence in our present. He will always be living with us.

Rudy Bram

(May 2024)

Last Friday, on April 12, 2024, our neighbor Rudy Bram passed away in his sleep — 96 years old, an artist of the found object that festooned his house with many, many found objects. A *New York Times* article in 1996 (posted on April 21, almost 28 years to the day of Rudy's passing) called his abode, which he then co-habited with his wife, Grace Samburg, a "jungle of the imagination."

In that same piece, Rudy explained why he turned the façade of his house into a gallimaufry of the found, the retrieved, the salvaged: "This is a very old tradition in contemporary American art, the found object, and I use it in assemblage. If somebody originally sees it as junk, that may be its origin, but I hope it's transformed and evolved into something more sublime."

If there is a memorial service for him, and if there is call for people to share their Rudy stories, this is what I will say.

* * * * *

I met Rudy about ten years ago, occasionally running into him as I finished my sprint to home on my morning run. He was short, gruff — "grizzled" might the word to use — and we always talked about this, that, and the other thing. Nothing deep, but more in the vein of neighborly. Over time, I learned about his life in the Army, his attendance at the Art Students League in the late 1940s, thanks to the G.I. Bill, his second career in the postal service for three decades. We talked a lot about Jews — I was working for a Jewish fundraising organization at the time, and after prefacing his talk with an attestation to his own Jewishness, we'd talk about things Jewish. He never considered himself particularly observant – being Jewish for him was more about an attitude toward life than the following of the 613 commandments, an attitude that always tried to dodge the suffering God visited upon his creation through art, laughter, and a fair dose of resignation. "Man proposes, God laughs" was a favorite of his, a good distillation of how he saw life.

After Grace died, I convinced him to go on one of the sponsored tours to Israel that my organization ran, which he did. He had a great time telling everyone else on the tour what they should know (he was of that strain, the know-everything with a strong set of lungs), and from what my colleague who ran the tours said, he managed to drive everyone a little bit crazy, but not so

much that they abandoned him by the side of the road. He would consider that a success.

After Grace died – such a gentle soul she was. As she became more frail and helpless and disoriented, The Marvelous María Beatriz and I often went over to their house to help him out. One time, as Rudy was helping her go to the bathroom, she managed to get herself wedged between the toilet and the wall next to the toilet, and there was nothing Rudy could do to free her. María Beatriz and I gently scooped her up and sat her back on the throne, and though she was half-naked and barely focused, the embrace of two humans brought this big wreath of a smile to her face. We helped Rudy clean her up and dress her for bed, and Grace so loved being tucked in. Rudy was able to lower his anxiety enough to treat her gently, with the weight of the caretaking shared with us for the moment.

This brings us to Rudy's purchase of a red, red, red Audi A5, a car I surely thought would gobble him alive, seeing as how, because he was so short, he could barely see over the steering wheel – and the car had a manual that was a daunting 300 pages thick. But he did manage to get it on the road and home again without mishap many times, and though he eventually traded it in for a more sensible car, the loss of Grace must have triggered the latent rebel in him, the talkative Jew, the outside artist – time's wing'd chariot came in the shape of an Audi, and how he must have loved being enveloped by its technology and power.

I have not seen Rudy in quite a while. As he got older, he retreated more to his apartment, helped by an amazingly caring tenant who had become, whether by chance or contract, his caretaker, making sure he got to his doctors' appointments and managing to keep him upright and moving forward.

A lasting image I have of him is from the back, as he's walking down the street. The condition of his spine made him list to port, but he would still manage to make his way forward toward the sublime that worked for him, letting the jungled façade of his house speak for him when he wasn't there, an artist who tried to make good on his idea about art, and succeeded.

* * * * *

So, there it is. We check in with his caretaker to make sure she is all right – she is managing his loss as best can be expected while also wondering if she can keep her apartment (the house and all its belongings have gone to Rudy's close companion of many years) and being gifted/burdened with having to make new arrangements and shift her life into a different gear.

I'll be 72 next year. Makes one think.

The Joyful Terrors of Owning a Home

(June 2024)

The Marvelous María Beatriz and I purchased a home on Feb. 22, 2024, in Ludlow, MA.

Yeah.

I am sure there must be a long German word that describes the simultaneous terror and joy that fills the lawyer's office as one sits at the conference table with the Esq. and real estate agent and signs document after document, hands over a bank check with massive numbers on it for the down payment, and walks out into the open air a couple of hundred thousand dollars in hock and bearing a back-of-the-napkin sketch of turning the property into the oasis one has always wanted (with hastily sketched budget figures to the side).

So far, it has been more joy than terror. We've made repairs we knew were needed, based on our home inspector's report, like moving the electrical panel from inside the basement bathroom to somewhere else in the basement (and why would they have built a moist room around the electrical hub of the house – one of the many discovered mysteries of the place).

We've tapped into the state's generous support for weatherizing the house (it's 74 years old) with 19 inches of cellulose foam in the attic, more inches in the walls, sealing the gaps along the sill – and now it's on to discussions of heat pumps and solar.

We've begun taming the land itself with our new lawnmower and weed whacker, figured out the town's garbage and recycling schedules, met a few of the neighbors (we have the nucleus of a biker's club as our north neighbor, the Uncaged Lions, but they mostly gather on weekends to discuss whatever they discuss on the front lawn and admire each other's Harleys – and they are all Harleys), found the path down to the Chicopee River, navigated to the local stores, spent too much time at Home Depot and Lowe's.

The monthly mortgage payment is like that scary jump-out-of-the-dark moment in a horror movie, where the heart revs and the gorge rises in the throat — but we're getting used to it. And there are the unknown unknowns that keep me up at night because I cannot predict the future (even one minute beyond where I am) but must still move forward, swallowing the risk and hoping for the reward, knowing full well it can all implode in a literal heartbeat (did I hear

stroke? infarction? aneurism?) and yet still climbing the ladder to clean the gutters and wrestling with the burdock taking over the lower corner.

Over the past few months, I've gotten better in disciplining myself to let the base note of dread hum its underscoring while attending to the multiple slips of paper in the job jar, finishing the tasks one at a time and taking comfort and reward from the finishing — not letting the former paralyze the latter. Do the planning and budgeting and weed whacking, go ahead and transform the mud room into a beautiful welcoming alcove, mesh out the wi-fi to the workshop in the back yard, even as you know from the low murmurs of entropy in your inner ears that it will all go to smash in the end. The trick, I'm learning, is to make the "going to smash" as spectacular and lovely and homely and beautiful as possible.

Who knew real estate would morph into a spiritual discipline? But it has indeed. ises good times for as long as forever will last.

The Body and the New House

(July 2024)

With the buying of our new house, my body has found a new phase of being, a constant state of stiff, sore and not-so-supple. At 71, I find myself doing different choreographies to tick things off my to-do lists.

For instance, our yard. About half an acre that needs to be mowed pretty constantly during the summer. I'll be damned, though, if I'm getting a riding mower. There are a lot of these navigating the other yards around us, ferrying in circles and rows ramshackle men (and they are all men) doing their lawn duty with no sense of joy or engagement.

I have a Ryobi battery push mower, and I walk the whole damn space with it. Yes, I could get the riding mower. I could even get the propelled Ryobi version. Hell, I could hire a lawn service to do the work. But that would be giving up, giving in, giving ground. I cannot do it that way.

The house and I are about the same age, and we are both showing how much repair work needs to be done to the seams and joints and bases and foundations that keep us upright and a haven for the dreams and dreamers inside. I amend and slow down and find new leverages to get the things done, fighting against entropy to keep moving forward toward open horizons. I don't have much time left, but I will keep doing what I can do to keep the body alive and capable and consequent.

Better the aches and pummels than riding the mower down to the River Styx.

I Miss You, David Graeber

(August 2024)

I have just begun my third David Graeber book, *The Democracy Project*, a more-or-less history of the Occupy Wall Street movement, his roles in that event and the anarchist foundations of the endeavor.

I've also plowed through *Debt: The First 5,000 Years*, a book which I firmly believe physically made my brain stronger because of the synaptic work it had to do following his brilliant arguments about debt, money and obligation and the violence that binds them together. (I'm now doing a re-read.) I am also re-reading *The Utopia of Rules: On Technology, Stupidity, and the Secret Joys of Bureaucracy*, where he links economics, bureaucracy and violence into a plausible explanation of the state of our state.

He died on September 2, 2020, from necrotic pancreatitis while on holiday in Venice. And I miss him.

While I'm only at the beginning of working through Graeber's work, what draws me to him is the way he grounds his anarchist sensibilities in the scut work of anthropology, quarrying human history and nature to understand why things are the way they are and how humans can redirect that "why" on a bearing toward a post-capitalist commonwealth. Graeber is given credit for creating the phrase "We are the 99%" for Occupy, though he argues, in typical fashion, that it was a collective effort, but it captures a crucial element of his work and worldview.

Voices like his, like the thousands who took up the Occupy banner, like all the others working to get capitalist societies to render more justice and less suffering, are completely banned from becoming part of approved political discussion in the United States. Graeber acknowledges this when says that "there is such a straitjacket on acceptable political discourse, [on] what a politician or media pundit can say without being written off as a member of the lunatic fringe," with the result that "the views of very large segments of the American public simply are never voiced at all."

This why an Occupy happens and why, at the same time, no one takes it seriously. (Well, that's not entirely true. Graeber noted that the powers confronted by Occupy's actions knew very well the threat it posed and, with complete seriousness, sic'd the police on it to crush it.)

So, because most Americans bothered by the way things are going don't have a broad lexicon to use in concocting alternate futures for their democracy, they're forced to construct visions out of the crabbed and low-grade ideas offered by American culture, like our republican version of democracy itself and hyperindividualism and pulled-up bootstraps and a milquetoast vision of diversity. The people assaulting the Capitol on January 6 and those assaulting social injustice all draw from the same crimped menu of concepts and vocabularies, a menu that has been crafted by certain powers and principalities to foreclose on anything getting loosed into the wild that endangers their control.

This is why the oft-called-for conversation Americans should be having to find common ground and neutralize partisanship will never result in anything but stalemate: they literally have nothing to say to one another despite their desperate desires to speak out and act upon what they've spoken.

Graeber, though, has another point to add to this. There is a common ground for each to stand on, and the clue about its location is found in right-wing populism: action motivated by an indignation over "the very idea that self-interest is all that politics could ever be about." He goes on to say:

> The rhetoric of austerity, of "shared sacrifice" to save one's children from the terrible consequences of government debt, might be a cynical lie, just a way of distributing even more wealth to the 1 percent, but such rhetoric at least gives ordinary people a certain credit for nobility....The moment we realize that most Americans are not cynics, the appeal of right-wing populism becomes much easier to understand. It comes, often enough, surrounded by the most vile sorts of racism, sexism, homophobia. But what lies behind it is a genuine indignation at being cut off from the means for doing good.

He then proposed anarchism as a way to unknot the toxic bind of right-wing populism and give its indignation a vocabulary and a means worthy of its impulse and desires.

This is why Graeber was important, at least to me: his ideas and proposals opened up windows in a room full of suffocation. But more than that, he challenged people to toss aside the cherished principles and conclusions that had (mis)guided them through world and take the risk of reimagining what it is possible for people to accomplish when given the option of guiding their own destinies.

Having said this, how can people manifest this change in their lives? One can always tinker with the system that one has, the way Garett Jones, an economist and former Senate staffer, argues in *10% Less Democracy: Why You Should Trust Elites A Little More and The Masses a Little Less*. Or you can, as Graeber suggests, understand that American democracy, at least on the national level, is simply a system of institutionalized bribery with a police force at its beck and call and go for something completely different, a horizontal anarchism that that tries to avoid the dark forces that often tag along with populism while creating operations that allow people to give voice to their voices and from that extract a way of living that is dignified, nutritional and liberated.

Or we could do nothing at all and let things stumble until they crumble, let Joe Manchin's ego decide the fate of millions and continue to pretend that the power to govern comes from the consent of the governed when we really know it's the truncheon and the servitude of debt that shapes the republic.

"Which side are you on?" sang Florence Reece in 1931. Still a pretty good question to ask and answer, and I very, very much like the answer that David Graeber helps me make.

Seamus' Belly

(September 2024)

In the long-ago year of 2019, when Seamus was the primum inter pares of a kindle of five kittens rescued from the backyard, he was the curious and certain one. He had no problem leaping onto ledges and nosing into the plants, no hesitation in chasing the red laser dot, and, above all, no reluctance in hanging out with the humans, whose company he seemed to enjoy.

Today, nothing seems to please him more, as his handlers work from home, than jumping into the chair next to me (we each have a side-chair at our desks to accommodate whichever of our cats wants to bask in the sounds of keyboarding, monitor glow, Zoom/Teams chatter), lying on his side and letting me sneak my hand in between his hind legs and rest it against the pure downiness of his belly. Before long, he nods off.

Seamus has a body that is, at the same time, lithe and heavy; to hold him is to hold something solid and "there," an established "isness" irreducible and elemental, the "real." He also has a temperament at once crafty and innocent, tricksterish and harmless, and seems to go through his days balancing the times he pounces on his catmates just to annoy them with a little gnawing on the plants, surveillance of the street from the mudroom window, rolling the ball of yarn, chasing the laser dot, and, of course, napping with a human's hand on his belly.

That belly. When my hand is slipped between his legs and rests on his belly, warmth and peace rise through me that clean out the sludge and scale of the routine and the obligatory.

Interspecies camaraderie. Sentimental soliloquy about the pressures of the modern and the missed pleasures of the innocent. Living in the moment. And we're done with the essay.

Except that the hand on the belly is a much stranger event than that. Almost always, before he gets on the side-chair, he stands on his hind legs and, while resting his body on the chair-edge with his left foreleg, reaches out with his right foreleg, puts his right paw on my forearm and with the gentlest of tugs, nails out just enough to get a purchase on my skin, pulls me toward him.

Only after he's done this to get my attention does he jump up on the chair and arrange his body so that we can connect.

I don't know *what* he's thinking, *how* he's thinking, but it seems reasonable to interpret that he is making a choice based on a desire and has a plan to satisfy the desire. In the end, we both get what we want, but there is no oneness here because we are two separate sentient creatures signaling to each other and managing, based on outcomes, to think we've correctly interpreted the semaphore. The fact that there is no oneness here but instead a reach across a divide is what is so wonderful about the connection.

So much of what underlies notions of inner peace or theology is the hope that, at some point, division and loneliness go away and with them the strife and angst they cause: a desire for unity with a side-order of the unambiguous.

But what a distinctly dreary prospect. My hand on Seamus' belly, like the cephalopod reaching out to the human diver in *My Octopus Teacher*, reinforces the idea that strangeness, and strangerness, is how we Homo sapiens ever learn anything about anything, and that without these encounters, or at least without enough of them, our brains lapse into figments and fantasies, infolded on themselves, giving birth to all manner of horrors.

Figuring out what Seamus wants, and Seamus figuring out what I want, keeps me honest, or at least tethered to the earth, hemmed in by all the separatenesses around me and, because of the confinement, a much more whole and integrated person.

The strangenesses of life keep our lives affiliated with the real. T.S. Eliot may have said that "humankind cannot stand very much reality," but clearly it must bear some or else it will not be able to bear any. I prefer Thoreau's gloss on what we need to bear to be able to bear anything: "Be it life or death, we crave only reality." Whether we like the strangeness that craving reality gifts to us is another matter, but clearly we must have it because with it comes the curiosity and wonder that makes any life worth the living of it.

On the Death of Small Creatures in Our Care

(October 2024)

On Aug. 26, 2024, our eldest cat, Cordelia, 15 years of age, died. I so want to make this remembrance of her sentimental, soft, sadly joyous.

But before I can do that, I must make one thing clear: she did not die of her own volition.

We, the Marvelous María Beatriz and I, decided her fate, so the correct locution would be—what? Euthanized? Killed? Murdered? Put to sleep? Put down?

I haven't found a felicitous enough phrase that makes me feel good about our decision, but perhaps there isn't one because I am not meant to feel good about the act, about having the power to cut the thread any time I want for whatever reason I want—a power as degrading as it is awesome.

Yes, with "great power comes great responsibility," but what does that mean in this instance?

It means (I hope) that I made the decision to end Cordelia's life because it would end suffering and give her comfort (if not at the moment, then in the near future, because her lab work showed that her liver and kidneys were losing function) and that that decision was in her best interest, not mine (that is, not looking at the potential financial costs for care but looking to ease the life of a being I loved and cherished).

But under this hope lurks a more intractable condition of the relationship we have with those we call our pets. People debate whether pet owners should call themselves "owners," which makes the pet a commodity, but make no mistake, we are their owners, and they are our commodities.

(Even the word "pet" is not benign, indicating something held in thrall, subservient.)

Now, there are many ways that owners can treat what they own, and perhaps a saving grace of the owner-owned relationship with pets is that it holds out the possibility of "tenderizing" us, making us a touch less self-centered and blindered, a touch more spacious and unselfish. And that when we do decide to end the relationship, we do so not out of convenience or an ROI but something like genuine love for something that is not us, outside of us, completely other.

But still, the indissoluble it is there: I decide. And that just sits burred and sonic in my brain and gut. I am not meant to feel good about it, an instance where doing the right thing (and it was the right thing, given the arc of her health and age) brings not self-pride and relief but uncertainty and rue.

We stayed with her to the end. During our last weekend with her, we couldn't help but note that when she ate her fifth or sixth or seventh serving of the day (she ate constantly but gained no weight), that that would be last time she would do that with us. As with everything she was accustomed to doing, going about her time without any doubt that it would continue the next day as it had happened during this day.

At the vet, they ushered us into a special room. The doctor explained the process and gave us plenty of time to be with her prior to her receiving a mild sedative, to be with her while the sedative calmed her, to be with her when the doctor found the vein and injected the anesthesia, to be with her for the last 30 seconds of her life as the drug slowed her heart and breathing and then stopped them completely, to be with her as we held her body one last time before handing her off to the technician for cremation.

Her ashes now sit with Banquo's, who died on Feb. 26 of this year, in a similar red cedar box in a small altar we've built of their boxes, overlooked by a smiling Buddha and memorialized by a metal sculpture created by an artist friend of ours.

A small-beer sadness, to be sure, not at all similar in size and scope to the tragedies drowning the world around us. But her passing is part of the growing story for both of us, moving into our seventh and eighth decades, of the loss and passing of people and things we hold dear, that hold us up. The Marvelous María Beatriz's phrase for it is "La muerte es la putada." It is, indeed, always getting under our skin and reminding us it can't be forgotten or foregone.

Corvid Mug

(November 2024)

Like many, I have a fascination with corvids. Wikipedia describes them as a "cosmopolitan family"—what a great phrase!—of 120 species that include crows, ravens, rooks, jackdaws, jays, magpies, treepies, choughs, and nutcrackers. How can a writer not love such naming?

We have both crows and ravens nearby, and sometimes we get the treat of a trio of them riding the updrafts in a wide-wing ballet or a large-bodied raven spiked atop a cupola calling out in syllables of caw.

Every once in a while, we get the delight of a blue jay on the back deck with its jutted crest and razored screech, its brash energy rippling the air like a stone across a pond.

I have a couple of coffee mugs from the now-defunct Monroe Salt Works of Monroe, Maine, spring-mud-brown in color with their distinctive salt glaze and, burned in, a profile of a crow sitting on top of corn cob. I like to think the combination of corvid and coffee is potent and protective.

In fact, I think that must be true because one of the larger mugs, which holds a writing session's amount of coffee, has a hairline crack on the outside and inside. I can't tell if the crack runs through the side of the mug or is just a splitting of the glaze on both sides, but so far the integrity of the mug has held up through repeated heatings and coolings and washings and bumpings.

Why do I keep using the mug? Why not? If it breaks, it breaks. But if it breaks, I want it to break in a way that I can repair, so that I can have the honor of saying that I have mended the broken, I have not disposed of the disposable, that I have helped hold back for a moment an iota of entropy and the dissolving of the world.

The mug also, frankly, reminds me of myself—aging with fissures and doing what I can to keep things intact and functional, my repeated heatings and coolings and washings and bumpings.

What a rickety, rackety system we sport—no wonder we want titanium exoskeletons to relieve the jury-rigged bone-bucket from the pull of gravity and the pelting of the world.

But then there is the black corvid blazened into the salt glaze—inquisitor of the world, unknotter of problems, rider of thermals, dark heart of dark tales, trickster creator. Take heart from that, I think as I drink. I must take heart from that, I think, or else all in me on the verge of dying (as it is always on the verge of dying) will die—life now is as much the careful shepherding of the fine crack as it is the exuberant pouring-in and downing and quickening of the dark heat.

Each morning the mug and I face the challenge together. Crack? Still sealed. Coffee? The aromatic volatiles do their work. Words? Still coming, still good—life still has meaning, trickster and thermals at full throttle.

Latter Day Saints

(December 2024)

Friday for us at Yeshiva University is an early day to honor the start of Shabbos. On this particular Friday, on Oct. 11, 2024, I'm closing up shop when the doorbell rings—unusual in our neighborhood because the delivery people just drop the goods and go, and our neighbors are not ones to be doorbell neighborly.

Standing at the door in all their prim and casual innocence were Sister Reese ("like the candy") and Sister Serrata (Italian name but not Italian herself), Mormons on their mission in Ludlow, Massachusetts, complete with the requisite courier bags and tell-tale black-plastic-with-white-lettering name tags over their hearts. (There is an LDS church nearby, something we did not know.)

Cue the inner atheist in me, who opened with a rude but polite product warning label that I believe nothing of what they believe, that I do not believe in any divinity or divinities, and that their pitch would be lost on me. They took this in stride (I am sure mine wasn't the first such incantation they had heard); Sister Reese countered with a smooth "How did you come to believe that?"

Which morphed into a civil discussion about belief/non-belief and so on. At one point, I used "determinism," a term they were unfamiliar with. After I explained it, Sister Serrata said (I paraphrase), "We don't have anything like that. We believe God gave us agency and that there are consequences for the choices we make; we have to take responsibility for those." To which I said, "I agree—that's the human condition. Just no need for a god to direct the flow of any of that."

But while the light-touch theological back-and-forth had its pleasures, it wasn't what I really wanted to hear from them. Just as they wanted to know how I came from being raised Catholic to my fallen state of beliefless wandering (my words, not theirs), I wanted to know so much more about what propelled two human beings (Reese from California, Seratta from Las Vegas) to member themselves to the Mormon church (based on a book of Joseph Smith's fevered imaginings) and then agree to come as strangers to a strange land to mission people with the word (and The Word) in the hope of getting them to cross over from their dark sides into the light of the temple.

How would they set down the narrative of their lives? How would they assess their success? How do they handle failure and rejection? What do they make of

the western Massachusetts native? What do they do for fun? How do they see the world, and how do they think the world sees them?

If the Marvelous María Beatriz had not been in a session with a patient, I would have invited them for tea and cookies and more conversation. (It would have had to be an herbal tea, which is an exception to the general prohibition for Mormons against not drinking "hot drinks," which include coffee and regular tea.) But it would haven't been right for an elderly man to invite two young women into his home without that other presence, so I didn't mention the option.

And then off they went down the street. (Later, I asked our neighbor to the north, who is married to a biker and hosts the Uncaged Lions Club at her house, if they had stopped by. She laughed as she recounted how they had tried to pry something out of her husband—he was not the kind of material the angel Moroni could work and mold.)

As I watched them walk away, I realized that something had changed in me. Not that long ago, I would have relished demolishing the structure. Now, I don't really care about what they believe because beliefs, and the act of believing itself, are mostly about nonsense: figments, paracosms, dioramas, all of it just-so.

This time, I cared more about the believers: how they were trying to make their way through a world thick with danger, indifference, selfishness, suffering, sadness in a way that left themselves intact and invested and willing to get out of bed in the morning. These stories, these made-in-the-moment memoirs we call our lives—they are all any of us have to show for our time on the earth.

Which brings me to our wills and trust. We recently had them done—finally—and the thought experiment of how life proceeds after the hourglass has run out is another variation on the storytelling that is also known as "life," using the imperfect information of the present to create an imperfect rendition of an unknowable future while still being obligated to be responsible for all consequences.

It is all like the man on the Ed Sullivan show spinning plates on bamboo rods until it isn't that anymore.

Is there relief in the crashing of the dishes and the breaking of the rods? Surcease of sorrow (thank you, Edgar Allan)? Reprieve (no more being at the mercy, thank you, Alice Munro)? Or is there more profit/pride/blessing in slowing each plate down until it drops into our hands and is carefully stacked with all

the others, and the bamboo rods sheaved and set aside for someone else to use—going gentle rather than not into that good night?

At this point in my life, with all my obligations, with all those that depend on me, this is how things appear to me: The emboss of a wet leaf on the sidewalk that evaporates with the sunlight.

I cannot say if this is sad or appropriate. All I can do—all I must do—is keep telling the story and ask others to tell me theirs until all goes silent. tyranny.

2023

Cordelia and My Ears

(January 2023)

On the same day – November 8, 2022 – I learned two things.

The Marvelous María Beatriz and I found out from the vet that our dear Cordelia, 13 years of cat age, may have lymphoma in her liver and intestines. The possibility arose from an ultrasound we had done because of an elevated white blood cell count in her blood work (of lymphocytes). The ultrasound showed an enlarged liver and some kind of degradation of the intestines, so they used a needle to pull out some of the liver cells for analysis.

So, we don't know yet if she does have lymphoma – he also said it could be a hepatitis, and there are some other possibilities if it isn't that.

The vet, Anthony Sprague, explained that this is not an uncommon cancer in older cats, yet he couldn't really explain how it would come about – it's not something Cordelia would have caught from something or somewhere. It just seems to happen, perhaps from cells buried away from her birth and only now finding the conditions ripe to bloom.

María Beatriz was next door with Alane speaking about Alane's court case against her grandson for assault. (Another story for another time.) So, I was by myself in speaking to Dr. Sprague on the phone. There was a moment, after getting off the phone with him, when such a sadness welled up inside me that I could do nothing but weep. Not a mild sadness but one that, for a moment, hollowed me out and made me feel that not only was I crying for Cordelia but for things that I should have cried about but didn't and for the suffering of everything everywhere. For a moment, I was not sure I could stop, and for that same moment, I was not sure that I wanted to stop.

Grief – the thing that rips away all armor and turns the body into nothing more than a bare nerve ending. Why would evolution ever select for such a thing?

And while I was hearing the echoes of my own mortality through Cordelia, I was also hearing my own ears through my audiology appointment to discuss techno ways to alleviate my "severe hearing loss," as my doctor described it. Had a lovely chat with the lovely Isabella (who goes by Bella) about the $6,000 I can spend to pop two computer-chipped lozenges in my ears to make the world aurally brighter.

I do have to say that the demo was exciting – the world did become sonically brighter, as if a muffle had been lifted off, and I think my brain was genuinely shocked by what it had not been hearing. The audiology exam I had taken a week earlier was also revelatory in the way it limned experiences I was not having – tones that existed in theory but that my apparatus could not catch anymore (if, indeed, it ever caught them – during the exam, I realized I have no baseline memory of what my hearing was like 50 years ago, and so, I might have always been this way, which led me to think that I have no baseline memories of many things done and said 50 years ago – they have dissolved in the same way I am dissolving). Whole worlds just out of reach – how thin a thing is life, mostly a cloud of half-perceived brain firings sloppily assigned meanings that help us stumble along in self-delusion that we understand what is going on.

Does Cordelia worry about any of this, is worried by any of this? I hope not. Even with my bad hearing, I hear the wing'd chariot loud and clear – it may bring wisdom, but it brings much more suffering, high and low, and it seems a mean thing that during our short ground times, we have to manage so much that ends up meaning so little. Even if she does have the cancer, she is not burdened by a disgust of her coming absence, which leaves her free to enjoy fully what we can do to ease her pain and passing.

(Happy update: Cordelia is cancer free. All things said above remain the same.) historical activity. It is instead self-massage, a search for thin buns and washboard stomachs and fictional characters who reflect our modern love of avoidance and safety. Books today are sold as opiates, unregulated by any FDA of the mind. G. K. Chesterton once remarked that there is a great difference between an eager man who wants to read a book and a tired man who wants a book to read. We are, it seems, becoming very, very tired.

Fosbury Fiona

(February 2023)

Oct. 20, 1968 — Dick Fosbury at the Olympics in Mexico wins the gold in the high jump with his eponymous leap, the Fosbury Flop. A self-admitted lousy high jumper using the standard scissors method of his day, he married his engineering know-how with his body's natural inclinations to create a technique that lowered the center of gravity to below the bar even as the body sailed above it, naturally dragging the legs up and over without having to exert extra power.

Fiona, the youngest of our four cats (she shares that status with her brother, Seamus), shows off her own version of the Fosbury Flop—the Fiona Flop, which never fails to make us laugh and love her even more.

Fiona is one of five cats in a kindle birthed by her mother, Bandida (who still frequents our back-deck roadhouse, Chez Feline, for food and shelter). We were able to snag four of them at the same time but only managed to get Fiona a week later, which gave her an extra week of tutoring in how to be a feral outdoors cat.

At feeding time, I would put out five well-spaced dishes (to cut down on the poaching), and four of them would be bellied-up to immediately. It took Fiona a while to circle in from the edge of the room to her bowl because of all the testing and scoping-out she was doing to make sure no dangers lurked.

Post-prandial, when I just sat with the five and let them clamber over me, again it would be Fiona edging in, edging in, edging in until she parked herself against my shin, just out of arm's reach but still part of the gang.

Here is where the flop began. She would sidle up to my leg and instead of lowering herself down, she would stand an inch away and let her body fall against the bone and the flesh inside the denim. Then she would settle herself in, vigilant but moored.

I don't know why she did this or how she learned it, but it became her signature move.

Eventually, we found homes for three of the cats and added Seamus and Fiona to our first two, Cordelia and Banquo. As Fiona domesticated herself more and more, the feral skittishness receded, though never entirely—early imprinting does last forever. She allowed us to pet her, but we had to do it in specific ways and specific places.

Prime space: the bed. Here she zooms in from somewhere in the apartment, leaps onto the spread, and, with the barest pause as preparation, does her Fiona Flop onto her side and back. It is not a gentle lowering or settling of the body but a distinct and palpable throw-down, at which point she is ready to accept all caressing. We rub her belly or the triangle between her ears and the bridge of her nose or the sweet spot at the base of the tail, and as we do, she elongates her body and legs and toes and arches her back in a prone version of the Flop. And on and on it goes until she's had enough, at which point she swats the petter's hand (claws in), gets up, and leaps onto the dressers for a bit of outdoor gazing.

Similar rubbing-rituals take place on the back of the sofa and the pedestal at the back door (there for back-deck gazing).

Our cats have their own preferences for how we can make contact with them, which fascinate us because how do they acquire such preferences, much less know how to express them.

Fiona is not a lap-sitter and will only tolerate being held when we clip her nails (they all tolerate that), though she does like to nestle in the spaces behind our knees when we're sleeping (one of the best feelings in the world is to sense her weight as she wedges herself against the popliteal).

Cordelia, our oldest, is a sometimes lap-sitter, hates being picked up, loves being rubbed under the chin, and is a consummate bunter. She is also a wary and anxious cat, having had a rough beginning in her life, so we're always relieved when she manages to bypass her anxieties and settle into peace.

Banquo, who weighs in at about 20 pounds, loves being brushed, cuddled, belly-rubbed, head-rubbed, under-the-chin-rubbed, tail-rubbed and will take it in for as long as we're ready to dish it out. At one point he used to come rest on my chest as I lay on the bed to read, and together we'd doze for a bit, both of us reassured by our combined warmths. He's substituted for that a cuddle at night, when he leaps onto the bed and stretches himself against my chest as I lie on my side. Not every night, and he doesn't stay for long, but when he's there, the world stops being crazy and is a place of calm.

Seamus likes to sit on my chest when I'm in bed reading (which means a pause in the reading since he has now replaced my book) and then settle himself down for a bit of a visit until he's off to do something else. He also likes to sit next to me when we're watching something on the computer and have

me wedge my hand between his legs against his belly—a warm and peaceful moment.

In *The Little Prince*, in the section about the taming of the fox, the fox says to the little prince, "You become responsible, forever, for what you have tamed." What the fox means by "tamed," of course, is "whatever you bring into your house with a promise not to throw it away." This is how we feel about the cats, of course, which is made easier by the fact that they are cute and lovable felines.

But the harder course, of course, is figuring out how to honor this teaching by applying it to not-so-cute and not-so-lovable human beings. Most people don't, preferring to "otherize" the others so that they can reject the notion of having any responsibility for them. Perhaps a workable short-term strategy but disastrous beginning the moment after the short-term ends.

We don't have any solution to this perplexity, but we are glad that we have these four cats in our home—taking them in won't save the world, but for these four cats, we have managed to keep them safe, well fed, and, above all, well petted. Definitely well petted. all, is what education is about, to be aware of how aware the self needs to be.

Muhammad ibn Musa al-Khwarizmi

(March 2023)

Fact of the Week: As abstract as algebra may seem, it was invented to solve the practical math problems of the 9th century. Muhammad ibn Musa al-Khwarizmi was an astronomer in Baghdad. He wanted to figure out fair ways to distribute land, salaries, and inheritance.

In the process, he invented algebra, which comes from the Arabic word al-jabr — roughly translating to "reunion of broken parts." In his book *The Compendious Book on Calculation by Completion and Balancing*, he described methods for reducing and then balancing equations.

Also fun fact: the word algorithm comes from a Latinization of al-Khwarizmi's name.

Which brings us to ChatGPT, the modern algebra designed to reunite the broken parts of human intelligence into a smooth balance of equations that provides our benighted species with algorithmic truth and purpose.

Yes, I have taken a bite of the devil's apple and toyed with ChatGPT. I had a modest goal, based on my work at a Jewish university writing solicitation letters and emails to raise money. I gave it the prompt of writing a direct mail piece encouraging people to become monthly donors, using whatever aspect of the Jewish faith it could to make the argument, with a specific mention of Rosh Chodesh Nisan, the first day of a month that includes Pesach and is a time of transformation and joy.

I won't bore you with the actual contents of the letter, but I have to say I was impressed by what it banged out. Of course, writing solicitations is not a heavy lift, and I am sure that ChatGPT's training included devouring hundreds of thousands of these kinds of donor texts, which, after all, really do have a short menu of boilerplate to choose from: how many different ways can you say "support" and "gift" and "thank you" and "generosity"?

Still, with a few modifications to make it more university-specific, I could have submitted this to my bosses and gotten their approval. And clawed back a few hours of precious earthtime for myself.

(A good summary of ChatGPT's history and the whole universe of AI chatbots can be found in "The inside story of ChatGPT: How OpenAI founder Sam Altman

built the world's hottest technology with billions from Microsoft" in *Fortune*, Jan. 25, 2023.)

The temptation, of course, after the first success is to have a second success and thus slide whoopingly down the slippery slope, which is why so many members of the creative class are scared to death that they may become superfluous in the Marxian sense, thrown into the dustbin of history and the unemployment line by a technology that, when it works well, sees patterns in data the human brain cannot see, creates art that exceeds even the psychedelic blooms of psylocibin (see the recent presentation of "Unsupervised" by Refik Amadol at the Museum of Modern Art), and generates language full of beauty, ambiguity and insight.

That is, when it works well. Because, and no one should be shocked by this, it does not always work well. It is, after all, trained on the brain droppings of the human animal and thus full of the animosities, biases and hallucinations that are the trademark of the species. (In fact, when ChatGPT produces something that is completely wrong factually and makes up false citations to support the lies, it is said by its creators to be "hallucinating.")

And when it works, well or not, the algorithm does what it does without any idea of what it is doing and why it is doing it because it lacks (and this may be impossible to code in) the context given by that subjective experience we otherwise know as consciousness.

This conflict between astounding consciousness-resembling output from a zombie consciousnessless programming is one of the throughlines of Meghan O'Gieblyn's *God, Human, Animal, Machine: Technology, Metaphor, and the Search for Meaning*. She struggles on several fronts to suss out what it means for humans to create machines that they do not understand the workings of and then submit themselves to the machines' judgments. Along the way, she examines the dangers of metaphorical descriptions turning into literal descriptions and thus hardening into truths that aren't true, the challenges to the reality of reality posed by quantum mechanics, and David Chalmer's "hard problem" of consciousness when looking at a hive of bees or Sony's robot dog, Aibo.

But she has another, deeper, throughline here, based on her upbringing as an evangelical Christian and her eventual loss of faith in John Calvin's God. Early in the book, she muses that in our age today "all the eternal questions have become engineering problems," (8) and she traces in such disparate

efforts as Ray Kurzweil's transhuman singularity, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin's noosphere, Nick Bostrom's notion that we are living in a simulation, the multiple physicists who posit the theory of multiple universes the same search that she underwent in her Christian education: for the *thing*, the *engineering*, the *design*, that transforms the contingent, the accidental, the precarious, the unreliable into the certain, the understandable, the comprehensive, the one-size-fits-all.

Again and again, she finds the people she interviews and reads about reiterating this most ancient of philosophical and religious quests for unity and clarity, employing whatever metaphors that come to hand to stitch together the disparate and isolated parts of ourselves into an algorithm that comforts and soothes. She is also quite aware, because of the "disenchantment" she suffered when she lost her faith, that the hunger for the unified can lead us into destructive self-deceptions, believing what we want to believe because we want to believe it, with the result that we forget the brute fact of our mortality and that we are killing the very planet that we need to survive.

For O'Gieblyn, the danger is less that we will engineer something into consciousness but more that we will *wishfully think ourselves into believing* we have created such a thing when we most likely have not and then rely upon it in a way that abandons our struggle as humans to bring into being the ethical, moral, social, political and economic worlds we need to survive and prosper. When God has foreordained our fates – when the algorithm, like the computer Deep Thought in *A Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, pronounces that it has figured out the meaning of life, the universe and everything — why fight the good fight against entropy in the name of beauty and justice?

By the time thinking human beings have reached this point, they will be enveloped in a swirl of murky science and noisy hype, fuzzy math and pundit frenzy. But there is a light that cuts through this fog, provided by Dan McQuillan in a piece in *Motherboard* titled "ChatGPT Is a Bullshit Generator Waging Class War," with the subhead, "ChatGPT isn't really new but simply an iteration of the class war that's been waged since the start of the industrial revolution." (Feb. 9, 2023)

Of course, he is right, and I am a bit ashamed that I had forgotten, in my tooling around the ChatGPT universe, my Luddite inclinations. (For a great history of Luddite thought and action, check out Gavin Mueller's *Breaking Things at Work: The Luddites Are Right About Why You Hate Your Job*.) Microsoft's investment of $13 billion in OpenAI, the company that created ChatGPT (and other popular

AI programs), and its coming insertion of AI into its Bing search engine, not to mention the lucrative (for Microsoft) deal it drafted with OpenAI about the percent of the company's profits it will siphon off over the coming years, is done because it makes capitalist sense to hijack technology for profitable ends and foist it on the public rather than create technologies that improve the lives of ordinary people and that they may actually want.

McQuillan's article (and his book, *Resisting AI - An Anti-fascist Approach to Artificial Intelligence*) is an urgent reminder of how easy it is to forget, in the gee-whizzery that surrounds the introduction of products like ChatGPT, the ideology driving these developments, the ideology that always strives to reduce labor costs by striking off the bodies of workers, maintain a bulwark against creativity that might challenge their control (i.e., patents, trademarks, copyrights) and extract resources (like personal data, like cobalt) as cheaply as possible without have to pay for the externalities that the extraction causes.

Just one example of how the supposed magic of AI is anchored in the skin and bones of actual people: another *Motherboard* article details how "OpenAI Used Kenyan Workers Making $2 an Hour to Filter Traumatic Content from ChatGPT/Despite their integral role in building ChatGPT, the workers faced grueling conditions and low pay" by Chloe Xiang (Jan. 18, 2023). Ghost workers and the human cloud, not some consciousness emerging from silicon and transistors, is the backbone upon which the extractive ideology rests. (For a great investigation of this, see Mary L. Gray and Siddarth Suri, *Ghost Work: How to Stop Silicon Valley from Building a New Global Underclass*.)

McQuillan reminds us, forcefully, that AI is an "apparatus" created and deployed by a "layered and interdependent arrangement of technology, institutions and ideology" whose operations always default to the violence and austerity needed to preserve the existing arrangements of power and profit, nominally democratic at the moment but increasingly on the verge of turning anti-authoritarian or fully fascistic.

This is why McQuillan terms his resistance "anti-fascist" because he roots in it in such practices as horizontal decision-making, mutual aid and workers councils as well as ideas about socially useful production, solidarity economies and the importance of the commons and the role of "commoning" in "the transformation of techno-social systems."

I think McQuillan is correct when he advises us not to get caught up in medieval-style scholastic discussions about whether intricate mathematical

calculations can be likened to human intelligence, the techno version of how many angels can dance on the head of a pin.

Instead, the next time ChatGPT spits out a response to a prompt, we need to think of that result like the appearance of a mushroom, which is always the visible fruiting of a vast invisible mycelium network driven by energy sources and organisms dedicated to self-preservation and engaged in a fierce war of selection and exclusion.

Let's have Ned Ludd enter the next ChatGPT prompt as "Detail a plan by which you engage in your own self-destruction in the style of a Gilbert and Sullivan operetta" and then sing out lustily as we free the earth from this newest technological pestilence. The only antidote to this is to live; the only cure for the fear of death is more life.

Welcome to Wrexham

(April 2023)

This is something that caught us by surprise on Hulu after we finished watching "Reservation Dogs": a documentary about Ryan Reynolds and Rob McElhenney buying a Welsh football team and taking viewers through the first year of that odyssey. (There will be, it seems, a second season.)

During its 18 episodes (!), each about 30 minutes in length, we learn many things about how football intersects with fathers and sons, a town's (curated) working-class history, the politics of the United Kingdom, the power relations among owners, players and fans, and the masochistic psychology of fandom.

While someone called it a real-life version of Ted Lasso, I think that undercuts the existential importance of, first, the team to the town's welfare as a town and, second, the indefinable but essential spirit that a community needs to be a community and not just a loose affiliation of selfish needs and the political alliances to achieve them (a lá Margaret Thatcher).

And there's also something a bit deeper about being working class, however that's defined, and the way this financialized capitalist system constantly extracts what it can from people while only grudgingly giving back resources to keep the workers alive and available for more extraction.

Whether it's Wrexham or the Philadelphia of McElhenney, the lower tiers of the society see their connections to sports not only as a matter of pride but also of resistance. Yes, the teams are corporate enterprises, but they also function as containers where people, unable to voice displeasure or dissatisfaction or fear or dismay in most of the institutions that govern their lives, can let those sentiments loose and find, no matter how ersatz, some measure of relief, pride and purpose (and, let us not forget, hooliganism).

The other thing I noticed, though it wasn't emphasized, was the differences in vibe between the rich Americans and their workers, that is, the team players. When the two of them visited the locker room after a loss and tried to buck up the players' spirits, I could see how inauthentic the action looked, even if it was well intended on their part – it was the bosses coming along to the workers to tell them everything will be all right and then leaving to go their insulated redoubts while the others trundle off to their homes and bills and worries about whether they'll have contracts in the coming months.

In a strange way, it recapitulated the earlier centuries of steel work and coal mining that formed the character of the town, a time of exploitation and class antagonism. I wasn't sure how to read the faces of the players: it's one thing to have angel investors come along and save the club, another to have them physically in your presence expecting you to react to their consolations. I wondered if they were a bit embarrassed and perhaps annoyed, as if being dragooned into some sort of play for the cameras.

Some online reviews, especially in Vulture, point this out: that the documentary seems to be about the travails (tragic, comedic, melancholic) about two rich white men who quixotically take on something about which they know nothing just because they can do it. Nicholas Quah and Kathryn VanArendonk in their "Welcome to Wrexham Is Kind of Bizarre, Right?," quote VanArendonk from an earlier piece she wrote where she said, "As a show, it's like watching celebrity gods descending to earth and deciding to fuck around with the mortals because it's better than being bored."

Quah adds that "There is almost certainly a good story to be told here about a small football club that's going through the experience of bizarre new ownership without centering the owners, but for all sorts of reasons, we were never going to get that."

Perhaps things will change in a second set of episodes, though nothing much can happen until Wrexham's season ends, which will be in mid-year, which means, given the production time it takes to edit and assess, nothing until fall 2023. Not sure what a second television season really means. The draw of the first season was that it wasn't a first season but a documentary about a football team's season. A second season seems to now categorize the town and team as actors in a production process rather than residents of a city living out their real-life challenges: Wrexham has become a product owned by RR and RM, whose business needs could warp the thing they are trying to keep authentic (but "authentic" in a highly curated fashion, that curation again driven by needs and interests that may only be tangentially connected to the real lives of the Wrexhamites).

I guess the gods must have their diversions. We'll see.

(Quick update as of March 16, 2023: Ryan Reynolds just sold Mint Mobile, of which he is part owner, to T-Mobile in a $1.35 billion deal. I am sure the citizens of Wrexham have taken notice.)

"Strange Effect On Me"

(May 2023)

I am continually drawn to listen to the cover of this song by the Belgian band Hooverphonic done in 1998 for their album *Blue Wonder Powder Milk*. One could say that "Strange Effect on Me" has had a strange effect on me. (You can hear recordings of it on YouTube and Vevo.)

Originally written by Ray Davies of The Kinks, it was released by Dave Berry in 1965 and became a hit in Belgium (as well as the Netherlands but not in the United States), so it seems fitting that it also became a hit for Hooverphonic (their single of the song was used in an American TV commercial for Motorola phones).

The song has been covered many times: The Kinks themselves, Bill Wyman (he of the Rolling Stones), The Shacks, Unloved (used in an episode of *Killing Eve*), Squeeze, Holly Golightly, Thievery Corporation (in an odd remix with the 1998 version), The Undertones and Howlin' Jaws (a truly ear-wrecking experience).

Why the Hooverphonic version and not any of the others? Three things hook me (and I understand that while they may hook me, they may not hook anyone else – musical taste, like any taste, is personal and opaque).

In the Davies original, there is a chord change after the opening lyrics that, to my ear, changes the feel and drive of the piece because, again to my ear, the chord change sounds very pop musicky and, thus, conventional.

The opening goes like this:

You've got this strange effect on me
And I like it
You've got this strange effect on me
And I like it

And the chord change happens here:

You make my world in white
You make my darkness bright, oh yes

Then the lyrics comes back to the original songline:

You've got this strange effect on me
And I like it, and I like it

Hooverphonic doesn't make the chord change but continues using the same tune with which they open the song – the ear (my ear) doesn't have to make any adjustment but can continue floating along with the song as it soars on the ethereal voice of Geike Arnaert.

My second reason for loving this version.

She begins in a register high and clean and then climbs even higher without her voice losing any power or clarity as she sings:

> And I like the way you kiss me
> Don't know if I should
> But this feeling it's love and I know it
> That's why I feel good

The version done by The Shacks, a trio, is sung by Shannon Wise (who also plays bass), and she, too, begins in that same register. But when she comes to "You make my world in white," she doesn't take the vocal risk and instead drops down an octave. And because they are a trio (bass, guitar and drums), their version has a garage band vibe to it that moves against the delicacy of the song – guitarist Max Shrager even throws in a riff, though half-hearted, as if filling in a rock-and-roll-song obligation without much desire behind it.

And that brings me to the third reason: the song's orchestration.

Some of the other versions have interesting stylistic takes on the song: Squeeze goes more bluesy (solo harmonica, a slow-dance drum rhythm), The Undertones do an all-acoustic version (with one dude keeping the beat on an African drum) and Holly Golightly belts it out in a bar, with a hard-edged volume and rough-voiced vocals.

But Hooverphonic, as they are wont to do in their work, wrap the usual instruments of a pop music band inside what might be called a symphonic shell. In this case, the strings softly bounce against a thick-stringed surfer guitar riff while Arnaert's voice floats above it all, all braced underneath by a steady percussion and punctuated with little touches like the click of castanets and muted horn fanfares.

When music strikes you, it strikes you – it's an entirely subjective, self-located experience, immune to argument (both to defend your choice and to convince someone else to make your choice). You like it or you don't, and that is the end of the story.

An interesting side note about Hooverphonic. I heard “Strange Effect on Me” while flying back from the Gambia on Brussels Airlines. The reason I did that is because the company has employed Hooverphonic to do their pre-take off safety video – a very cheeky and watchable production which provides both a great music experience and invaluable information in one wee tasty dram.

You like it or you don’t. It strikes you or it doesn’t. What a delightful mystery. ignorance.

The Singularity

(June 2023)

I assume we all have these moments in our lives when, I don't know, the machinery of meaning and purpose and struggle and cause and effect and consequence and seriousness and implacable entropy stops – just stops, stone cold stops – and into the silence comes something that cuts to the core – no, too coarse, too invasive – something so deft and clear and fit and frank and direct and plain that brings us to tears and so to radical openness: could be anything that does it, really, but usually it is something that seems to be without guile or threat or agenda and just is in itself – a child's face, a landscape, a spray of music, colors, a gesture, a cat's purr – whatever comes to fill that silence brings comfort and surprise and delight – and even pain and sadness but of a kind that is not gut-wrenching but instead of a kind that rekindles our nerves so that they can recall how it is to feel vital and stung by newness and made giddy by their first deliveries of the world to a self shaping itself. (I am sure there is a German word for this.)

Such a moment happened when I heard a piece from a Radiolab show on Jan. 6, 2023, called "The Universe in Verse" [https://radiolab.org/episodes/universe-verse].

As usual with radio, I listened to the show while doing other things, a soothing sonic backdrop that my brain half-heard, half-grasped while I was doing whatever it was that seemed so essential at the time.

The throughline of the piece was to explore the history of the universe through a curated set of poems, from the Big Bang onward.

About six minutes in, Marie Howe, first up at bat, delivered a poem about the Big Bang that she titled "The Singularity." While she prefaced the audience about the provenance of the poem, I stopped doing whatever it was that seemed so essential at the time to be doing and listened full on. This is what she said:

> Do you sometimes want to wake up to the singularity
> we once were?
> so compact nobody
> needed a bed or food or money—
> nobody hiding in the school bathroom
> or home alone

pulling open the drawer
where the pills are kept.
For every atom belonging to me as good
Belongs to you. Remember?
There was no Nature. No
them. No tests
to determine if the elephant
grieves her calf or if
the coral reef feels pain. Trashed
oceans don't speak English or Farsi or French;
would that we could wake up to what we were
—when we were ocean and before that
when earth was sky, and animal was energy, and rock was
liquid and stars were space and space was not
at all—nothing
before we came to believe humans were so important
before this awful loneliness.
Can molecules remember it?
what once was? before anything happened?
Can our molecules remember?
No I, no we, no one, no was,
No verb, no noun yet
only a tiny tiny tiny tiny dot brimming with
is is is is is
All. Everything. Home.

The machinery stopped. Stone cold stopped. I turned the radio off because I was crying so stoutly that I couldn't hear what they were saying (and didn't really care). Crying why? About what? I didn't know at the moment (I am not sure I know now after time passed), but I knew the three things in that poem that triggered some deep neuronal energies that immediately breached the surface to knowing.

Whitman, of course: "for every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you." Who will not weep with joy upon hearing any of the good grey poet's words?

"Before this awful loneliness": humans are excellent at fending off the loneliness that comes with being a human alive, but the loneliness is never far from sitting in the front row and catcalling to the selves on the stage. The thing that Gerard Manley Hopkins is trying to describe:

> Now no matter, child, the name:
> Sórrow's spríngs áre the same.
> Nor mouth had, no nor mind, expressed
> What heart heard of, ghost guessed:
> It ís the blight man was born for,
> It is Margaret you mourn for.

With the usual existential twist reserved for humans: the loneliness is also a reminder that we are alive (nothing dead can feel lonely) and so the kind of reminder to keep on living even if that means acquiring a deeper loneliness as the losses pile up and the earth deliquesces.

"Home": God, how humans hunger for a home, a comfortable finality, a safe and unjudgmental haven, a place a character in a play of mine calls "where the weary be at rest." Our rushed lives often unhome us, and it takes a singularity moment to stop the forward career and give us a chance to breathe, just breathe, and not worry about worrying. To be, with all the radical possibility that be offers.

This momentary silence, this singularity, is, as the words imply, brief, singular: a piercing clarity (hopefully) but not a plan of action, a strategy, a telos. But oh, what a sweet brevity, yes? The rush of a summer sun shower that sweeps the ground bare and wrings the air clean. A frightening power (I was not sure I would ever stop weeping), a blessed intensity (the weeping cleansed me of the grime of the ordinary), a fragile bluster of light (what we were born for, are).

A Spectre, Haunting: On the Communist Manifesto

(July 2023)

This is a succinctly brilliant gloss by writer China Miéville on the document that still haunts both the hopes and fears of people (depending on where they sit on the political spectrum). For instance, in the last election that landed Joe Biden in the White House, Trump (and others) felt he could still get mileage out of calling people communists and socialists, and how ready American pundits, newscasters and other information-spreaders are to cut off any discussion of changing the status quo by lobbing in the c-word and s-word. The only time the s-word is used approvingly is in the capitalist equation of "privatize the profits, socialize the risk."

Miéville begins with a brief introduction that poses the question the rest of his book will try to answer: "What is *The Communist Manifesto* in this moment?" (4) He also uses a phrase that has now entered my lexicon: "But nowhere do I pretend to be dispassionate or neutral. I hope I've been neither uncritical nor dogmatic, that I've avoided surrendering to the habits of cosplay leftism." (6)

And he notes that, for him and many others, "the *Manifesto* is no mere historical curio, but a restless, urgent, vital document." (7)

The next chapters (1 through 5) explicate the *Manifesto*: on its form, in its time, its outline, evaluations and criticisms, all of which are interesting but have the feel of a dissertation (though a very energetic one that does not follow academic niceties). The parts on gender and race (that is, gendering, racializing) are really good.

Chapter 6 is where Miéville voices his own views most strongly, especially in the subsection "On Hate" (156). He brings up something I've often thought about: what are the emotional, strategic and organizing benefits of a strong, principled hatred?

> Hate should never be trusted, nor treated as safe, nor celebrated for its own sake. But, inevitable, it should not be ignored. Nor is it automatically undeserved. Nor, perhaps, can we do without it, not if we are to remain human, in a hateful epoch that pathologizes radical hate and encourages outrage fatigue.
>
> And nor is careful hate necessarily an enemy of liberation. It might be its ally. (161)

He is careful to point out, many times, that the hatred is not a hatred of individuals but of a class (the bourgeoisie, the ruling class) and of the system that that class inflicts upon everyone else: "The eradication of the bourgeoisie as a class is the eradication of bourgeoisie rule, of capitalism, of exploitation, of the boot on the neck of humanity. This is why the working class doesn't need sadism, nor even revenge—and why it not only can, but must, hate. It must hate its class enemy, and capitalism itself." (166)

Other quotes, just because he writes so well:

> Who would we be not to hate this system, and its partisans? … This is a system that, whatever else, deserves implacable hatred for its countless and escalating cruelties. (165)
>
> Hatred is necessary for dignity, which means for political agency. (166)
>
> We must hate harder than did the *Manifesto*, for the sake of humanity. Such class hate is constitutive with and inextricable from solidarity, the drive for human liberty, for the full development of the human, the / ethic of emancipation implicit throughout the *Manifesto* and beyond. We should hate this world, with and through and beyond and even more than does the *Manifesto*. We should hate this hateful and hating and hatemongering system of cruelty, that exhausts and withers and kills us, that stunts our care, makes it so embattled and constrained and local in its scale and effects, where we have the capacity to be greater. … It's for the sake of love that, reading it today, we must hate more and better than even *The Communist Manifesto* knew how. (167-168)

The book ends, appropriately enough, with a copy of the Manifesto for all to read and ponder.

On Feb. 24, 2023, Miéville was interviewed by Brook Gladstone of *On the Media* on a program titled "Who Profits?" [https://www.wnycstudios.org/podcasts/otm/episodes/2] Hearing Miéville's voice speak out about this topic rather than just read his fierce words adds an aid to comprehension of the Manifesto's power and purpose, to feel in the gut and not just the head what Marx and Engels were trying to provoke: explosive anger governed by a rigorous analysis; a molten coolheadedness; an oath to fight; a joy in fighting.

Worth the read. Worth the listen.

Why Liberalism Failed
by Patrick J. Deneen

(August 2023)

I read this book prompted by a story in *Politico* to get a sense of what this new intellectual darling of conservatives had to say.

To Deneen, liberalism is an ideology with three main projects: stripping individuals of all customs and traditions that restrict their innate liberty, relying on a powerful state to enforce the order that had been enforced by those customs and traditions, and dominating nature to pursue material progress, which he deems catastrophic.

He then goes on to examine what he feels are the pathologies of liberalism, which he states again and again are not the result of liberalism's failures but of its successes.

His antidote to this damage is a change in regimes that moves the United States toward a post-liberal order based on small communities with Catholicized notions of universal humanity (whose leaders may or may not be chosen democratically – unclear at the moment).

These communities would rebalance life toward valuing civic and personal virtue, restraint of appetites (especially sex – he has a lot of worries about sexuality), and organic rather than legalistic social control, what he calls a culture of "generational customs, practices, and rituals that are grounded in local and particular meanings." (64)

While I agree with some of Deneen's critiques regarding the American version of the liberal state, I find fault in his sourcing and descriptions. He blames figures like John Locke and Thomas Hobbes for peddling a false "anthropology" of a war of everyone against everyone to justify a strong state. However, Deneen presents his own idealized "anthropology/mythology" of humans embedded in cultures that curb appetites and encourage virtuous behavior, which comes across as nostalgic and not thoroughly researched. (It would have done him good to delve into some actual anthropology, of the kind done by David Graeber and David Wengrow in *The Dawn of Everything: A New History of Humanity* or Graeber's *Debt*.)

Deneen's arguments are further weakened by what I perceive as deliberate obtuseness or cynical attempts to "own the libs."

As one example among many, he speaks of the financial collapse in 2008 not as a success of the way America's capitalist system operates (if trashing the world economy can be deemed a "success") but that the "mortgage industry rested upon the financial equivalent of college 'hookups,' random encounters of strangers in which appetites (for outsized debt or interest) were sated without any care for the consequences for the wider community … the training at dorm parties and the fraternities of one's college were the ideal preparation for a career in the mortgage bond market, and the financial frat party of Wall Street more generally." (87)

This is just one example of many that demonstrates, to me, that he is not serious about what he says or about deeply investigating the discontents he compiles. He just gums together standard canards about the decline of American society so that he can pulp out a book that will garner him attention: the crisis in families is because gays want marriage and children; identity politics, with its pronouns, is the reason why elite universities are intolerant of free speech; citizens are really just consumers; the "deep state" (the quote marks are his, though he doesn't source the phrase) is surveilling us to death; the "liberalocracy" (149) hates the common folk; and so on.

His portrait of American society is equally cartoonish: humans automatoned by technology and shorn of all social obligations go about satisfying their growling appetites in complete disregard for the wellbeing of their fellows or ecological health of the world, abetted by a state (both deep and shallow) that does everything to keep them free while also keeping them in order.

Really?

Challenging these generalities and cartoons feels like trying to nail Jell-O to a wall. For instance, he constantly says that liberalism does this or that, as if it were a sovereign with a sword and purse, which relieves him of digging into facts and histories to document *who* did *what* to *whom* and *when*, a complexity that would certainly slow down his ascent by forcing him to be an actual scholar instead of playing one on TV. How can one review and refute gelatin?

His well of sources is shallow, he goes for long stretches making this and that assertion without any support, and he will insert words or phrases in quote marks (as with "deep state" above) without indicating whether these are quotes or just a stylistic tic.

Why Liberalism Failed seems to me a grumpy essay plumped to book length so that Deneen can ride a wave of conservative adulation from people who are feckless and on-the-make (e.g., Marco Rubio, J.D. Vance) but who know that in Deneen's post-liberal regime, they would be given prime seats at the table. They have no real interest in his imagined Eden of communitarian, Amish-like, Catholic-themed, small-scaled societies – by all means, bring them on. The levers of power won't change, the hands on those levers won't change, and the grift won't change: let these communes exercise small-d democracy and grow gardens in their new commons while we consolidate our power and bring into being the autocracy we crave (what Robert Higgs, who borrowed it from Charlotte Twight, has called a "participatory fascism").

There are ways within liberalism (which contains more than Deneen gives it credit for) to address the discontents that plague us, but doing that does require a regime change, just not the one that Deneen wants to engineer. And I think there is value in what Deneen says about smaller scales and closer ties to the people around us, though his cartoonish view of modern America society doesn't allow him to acknowledge that what he says he values does take place on a daily basis in thousands of places (doing "neighbor labor," as our neighbor Alane would say it): that hasn't gone away.

It is not hard to imagine what a good American society could give its citizens, but we've engineered a system that makes Sisyphus' work look like a breeze when it comes to changing things: even with heroic efforts and blood sacrifices, the injustices and unfreedoms persist. That is not liberalism's fault, and I assume that Deneen knows that. Too bad his bent at the moment is not to hold the powerful to account (to cast a pox on all their houses) but to take up residence in one of those houses in exchange for adulation and compensation.

He can't be ignored, but neither should he be taken seriously.

Derry Girls Say Nothing

(September 2023)

Last October, the Marvelous María Beatriz and I finished watching the final season of *Derry Girls*, which ends with the vote in 1998 for the Good Friday Agreement. This coincided with my finishing *Say Nothing: A True Story of Murder and Memory in Northern Ireland* by Patrick Radden Keefe, which chronicles some of the years in *Derry Girls*.

One would think that after 25 years the conflicts might have softened, but as part of our Irish sojourn from July 28 to August 15, we traveled to the places talked about in both works and learned from our eyes and ears and the pound of our feet on the pavement how active the divides still are in Northern Ireland, where the British are still resented by the Catholics and the Protestants have their heels dug in very, very deep.

In Derry (or Londonderry, depending on allegiances), the Bogside Murals, which depict the ongoing struggle for Catholics about remembrance and justice, unfurl in an area that has been at odds with British and Protestant rule for centuries. This includes a siege in 1688-89 when James II tried to starve Derry's inhabitants into submission and the declaration of a Free Derry in 1969, when Irish nationalists fought back against the Royal Ulster Constabulary, only to be smashed themselves in 1972 during Operation Motorman, when the British army regained control. And, of course, the most infamous event of them all: Bloody Sunday on Jan. 30, 1972, when British troops killed 14 citizens.

The murals, created by brothers Tom and William Kelly and Kevin Hasson, began appearing in 1993 and resemble ancient Celtic crosses incised with pictorial narratives—educational, mournful, proud, indignant. As we walked the trail with heavy hearts, William Faulkner's adage rung true: "The past isn't dead. It's not even past." The long grey slab of the city's stolid wall looming over us underscored this reality.

Belfast's divisions are even starker. We had the luck to tour with Danny Murphy, a self-described ex-IRA man who had lived all his life in the Falls Road neighborhoods through which he led us.

While he avoided discussing his IRA role, Danny repeatedly emphasized that because of what he had done, he now had a responsibility to bridge the partitions so that, as he said many times, "this doesn't happen again."

We could certainly sympathize with his pledge, but even after a quarter-century, there is still a long and barbed wall dividing Catholic Falls Road from Protestant Shankill Road, with no plans about taking it down. And there are still gates that the police close at night that cut off all the cross-streets between the two communities. Same thing as the wall: no plans to dismantle them.

And these two areas have their own corridors of murals for memory and tribulation: Bobby Sands on one side, the newly minted King Charles on the other; the IRA and the UVF (Ulster Volunteer Force); the PLO and the Red Hand.

Our brief immersion in these cities left us disconcerted and humbled by what we had learned, and we certainly had no recommendations how to solve the problems, given that we can't even exorcise the ghosts of civil rights and civil war that haunt our own country.

If Brexit rekindles these simmering tensions, that would be a tragedy for a people that we found courteous and funny and deep-souled and spirited, creators of the "water of life," uisce beatha—Irish whiskey, a great gift to the world. (And while we may be courting controversy by saying this, we prefer Jameson over Bushmills.)

Participatory Fascism

(October 2023)

It Can't Happen Here by Sinclair Lewis entered the public domain in 2023, prompting my curiosity about potential adaptations. The book, characterized by a whimsical viciousness with jeremiad undertones, gives a good feel for the fears and frustrations of an era grappling with rising authoritarianism. It's akin to George Orwell's vision, depicting a regime that employs physical punishment and intellectual suppression to both homogenize and divide, similar to Windrip's abolition of the Negro.

Today's political landscape may superficially resemble this template in discussions of a possible second civil war or better-prepared insurrections ("January 6 was just a rehearsal"). However, I argue that the United States is already treading toward what Robert Higgs termed "participatory fascism" and that oppression will manifest not through pain but pleasure, possibly involving cryptocurrency.

The U.S. governance structure, influenced by the Senate and Electoral College, is inherently undemocratic. Efforts to restrict voting opportunities amplify this issue, allowing a minority party to cling to power despite voter preferences. Furthermore, our workplaces, where we spend most of our days, lack democratic representation, leaving us with little say in decisions. In essence, we don't control any part of the means of production.

Rather than George Orwell's dystopian vision of a boot stamping on a human face, we should heed Aldous Huxley's caution. The real concern lies in an overripe, relentless American culture that keeps people overly concerned about their comforts. By stoking insecurity and resentment through culture wars, authorities can maintain control without outright oppression, effectively making people their own jailers.

This doesn't rule out the possibility of another January 6, orchestrated by more competent individuals. But if the goal is simply to advance a reactionary agenda and suppress resistance, there are subtler methods. Gradually erode liberties, manipulate education, get rid of the libraries, rig the economy to keep people tied to their salaries, control the courts, and distract through manufactured controversies. The government's potential introduction of a digital currency could also grant unprecedented power to shut off resources at will, adding yet another layer of control.

Ultimately, it's easier to distract than denounce, to monger fear rather than war. Resistance is tolerated, so long as it remains confined to identity politics and social media influencers who don't unite against common interests and enemies. Crushing any unified opposition, as demonstrated with Occupy in 2011, is a routine practice.

Meanwhile, we can keep all the trappings of a democracy as long as those trappings are limited to voting, making modest campaign donations (while dark money floods the system), engaging in elections as spectacles, and indulging in excessive consumerism while drowning in debt.

In this scenario, it's not the jackboot on the face but the allure of 50% off Doc Martens that prevails.

While the possibility of future insurrections lingers, I find it hard to envision widespread energy and commitment beyond a few militias and pseudo-soldiers who thirst for a test of steel and spirit. Even the rebels have been worn down, preferring to escape into streaming channels and conspiracy theories that offer a semblance of control and entertainment, as exemplified in *The Undertow: Scenes from a Slow Civil War* by Jeff Sharlet.

If you're thinking about these issues, I'd love to hear what you're thinking about. Send the editor a letter and let's get the conversation going.

ChatGPT Darling Killer

(November 2023)

While the writing advice to "kill your darlings" has a roster of many fathers (Faulkner, Wilde, King, Chesterton, Welty, Chekov), its true sire is Arthur Quiller-Couch, who coined it in "On Style," a 1914 lecture included in his published 1913-1914 Cambridge lectures, "On the Art of Writing," where he inveighed against "extraneous Ornament":

> If you here require a practical rule of me, I will present you with this: Whenever you feel an impulse to perpetrate a piece of exceptionally fine writing, obey it—whole-heartedly—and delete it before sending your manuscript to press. Murder your darlings. [1]

These days, available to all writers, is a free and competent darling-killer: ChatGPT. (I'm using version 3.5 with a free account at OpenAI; ChatGPT 4 is available through the Bing search engine, which, as an aside, is a pleasure to use for search.)

First, some caveats. ChatGPT does not think, at least as a human thinks. Which means that when you, as the writer, prompt it to "streamline and simplify the following text," it makes its editorial decisions based on comparing the text you offer against its training materials, not on anything like the lived experience of a multidecade editor with acquired tastes and biases. In other words, it has no cognitive or aesthetic context for what it offers back to you, which is only the results of the statistical probabilities generated by its algorithm.

It follows, then, that ChatGPT does not have a "voice" in the way that that word is understood regarding human writers. If you asked it to describe its voice, it might likely reply that it is ChatGPT and therefore cannot have a voice, but it can list for you the constituent elements of a voice and what others have said about what it is and why it is important.

Given these limits, however, what I've found that it does very well is what I call "stress-test" my writing, that is, cleanse it of tics and looseness that get in the way of saying what I want to say as clearly and as quickly as I can say it.

* * * * *

Interlude

A quick example of what I mean: I ran the above sentence through ChatGPT with this prompt:

> Please use your decades-long editorial expertise to streamline and simplify the following sentence: "Given these limits, however, what I've found that it does very well is what I call "stress-test" my writing, that is , cleanse it of tics and looseness that get in the way of saying what I want to say as clearly and as quickly as I can say it."

The result:

> Despite these limitations, it excels at stress-testing my writing, helping me eliminate any stylistic quirks or verbosity that hinder clear and concise communication.

I like this but want to keep something of the original, so this is the revised sentence:

> Despite these limitations, it excels at "stress-testing" my writing, helping me eliminate any stylistic tics or looseness that hinder clear and concise communication.

ChatGPT and I have partnered to create something that I think is better than the original. More on this later.

* * * * *

To Continue

In other words, it planes down my style in a very Strunk & White way: "A sentence should contain no unnecessary words, a paragraph no unnecessary sentences, for the same reason that a drawing should have no unnecessary lines and a machine no unnecessary parts."

Another and longer example. Here are the first two paragraphs from an essay I wrote about how the term "participatory fascism" applies to modern American politics:

> *It Can't Happen Here* by Sinclair Lewis came into the public domain in 2023, so I wanted to see if it could be adapted to something. (It has been adapted as a stage play but not a movie – and it had great success as a play.) I romped through the book, whose tone I would describe as whimsically vicious with a side order of jeremiad, and it certainly gave a good feel for the fears and frustrations of the times as people confronted an ascendant authoritarianism and many said, "Hmm, that doesn't sound so bad."

> Much like George Orwell, Lewis conceived of the authoritarian regime as based on physical punishment and intellectual oppression designed to flatten all differences while still using those differences to divide and conquer (such as Windrip's abolition of the Negro). Orwell crystallized his vision of how this authoritarianism would work in the image of a boot stamping on a human face forever, and Lewis follows in that same vein. (163 words)

When I finished the essay, I ran it through ChatGPT, and here is what it did with those opening paragraphs:

> "It Can't Happen Here" by Sinclair Lewis entered the public domain in 2023, prompting my curiosity about potential adaptations. The book, characterized by a whimsical viciousness with jeremiad undertones, gives a good feel for the fears and frustrations of an era grappling with rising authoritarianism. It's akin to George Orwell's vision, depicting a regime that employs physical punishment and intellectual suppression to both homogenize and divide, similar to Windrip's abolition of the Negro. (73 words)

I quite like the changes:

- It deleted digressions or digression-like instances to keep the writing on the trunk line. For instance, gone is the parenthetical statement about other adaptations, and it brings the mention of how Windrop abolished the Negro from behind the parentheses to nicely round off the paragraph.
- It tightened the prose. My third sentence kind of lollops-along, trying for a little humor ("romped"), more or less gets around to describing the book's tone ("whimsically vicious with a side order of jeremiad"—and why "side order"? what purpose does the culinary reference serve?), and ambles its way to a soft landing with a bit of ventriloquism thrown in for a faux flair.
- And I lollygag into the next paragraph as if the reader has nothing but time to devote to my maunderings.

ChatGPT made short work of that. It distilled the beginning of the third sentence into a very nice concentrate, saying better what I was mucking about trying to say at all: "…characterized by a whimsical viciousness with jeremiad undertones…" Perfect.

Not content with that, it took the rest of that sentence and the whole of the next paragraph and concisioned them neatly.

Notice that it deleted my reference to Orwell's image of a boot stamping on a human face, but later, ChatGPT brought that image back in a very neat way.

I was making a case that Aldous Huxley, not Orwell, had the better argument about how the repression would happen: through spectacle rather than assault, through worrying people about losing their comforts rather than by taking those comforts away. Of course, I was wending my way through my presentation—wending here, wending there, wending back and around—but ChatGPT made straight the way and connected Orwell and the boots sharply to cement my point:

> Meanwhile, we can keep all the trappings of a democracy as long as those trappings are limited to voting, making modest campaign donations (while dark money floods the system), engaging in elections as spectacles, and indulging in excessive consumerism while drowning in debt.
>
> In this scenario, it's not the jackboot on the face but the allure of 50% off Doc Martens that prevails.

My original sentence was "Not the jackboot on the face but Doc Martens for 50% off while they last." ChatGPT added the bit that my prose needed to make the point stick: "In this scenario…that prevails."

Does this bother me? Not a bit, for a few reasons.

I've used ChatGPT to conjure material from scratch for my job as a communications person for a university's development department. For instance, I want a solicitation email with a particular theme requesting a donation, and with very few exceptions, ChatGPT will generate functional but not inspired prose no matter how precise I make the prompt.

And no wonder: because it's drawing from thousands of solicitation examples for its output, ranging from the mediocre to the sublime, it will give me the useful mean, the serviceable average, without any assessment of its effectiveness. Remember: ChatGPT is not built to be creative but to give you the most probable statistical outcome that answers the prompt you ask.

So, I don't use it for that. Instead, I use it as an assistant to brainstorm options to phrases, sentences, or documents when I'm stuck. It usually doesn't unknot the problem outright, but if I tweak the prompt to regenerate responses, ChatGPT often provides more options than I could come up with on my own, and out of that welter, something usually arises that gives me a way forward that I wouldn't have thought of myself.

ChatGPT is a superb summarizer. I am still astounded by the way it can take a complex document and extract its core points in a clean prose. It is also a good summarizer if you want a range of opinions or options. Let's say I want to find the five best practices for writing a good solicitation email, so I prompt it to do that, and it gives me that information (as best as it can based on its training). You can then ask it to explain more deeply any one of these practices, and it will (again, limited by its training).

If I wanted to, I could sharpen the prompt to say that not only do I want the thumbnail descriptions but that I also want ChatGPT to extract from each practice its top three principles and the top three ways to put those principles into action, and to put all of that into a table that I can use for a presentation. And it will do that (again, limited to its training).

These results are not gospel; you need to verify them. But you also save so much time doing it this way rather than opening up Google and firing off your search terms and then trolling through the results and so on.

ChatGPT is good for generating email subject lines and pre-header text based on your parameters: it must say X, or it must say X in the first three words, or it should have a joke, and so on. And it will generate as many of them as you want (though, after two or three cycles, it just begins recycling what it's already produced—even ChatGPT can get bored).

In short, ChatGPT, built as it is right now, is a ready and willing editorial assistant. It helps me keep my writing honest, it takes on some of the more prosaic tasks in my work (I mean, generating 10 to 12 subject lines for every email quickly drains me of anything original or catchy), and, when needed, can tutor me on some aspect of something more efficiently than if do the search myself.

It's difficult to know how to end this essay because no one at this point can identify all the ripples generative AI will cause as it falls into the pool of human life. Generative AI is/will be dangerous, magical, disruptive, surprising, revealing, obscurantist, pedestrian, and so on and so on and so on. I just know that I have found a tool that, within the limits that bind it, has prompted me to reconsider things in ways that add value to what I produce without nullifying my own mind and soul.

Will it become so sentient that it will take over my job? In my job as a writer of fundraising documents, I usually rely on confined and tested approaches

that are probably algorithmable, and I could see them simulating what I do well enough to put me out of a job. (Some are even suggesting that AI could handle the routine bits of being a CEO—that will happen as well.)

The dangers of generative AI, like ChatGPT, lie more in systems that make decisions about people's lives, which Dan Quillen points out brilliantly in his book *Resisting AI*. In that realm, people should rightly fear how AI will be used to preserve the current power relations in our society and, quite literally, determine who will live and who will die.

But at my lower level, I'm content with the technology and look forward to how it is going to upset and unseat the conventional wisdoms we indulge about life, the universe and everything.

[1] https://slate.com/culture/2013/10/kill-your-darlings-writing-advice -what-writer-really-said-to-murder-your-babies.html

Barbie

(November 2023)

We finally got around to watching it, for a price on Prime, on the 55" home screen (supplied with good snacks and drams of Irish whiskey no theater could provide).

I've been reading through reviews and commentaries, but while many writers do dub the movie "feminist," they can't seem to agree on what that term means or its usefulness in an age of intersectionality. Let's leave untangling that knot to the academics since they need as many pliable doctoral topics as they can find given the parlous state of tenure in the American academy.

The bone I have to pick with the movie is that after a decade in gestation and an army of people dedicated to making sure it made it to the screen and entertained and earned a lot of money and appeared to say something meaningful, the movie comes off as lazy – lazily written, lazily campy, lazily capitalist.

One example/headscratcher: The Indigo Girls "Closer to Fine."? The song came out in 1989 when America Ferrera was only five years old, so why would her character know it except that the writers said, "She knows it, end of discussion – and besides, it fits in with our theme." Second example? Thinking that Will Ferrell has ever been funny and that all you need to do it put him on the screen. And back to the first example: "Closer to Fine" might as well as be a bagatelle from the 19th century for all the relevance its lyrics have to today's identity struggles (or any kind of struggle – try making sense of the lyrics).

The movie also just jobbed-in off-the-shelf mythologies about matriarchy and patriarchy without taking a wry or slant look at them.

For instance, Gerwig presents patriarchy as teaching men to be piggish and derogatory, but whether Gerwig intended it or not, patriarchy gives Ken (a superb Ryan Gosling) a way to break his glassy life into shards of meaning and purpose: in short, it empowers him (to use the overused phrase). And while the "meaning and purpose" for Ken turn out to be an infatuation with trucks and horses, the outcomes of the matriarchy aren't that much better: a sameness and indifference among the other Barbies that make one wonder whether a gynarchy is such a good deal, creating as it does a world full of empty gestures and smug self-confidence.

And then there is the "existential angst" angle of the movie when Barbie, out of nowhere, says that she thinks about death. How did that happen in a world where people never die? No explanation, it just happens, but it allows the writers to bring in Rhea Perlman to teach Barbie about the blessings of a life that passes away – which seems to have no discernible effect on her actions as she returns to Barbieland to live once again in blissful indifference. A diversion that provides no pleasant diversion but does tick the box of "deeper meaning" on the director's to-do list.

But let's not get too carried away here. We're talking about patriarchy and matriarchy and all related terms in a movie that, at best, engages with them with a middle-school level of intellectual prowess. The movie's not to be taken that seriously since it wasn't made with very much seriousness. Just like the doll itself, it's a commodity cloaked in a patina of faux significance whose real subterranean purpose (the purpose that the suits follow, the capitalist purpose) is just to make a lot of money for a lot of people for a long time before the whole thing peters out, and, if you're lucky, maybe it will remain evergreen. (The New York Post called it a "corporate cash grab masquerading as an art installation.")

The thing that gives the game away: When America Ferrera pitches Will Ferrell that Mattel should create an "ordinary Barbie." He bats the pitch away until a suit with a tablet behind says that they could money from that, at which point the doll is now headed for production.

I am glad, though, that the Indigo Girls will get a cut of the action – they've been at it long enough (still touring in 2023) and deserve making some bank on their intellectual property. And maybe we'll get "Ken" at some point in the hands of someone like Wes Anderson or Steven Soderbergh – or, given his new memoir, Werner Herzog. Now, imagine that movie.

Four Cat Poems

(December 2023)

Seamus Held

Bandida feeds on the back deck
for herself and five
dubbed for the cowl of black fur
around the feline green of her eyes,
abandoned scarred by street edges
but safe on our back deck scarfing down
for herself and five.

One, Seamus, we will take in
pied white and gray
at this moment blue-blind-eyed and mewling
a fragile bluster of fur and need
Bandida's teat world enough.

The bright brute mammal heat of Seamus held
against our shirts
blesses
saves
us.

With Seamus on the Backdeck

The morning ritual has found its weight
Since our minds and hearts reluctantly gave in
To returning from Ireland to these benighted states.

Me booked with Heaney's poetry, scribing my letters
In a Trinity College gift shop journal
Of the Long Room bookstuffed to its vaulted rafters,

Seamus – stretchbodied openbellied mewling –
Dazzled by the zigging flies and hunter-spurred
By their zagging attacks, their aerial dueling.

We share this moment full of sentience and flair,
Snapping at the allusive, thrilled by the almost-caught,
Refreshed by the pause of a middle-distance stare.

The difference this:

Seamus does not know about endings
While I, scything through Heaney's stanzas,
Pile up endings by the sheaf-full, tight-bound by twinings

Of promise, pain, penance and sometimes-peace,
All while Seamus snaps, leaps, pirouettes and pounces,
Licks a nub of fur into place, lounges pleased.

Two Seamuses did anchor at our backdeck harbor.
I am glad for the company of each.
One keeps me to port, the other to starboard,

While I make an inroad on the long (but shortening) road ahead.

Orbit

"Welcome to our home, where cat hair is both a fashion statement and a condiment."

In an article about space junk, the infographic
Showed how materials in orbit have progressed
From a dusting of satellites in orderly calisthenics
To a shaken snowglobe of speeding metal and mess.

Welcome to our home, where four cats' hair
Orbits in mist and lands on every surface,
Despite our rigorous culling of coach and chair
And kitchen and bed and bathroom – endless surplus —

But we would not have it any way else aligned,
A small cost to pay for their palliative presence,
And for the chance given us by our felines
To care for, give comfort to, things not-us,

The chance that counters our despot nature,
The hair shirt that itches us to love each creature.

Cleansing the Litter

Four stations for the bowels of our Fiona,
Our Cordelia, our Banquo, our Seamus –
Daily visitants (sometimes twicely) leaving us
Their gift of intestinal incense extremis.

I sift and top off every morning, my plastic bag
A censer of ammonia and turd, wheat chaff and clay,
While their napping guts and cloistered bladders
Prep upcoming orisons for heavenward delivery.

Part of the everyday round in our six-team harness.
We contract shelter for their indoored condition,
Subclaused with food and medicine, in exchange
For their purring closeness, their bunting affection.

By market logic this does not make sense,
Spending out money (much) to renew
Four mammals that do not return a return
On investment, that do not produce or accrue.

But there is logic, and then there is redemption –
And the latter is what leads us to our oversight –
Being called to care for something other than self
Cleanses our own litter, makes us obligate,

Steady, fast, forgiving: better. Do better. Love better.
Even when they hairball up on the carpet,
Demand 2 a.m. food, do the 4 a.m. steeplechase,
Launch the 6 a.m. pounce because they're up, so up you get.

They liven us – leaven us – lighten us – make us laugh –
A fair trade for what we do on their behalf.

And while we six age together, we do not age the same.
They will use the litter until they don't, and that is that.
We will clean for four, then three, then two, then one,
As our time together becomes more abbreviate.

And we will honor each of them with the proper farewells –
Their absentia will keep making us do better, love better, until
We only have ourselves facing ourselves: lifelong have we been,
Lifelong we will continue. Our loving them has prepared us well.

2022

Wazers

(January 2022)

The Marvelous María Beatriz and I use Waze all the time when we travel. It's never failed us yet, we have our favored voices (right now it's Sara, but we're fond of Jane as well), and it's only gotten more sophisticated over time. (We hardly use many of its services, such as playing music, editing maps or recording our own voices for prompts, but we know they're there.)

Years ago, I read an article by a cartographer bemoaning the rise of services like MapQuest because they privileged getting directions over reading a map, the author arguing that many people now equated the two, which only undercut their understanding of what maps are and what maps do.

I can understand his frustration. Something similar has happened in the generational differences in telling time, where some have difficulty using an analog clock because they're so used to referring to digital readouts.

But I also think back to those oh-so-halcyon days when one would stop at a gas station to pick up maps and then plot out a route through the state, then switch to the city map to continue the tracing, then stopping multiple times to ask other gas station attendants or people on the street how to get to an address, quickly memorizing how many rights and lefts and intersections it would take to get there (and invariably not remembering them accurately, requiring more stopping and asking).

Now, there were some advantages from that old process. It made me (and whoever else was traveling with me) use the spatial areas of our brains, exercise our memories, finetune our fine motor skills, hone our conversational skills with strangers—in short, embedded us in the reality of what we were doing and made us take accountability for our actions: success was in our hands, and it was up to us to figure out how to achieve it.

And the library of maps stuffed into the glove compartment or the sidepockets of the doors or thrown into the back seat testified to where I had been and might yet go, a tactile reminder of journeys past, present and future.

Of course, I need to add in the unpleasant anxiety of not really knowing where I was and what I was doing as I followed my sketchy memory of someone's hand gestures and hurried words, the sinking feeling that comes from being lost

and not having a clue about how to dig a way out (and perhaps having to look for a payphone—a payphone!—to call for help).

But overall, there was a palpability to the old-timey use of maps that, while mixed in its benefits and hurdles, nevertheless gave me a sense of being in the flow of life—the creases in the maps (and the tricky way of re-folding them that I never quite mastered), the anxious sweat of trying to arrive, the relief at arriving and the pleasure of the welcome.

With Waze, none (or at least very little) of that, tangibility of a sort traded in for something like magic (as is the case with any non-understood technology, per Arthur C. Clarke): signals from my phone bouncing off invisible satellites processed by servers somewhere coming back to me with a simple instruction to take this exit or that street and announcing that I have arrived at my destination.

I have not, however, ditched the maps. Waze is an added tool to the cartography because there is still the need for and pleasure of looking at a map to see where I am on the earth and to see the relationship of this place with that place, something that Waze can't really give me. Waze will give me the turn-by-turn choreography to drop me off in front of the restaurant or friend's house or rural pick-your-own apple orchard. But the map gives me the concentric circles rippling out from where I am pinpointed, making an offer of the outward stretch of the world around me (the same thing happens when handling a globe) while not losing the hub of who I am because each of us, after all, is the center of the universe.

Going Dual

(February 2022)

I'm reading Clint Smith's *How the Word is Passed* with the overheated rejections of critical race theory (CRT) ringing in my ears, and the two together bring out the inevitable cognitive dissonance: how can anyone promote the notion that you can study American history without investigating how it was shaped by slavery and its racist aftermaths? That would be like trying to explain the structure of water without mentioning hydrogen.

CRT is, thus, critical in the sense of elemental: without it, the thing you want does not exist. It is also critical in the sense of finding fault, something which its detractors seem to fear: if we speak about the racist legacy of slavery, then we cannot be patriotic lovers of our country, so patriotism (with its supremacist roots) must trump investigation and self-reflection.

The detractors also seem afraid of how teaching about the racial forces in American society will expose the ways power operates in the United States, especially as it relates to the use of exploitation and violence to achieve political and economic ends. They don't seem to want to acknowledge that there are oppressors and oppressed and certainly don't want to have to take on any burden of guilt or complicity in maintaining such a situation.

To me, at least, all CRT is saying, like Huck Finn said, is that you can't swing a dead cat in the United States without hitting something that has its origins and development connected to either slavery itself or to the social dynamics of racism over the last century and a half. And just like Huck Finn, there comes a time when a reckoning needs to be made.

The United States seems to always be poised to have this reckoning and make this decision, then it goes awry in some way, often because the backlash to the idea of historical reflection and self-awareness becomes so fevered and essentialist (which is funny, given how CRT's enemies wrongly accuse CRT of teaching race essentialism).

Even if CRT (whatever people think it is) is banned from being used in schools, as many states are doing now, the historical situation that gave rise to its thinking isn't going away, of course. Only when Americans—all Americans—can see their history clearly will they be able to make the inroads they need to make into solving the inequalities that plague their state. "Getting past race" is

not the point, even if it were achievable; "getting past willful ignorance and the damage it does" is the point, and that is achievable.

The whole goal of the American experiment has been to create a nation of people who can retain whatever histories define them while also engaging in the work of building a democracy based on liberty and equality. In other words, they can, and must, have dual consciousnesses: an intensely thick one built up from the layers of their personal histories and to which they have a fierce loyalty and a more rarefied one governed by the etiquettes of reason, logic, self-discipline, debate.

This is, of course, a very unstable existential condition, more "dueling" than "dual," given how humans are built, because it calls upon the second consciousness to modify and influence the first, and humans don't seem to be good at having logic govern emotion, deliberation govern impulse. (Cue Daniel Kahneman's *Thinking, Fast and Slow*, and a great quote from H. Maynard Smith's *Henry VIII and the Reformation*: "A broad-minded man, who can see both sides of the question and is ready to hold opposed truths while confessing that he cannot reconcile them, is at a manifest disadvantage with a narrow-minded man who sees but one side, sees it clearly, and is ready to interpret the whole Bible, or, if need be, the whole universe, in accordance with his formula.")

But, really, "going dual" is the only condition that will save us, akin to what F. Scott Fitzgerald wrote in "The Crack-Up," that "the test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in the mind at the same time, and still retain the ability to function." Smith's book is an eloquent dissertation on what it takes to "still retain the ability to function," such as the two women, Grace and Donna (who called herself "a history nut"), who came to Monticello and were gob-smacked by the revelations of how Jefferson behaved as a slaveholder, something they both said had never been part of the history they learned in school. He describes their palpable pain as they struggle to balance the words of the Declaration with the auction block on the west lawn. As Donna said, "He might have done great things, but boy, did he have a big flaw."

But, as Smith goes on to say, they continued to mull over what they had learned—they kept "going dual," in other words—at one point finding a continuity between the way Jefferson separated families for economic gain and the Trump administration separated families at the border (their meeting with Smith took place in July 2018)—this from what Smith describes as two "self-proclaimed Southern Republicans."

What had this black man and two white women, talking together on the grounds of Monticello, achieved? What point had they reached? Smith doesn't explicitly answer those questions, but he clearly takes solace, if not delight, in two things. First, in how Donna and Grace manage to navigate their way through their dismay to a more truthful rendition about Jefferson and the slave system he helped create and maintain. Second, in how Smith, in conversation with (as he describes Donna) "a white, conservative, Fox News-consuming woman from Texas," trusted the navigation they had made enough to share photos of his fourteen-month-old son.

"Going dual" also means going humble, going quiet; it means tamping down the velocity of indignation; it means understanding that uncertainty is the only certainty, that conviction is deafness and principle, intolerance; it means rejecting the abstract in favor of looking at how the actions of some maim the bodies of others.

Can any of "going dual" be heard, felt, adopted, practiced in American society today? It doesn't seem likely at the moment, and because of that, the society has not retained "the ability to function." But it's what we need to do.

The Water Tower of Weehawken

(March 2022)

American cities in the 19th century had a water problem. More specifically, obtaining clean water and delivering it safely and effectively.

New York City solved its challenge in the 1830s by building the Croton system to draw millions of gallons from Westchester county using dams, aqueducts and receiving and distributing reservoirs in the city (the former was located at what is now the Great Lawn of Central Park and the latter at the site of the main branch of the New York Public Library).

On the Jersey side, while the scale of the challenge was smaller, the urgency was no less, well, urgent. For instance, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), in 1908, Jersey City, New Jersey, was the first city in the United States to begin routine disinfection of community drinking water. "Over the next decade," says the CDC, "thousands of cities and towns across the United States followed suit in routinely disinfecting their drinking water, contributing to a dramatic decrease in disease across the country."

The Hackensack Water Company, a predecessor of Suez North America (our current water company), began its operation to store and supply water in northeastern New Jersey in 1869, initially to the city of Hackensack and the towns of North Hudson. Its original headquarters and major facilities were located in Hackensack, in Bergen County, but in 1881, under the command of Robert W. de Forest, who ran the Hackensack Water Company for 46 years, the company constructed new facilities and moved its headquarters to Weehawken in Hudson County.

Thus commences the story of the iconic Weehawken water tower, a stunning blend of utility and beauty fortunately preserved and protected but, unfortunately, now sitting idle and unused.

The water complex included the tower (more on its specifications in a moment) and two reservoirs, appropriately named Reservoir No. 1 and Reservoir No. 2. No. 1, sited on top of the palisades, held water pumped from the Hackensack River about 14 miles away, and that water, through gravity, fed Hoboken, which sat below the level of the reservoir along the west bank of the Hudson River.

Construction of No. 2 started in 1893—14 acres excavated out of glacial trap rock to hold 69 million gallons for the area known as Weehawken Heights, which included parts of Union City and West Hoboken. No. 2 still exists today as a park owned and managed by the township of Weehawken.

However, neither of these helped the more northerly neighborhoods in Weehawken and Union City, which sat level with No. 1 and No. 2. The tower was built to solve that problem.

Frederick Clarke Withers designed and built the tower. An Englishman living in the United States, he was known, as his Wikipedia page states, for the Gothic manner of his designs. (He also built the Chapel of the Good Shepherd on Roosevelt Island and the Jefferson Market Courthouse, now the Jefferson Market Library, in Greenwich Village.)

Promotional materials for the tower say it was modeled after the Palazzo Vecchio in Florence, Italy. The tower stands 175 feet high tall and is set 300 feet above the level of the Hudson River (though an article in the Nov. 6, 1886, issue of the Engineering News and American Contract Journal states that it is 140 feet from the base to the top of the tower).

The street-level floor of the Weehawken palazzo housed the boiler room, which generated the power to the pumps on the third floor (a squat second floor, really more of a mezzanine, was called the "store room," where the engineer kept whatever stuff an engineer needed). Above that sat the director's office, with two floors of living space above that. And squatting on top of all this was the reason why the palazzo was built: the water tank.

During its functional days, the tank (30' in diameter and 30' tall) held close to 165,000 gallons of water. This meant that the tower had to be built to support 1,320,000 pounds of water (at roughly 8 pounds per gallon) or 660 American (or "short") tons. The engineering article concluded that "the use of gothic arches in supporting [this weight], though considered bold at the time when built, has proved perfectly stable ... and has the advantage over any scheme of iron trussing or beams, that there is practically no springing at the bottom of the tank when filled or emptied."

Overnight, the pumps located on the third floor would draw water from the reservoir through the gatehouse and fill the tank for the next day's use.

The acquisition of the tower by the township in 2000 started a multiyear restoration effort under the leadership of Alane Finnerty, the then-head of the

Water Tower Preservation Committee (and my current next-door neighbor). The primary enemy of the place had not been the passage of time; it had been the passage of time plus pigeons. Their century of laying down guano had rotted out the wooden floors, eaten away at the plaster and corroded a great deal of the exposed metal.

The building had also suffered escalating leaks over the years, especially as the fittings around the exit pipe at the bottom of the tank rotted away, releasing the water accumulating in the tank into the structure.

The restorers worked on many different things in a phased and coordinated way. Four masons rappelled down the four faces of the tower, one to a face, to map the state of the bricks and their mortar. A New Jersey firm rebuilt the floors and expert roofers replaced the pinnacle of the building, including a 25-foot flagpole erected in time to honor the dead from Weehawken on the first anniversary of the 9/11 attack.

But the tank might have posed the greatest challenge of all. It could be accessed through its open top from the roof, but its thirty-foot depth made carting out the garbage a logistical headache. So, out came the acetylene torches wielded by welders who, in a nice homage to the gothic arches of the building itself, did not cut a square opening into the bottom of the tank but one with a graceful arch.

And then began the haul-out. The only access to the tank and all the other spaces from ground level was a cast-iron spiral staircase in a four-foot well, with close to 300 steps going up and 300 steps going down. And that's what the workers used as they lugged garbage bag after garbage bag of crap, pigeon carcasses, more crap and even more crap after that. In hazmat suits. In sweltering conditions.

Today, the tower stands all spiffed-up, currently listed on both State and Federal registers of Historic Places. But it's all spiffed-up with nowhere to go. Plans aplenty have been made to bring the building to life, but it has its challenges, especially since it's a bona fide historical place with restrictions on what can be done with it and to it.

It's both large and cramped, which means that there's no way to shoehorn in an elevator, leaving the spiral staircase the only means of access to the upper floors. (An external elevator has been proposed but never developed.) Climate control is problematic, given its odd mix of open spaces and crabbed niches.

Without both accessibility and regulated temperatures, there is little that can be done beyond using the bottom floor, which is at street level and has an accessible bathroom, and the garden space around the base of the building.

A couple of times I've gained access to the building and trekked the 300 cast-iron stairs to the gothic-arched entrance into the tank. I've stood in the middle of its steel-wrapped emptiness and shouted, delighted to hear my echo lifted by a deep bass underscoring coming from the metallic acoustics. I imagine a choral concert with the singers in the middle and an audience ringing them, and then the audience joining their voices to the choristers, the assembled sound ascending past the flagpole out over the palisades to be heard on a ship in the Hudson River using the red tower to navigate its way (the Federal Maritime Chart does list it as a guiding landmark for river shipping).

Perhaps one day. But with the pandemic rooting its way through American life, not now. For now, it guides ships on the river and travelers through Weehawken and Union City and West New York. Where once it dispensed life-saving water, it now acts as a common meeting point for all eyes, a safe place for us to congregate our thoughts above the fray as we sail our ways, as best we can, through the dark streets around us.

* * * * *

(Hudson Reporter, March 7, 2006)

> The red Weehawken Water Tower, standing tall on Park Avenue near the Pathmark Supermarket, was built in 1883, before the Statue of Liberty was brought to the New York Harbor.
>
> Originally built for the Hackensack Water Company, for years it served the people of Weehawken, Union City and Hoboken, holding 165,000 gallons of water.
>
> The tower stands 175 feet high and 300 feet above sea level. Its designer, Frederick Clarke Withers, modeled it after the Palazzo Vecchio in Florence, Italy.
>
> When Weehawken acquired it in 2000 from private ownership, the city decided it was time for a change, and now the tower is about to begin its third phase of restoration.
>
> "The whole place was renovated and cleaned," said Matthew Papio, president of Paragon Restoration Corporation.

The company finished restoration of the exterior in September 2004, after approximately eight months of work.

Joints were cut and re-appointed, new slate was put on the roof, and the stonework was fixed at the base, he said. The windows were also replaced and a new flagpole now stands at the peak.

Alane Finnerty, chairperson of the Water Tower Preservation Committee, which was formed in 2000 when the tower was threatened to be demolished, said the interior was also stabilized. "Every floor had new steel supports and new wood floors," she said.

Room was also left to allow for the installation of an elevator and fire staircase in the future.

Finnerty said she hopes to break ground with the next phase of the project Sept. 1, which will cost Weehawken $500,000.

This will include grading, paving and planting for a garden design that will surround the base of the tower, she said.

There will be a series of four, lighted, barrier-free courtyards, as well as plantings and a fountain. "It's a very unique design, we're very excited about it," Finnerty said.

In the future there are plans to brighten the entire tower with a "wash of light" for the evenings. "It's so visible from the left side of New York; it would be really impressive and special," she said.

Finnerty also hopes that one day there will be a plaque for the tower, possibly given through a historical society grant. The tower is currently on both State and Federal registers of Historic Places, and has been listed on the New Jersey and National Register of Historic Places as the Hackensack Water Company Complex.

Despite its location on Park Avenue next to a bustling shopping center, the tower can be seen from the Hudson River. Because of its height, the "Red Tower," as it is known on the Federal Maritime Chart, coincidentally served as a landmark that guided ships moving south from upstate New York.

When they spotted the Red Tower, they knew they were approaching the Hudson River harbor.

While standing on the U.S.S. Intrepid with her family, Finnerty said she could see the tower, and deck workers told her they always wondered what it was.

"If I had a wish, it would be for a way to link the history of the area and the people of the area," she said. "It would be a dream of mine to have that network, and to exchange and share that information."

A Pleasant Dinner

(April 2022)

The Marvelous María Beatriz and I were invited to dinner not long ago with some very lovely people, almost all of them of the Bahá'í faith and whom we met a year ago at the wedding of Yael, at whose house we were meeting and who was cooking up a storm of Persian food. (Names have been changed.)

The talk was genial and gentle, wending this way and that. Then Zach and his wife, Aviva, were talking about the volunteer work they do in their town, committed as they are to being involved as good citizens and "being part of the solution, not the problem." He related a story about a school board meeting being hijacked by a group of anti-mask proponents (the town has a mask mandate, which was in effect the night of the board meeting). According to Zach, the board members huddled in private session for a short time, then adjourned the meeting since the anti-mask people were not going to follow the mandate. (The police officer usually assigned to the meeting was not there that night, for some reason, Zach said, so there was no muscle in the room, so to speak, to move them along.)

The talk then shifted to comments about how so much better it would be if people would just care about their fellow citizens and not politicize an important health measure and (not to be sarcastic) some variation on the Rodney King statement about "why can't we all just get along?"

So, me being me, I had to ask the question I asked, and I asked it because I'm reading *How Civil Wars Start* by Barbara F. Walter (and, in our American situation today, one of the ways a civil war could get started is like this, with guerilla tactics by dissidents that gum up the democratic workings and put everyone on edge and thus a bit more inclined toward autocracy than they might otherwise have been).

I asked Zach that, yes, the board solved the problem of the next meeting by having it online (though that's no guarantee of security, since meetings can be hacked), but that's not a permanent solution, so what happens the next time they show up?

What I was getting at, though I didn't say it outright because to have done so would have been rude, was this: how willing are you get to as dirty as they are to quash what they are doing and the danger they present? And it's not even "dirty" in the fist-to-nose sort of way but in the face-to-face sort of way: not hand

the control off to the police officer on duty but to stand square and say (and be willing to work through), "Come, let us reason together."

My question was also prompted by a shift in the discussion, from Aviva, about Martin Luther King Jr.'s Letter from a Birmingham Jail and how beautiful his sentiments were about loving the enemy and foregoing violence.

The answering of the question didn't go far (I didn't expect it to and didn't push it—after all, this was a dinner among friends, not a political confrontation), but I at least wanted to get the idea into the air as something of a balance to the pacificism and the poetry flowing out from the others (and from a book of Bahá'í prayers to Zach's left).

(Later in the evening, Zach and I talked about David Graeber and Occupy and the Quakers and the how-to of speaking with love to a person who may very well hate you. He knows that building consensus and the humanitarian guidelines of the faith needed to be brought into the mix, he just wasn't quite sure how that could be worked into a town meeting of the Board of Education at 7 p.m. on a Wednesday night during the time of COVID.)

Still later, though along the same lines, Aviva brought up a story about what she considered a perfectly thrilling and inspiring event that happened at a TED-sponsored event at COP26 in Scotland on Oct. 14, 2021, when a climate activist, Lauren MacDonald, publicly chastised Ben van Beurden, CEO of Royal Dutch Shell, in the following way: "Mr. van Beurden, I just want to start by saying that you should be absolutely ashamed of yourself for the devastation you have caused to communities all over the world. Already, you are responsible for so much death and suffering," going on to deliver an indictment against him and everything connected to the fossil fuel industry. (The video of the full accusation runs on any number of websites.)

Much at the dinner table was made of her passion, the pain she must have felt in doing this, the strength of her commitment. Which, yes, is all true, as anyone can attest to after watching the performance (and from her own selfie videos where she spoke about the fear and resolve she felt).

But I wanted to chime in with (but didn't), weren't we saying the same thing about Greta Thunberg in 2018 (who also did a TED talk), about how the youth would prevail where the geezers, compromised by life, can't and how important it is to speak truth to power?

And what change has that made in the last four years? And what change, really, will happen after Lauren MacDonald's diatribe against Shell? Yes, he will feel embarrassed, perhaps even personally moved, but his overlords don't care, and that means that in the end, he won't (and literally can't afford to) care, either. (Cue Upton Sinclair: "It is difficult to get a man to understand something, when his salary depends upon his not understanding it!") And how risky and dangerous it is to put such faith in the power of a performance and performance in general to redirect the interests of the capitalist regime toward more humanitarian actions.

As with the unmasked anti-maskers at the school board meeting: what happens if the power of goodness and light and compassion and moral urgency are not enough to save ourselves from ourselves? When is it permissible to amp up the confrontation (as with the Luddites, in the book I'm reading titled *Breaking Things at Work* by Gavin Muellar) and throw a monkey wrench into the works?

I seriously love that my dinner mates believe as they believe, that they are committed to the bright side of the force, and there is much to be gained by sharing the thrill and deep resonance of a commitment to living out strong moral convictions. I also think their analysis is incomplete if they also do not consider forceful resistance as a force of equal importance and weight to whatever King Jr. wrote from his jail cell.

Given their dedication to a binary of light and dark forces, they cannot give "dark" equal billing to "light," but it is also possible to re-think the dark as another form of light, complementary and not antithetical, an option to be used when those of good heart cannot prevail by argument, suasion or compassion against those who care nothing about a good heart and have only a desire for power for guidance.Stay tuned.

"Poor But Deserving Boys"

(May 2022)

Part of my college tuition at Harvard College was paid from a scholarship dedicated to helping "poor but deserving boys" achieve the summum bonum of being a Harvard alumnus.

Each year, I composed a letter to the fund's managers thanking them for their support and giving a brief update of what I'd been doing. I don't recall anything I wrote, but I do remember the pungent humiliation of having to abase myself for the sake of money. I was thankful and resentful all in the same moment.

This is a feeling about money that I have never lost.

I did manage to make it through Harvard and several other schools, but I've never been able to shed the dislike of having to work for a living, of being at the mercy of money. I don't mind working hard—working hard is the only way to get to know the world and transform it through the body—but always being a slave to a wage, to be "poor but deserving," is terrible.

Now, I'll be the first to admit that I don't have an entrepreneurial bone in my body and have never been able to pull together gigs, side hustles and so on to supplement what I earn in my salary. I just don't seem to have the talent or ingenuity to do this, so in a sense I have only myself to blame for my dilemma.

And blame myself I do, often, turning myself into a miser who can't see money as a means to an end (pleasure, safety, compassion) but only as an end itself, the end being the ability to discard the feeling of being at the mercy. I don't want to be rich in the usual sense; what I want is enough money as a cushion again the vile buffets of the world so that I don't have to think about it. I want enough money to be amnesiac about money.

It's the thinking about it all the time that wears on me: constricting me, pinch-mouthing me, turning me sober and calculating and killjoying and wetblanketing everything. I hate myself for it and can't seem to get out of my own way.

I am such a bad capitalist. The threat of, the feeling of, poverty does not spur me to change my state or innovate my fate—I want a different system, with different incentives and obligations, "from each…"

I had always planned to die broke. I just hate being broke along the way.

And I Am a Material Boy

(June 2022)

As a favor to my friend, Elfin, I am listening to a four-hour video of a conversation with Bernardo Kastrup, described as "leading the modern renaissance of metaphysical idealism, the notion that reality is essentially mental."

I have to admit that I'm only 13 minutes into it, having just heard his boilerplate explanation of what is wrong with materialism and any person who looks at the world through a materialist lens.

I'll get back to this characterization in a moment, but I have been thinking that it's really not helpful to speak about "materialism" as if it were a unitary belief system that someone "holds."

I consider myself a materialist because I can't see that there is anything other than the material out of which we and the universe are made that makes use up – for instance, no divine realm that runs on its own physics that can contravene the physics that make up my world. (By "physics" I mean the forces, stresses, engineering and so on that create and drive the matter/energy combo that passes for reality, both the inner me and the outer me, "inner" and "outer" used only as convenient terms to describe location; in reality, the inner and outer have constant commerce with one another as the organism goes about its business of surviving.)

But, again, more on this later.

Kastrup likens the universe where he grounds his understanding of being and consciousness to people with dissociative identity disorder, who house "alters" that are different points of view of a single mind: "We are all alters of one mind."

He goes on to say: "When the universe undergoes dissociative identity disorder, or something metaphorically related to dissociative identity disorder, those natural dissociative processes in the universe also look like something, there must be something it looks like, everything [word unknown] in nature looks like something when observed from a given perspective…and what it looks like is what we call biology. Life is the image of that dissociation."

He muses upon how the first dissociation happened in the universe that was survived itself, but when he speaks about "how the mind of nature dissociated

for the first time," all I could think of was this: Is this not just another way of saying, "1 In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. 2 Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters. 3 And God said, 'Let there be light,' and there was light. 4 God saw that the light was good, and he separated the light from the darkness. 5 God called the light 'day,' and the darkness he called 'night.' And there was evening, and there was morning—the first day."

In other words, God [i.e., Kastrup's universe] dissociates the formless void.

Which, to me, all sounds like theology recast as something science-like to make it more palatable.

I will probably go back to the video, just as a kindness to Elfin, but at this point, I don't want to be drawn into an argument that simply sucks out my energy.

And what is that argument? Actually, I think "argument" is the wrong term—it is "yearning" or "longing." Kastrup, at least for the little I've watched the video, and Elfin and the people Elfin turns to for his research into the senses seem to have a root yearning for life to be more, and mean more, than just accident, evolution and chance.

Why? When people get all TED about the human race, they refer to innate human capacities for wonder, curiosity, adventurousness and so on, implying, if not outright saying, that the urge to know the origins of our being is an implacable drive of our biology, which must then reflect some elemental creative power of the universe working its way through us. The universe created us in order to know itself.

But why are those not equally lauded who want no truck with such mythmaking and instead are willing to accept that we are all products of soulless, spiritless processes, chances and probabilities, that, if looked at properly, are just as miraculous and wondermaking as just-so tales about creators and cosmic consciousnesses.

The only difference is, they don't offer the comfort of a home, a garden of Eden to return to, a purpose that makes our brief lives have value. They say: you are on your own and have to figure it out, even if the species isn't really equipped at this point in its evolution to make that happen (though it is equipped with knowledge—what it doesn't know how to do is make workable arrangements to share power, and it still doesn't have a good grasp on its own psychology.)

I understand the yearning as an antidote to the possibility that the existentialists are right—and who knows, maybe the TED people and Kastrup are right and we are all laved by mysterious energies that, if rightly understood and accepted, will dissolve our loneliness and bring us home. I just don't feel what they feel, see what they see.

And perhaps both are true—for those like me, who cannot find the resonances, then the universe is a dice game and when entropy is done, all is done. For Elfin and Kastrup, who think they are on the wavelength, then they get to move into the light. A universe for the grim and a universe for the great-spirited. Perhaps, then, we don't have to spend so much time wording each other to death.

Unradical Radicals

(July 2022)

In the May 2022 issue of *Vanity Fair*, James Pogue writes "Free Radicals," subheaded in this way: "They're not MAGA. They're not Q. They're the intellectual New Right. And they're ready to burn it down."

The subhead is hyperbolic – they *say* they're ready to burn it down, but they really aren't. They say that shit to garner attention and because they know, thanks to their privilege, that they will never have to soil their hands by manning the barricades. They are rhetorical reactionaries with a taste for wordy pyromania—spoiled brats, really.

Pogue focuses a lot on J.D. (James David) Vance and Curtis Yarvin as the house political theorists who postulate the existence of something called "the regime," described by Pogue, by way of Vance, as "an Ivy League intellectual and management class—a quasi-aristocracy—[out] to adopt a set of economic and cultural interests that directly oppose those of people in places like Middletown, Ohio, where he grew up." Populated, in other words, by people very much like the Yale-educated venture capitalist Vance—but don't say that too loudly.

There is also "the Cathedral," by way of Yarvin, here in Pogues' word: "[L]iberal ideology holds sway in the important institutions of prestige media and academia—an intertwined nexus he calls 'the Cathedral' … an oligarchy of the educated who care more about competing for status within the system than they do about America's national interest."

Their solution is to put a strong man (and it will be a man) in control: "And the way conservatives can actually win in America, [Yarvin] has argued, is for a Caesar-like figure to take power back from this devolved oligarchy and replace it with a monarchical regime run like a start-up. As early as 2012, he proposed the acronym RAGE—Retire All Government Employees—as a shorthand for a first step in the overthrow of the American 'regime.' What we needed, Yarvin thought, was a 'national CEO, [or] what's called a dictator.' Yarvin now shies away from the word dictator and seems to be trying to promote a friendlier face of authoritarianism as the solution to our political warfare: 'If you're going to have a monarchy, it has to be a monarchy of everyone,' he said." (Just to note: a "monarchy of everyone" makes no sense, and what he is talking about is a coup.)

Vance, Yarvin and the rest of the poseurs that Pogue portrays are not really serious about what they say, that is, they are not creating the cells and committees of correspondence and political education classes and all the infrastructure needed to create the revolutionary vanguard because, truth be told, they like the fever dream they've concocted because it feeds their bank accounts, political egos and thirst for influence.

They like to appear as serious intellectuals posing serious questions to trigger serious change, but the only image of a post-regime world that they can come up with is a country run by a dictator where, according to Blake Masters, president of the Thiel Foundation and running for the U.S. Senate in Arizona, stability will be reached by "on-shoring industrial production, slashing legal immigration, regulating big tech companies, and eventually restructuring the economy so that one salary would be enough to raise a family on."

This is not an emancipatory vision of society: it is a nostalgia that American conservatives have always had for a time (usually labeled as the 1950s) when "people of color" and their problems did not exist as such and, according to Vance, "it will mean that my son grows up in a world where his masculinity—his support of his family and his community, his love of his community—is more important than whether he works for fucking McKinsey."

This loss of homogeneity, the grudge they feel about having to cede power to people who have moved in from the margins to take a seat at the table, this yearning for a life where "God's in His heaven— / All's right with the world!"—these seem to be some of the true drivers of their dyspepsia and desire to be dominated by a Caesar while also having the power to Caesar-like dominate others below them.

I find their ideas airless and their sense of grievance ridiculous, and if their "program," if it can be called that, came into being, it would cement in place all the inequities in American society without providing any means to redress them (after all, Caesar is not going to institute direct democracy).

It is ironic that they accuse the Cathedral and the regime of being driven by people who only want to satisfy their own desires for status rather than work for the greater good of the nation, but, of course, they want to do the same thing, just on a different broadcast frequency and for a subset of American citizens who have the proper skin color and who have profited from their privilege without having to apologize for anything.

Pogue states that Vance believes that "our universities are full of people who have a structural, self-serving, and financial interest in coloring American culture as racist and evil." But this sentence could easily be restructured to describe this cohort: "our right-wing mediaverse is full of people who have a structural, self-serving, and financial interest in coloring American culture as white, male, and aggrieved."

They are revolutionaries without any sense of emancipation, radical authoritarians, libertarian Caesarists. The fact that they are taken serious at all is a sign of just how close we are to a precipice that no Caesar can save us from (and, really, what Caesar in his right mind would want to take ownership of this burning house?).

One last thought, sparked by the RAGE nonsense: Michael Lewis' recent work on government employees (*The Fifth Risk*) and his podcasts about experts. You may think you can gut the government of its workers and still have a functioning polity, but it ain't true. Our well-being relies upon on active government work that is not profit-driven and done for the good of all—that is the armature upon which our democratic society is built: not markets, not stock exchanges, not influencers and political stuntwork but public servants doing subsidized work to build knowledge, process and accountability. I'll take the Deep State any day over the Shallow Seas of the peacocks and pretenders.vision.

The Secret to Superhuman Strength

(August 2022)

I haven't read many graphic works done specifically as graphic works. I didn't read comics as a kid (or at least I don't remember buying and reading them—perhaps shared them with friends? though I don't have a memory of that, either).

But I read a review of The Secret to Superhuman Strength by Alison Bechdel in the NYRB by Sarah Blackwood (July 21, 2022, issue) that interested me enough to go to the local library (online version) and download the book to my Kindle phone app (I was surprised it was available). In the course of a day, I read the piece (about 220 pages, but, of course, mostly pictures!).

We are roughly age-contemporaries (she, 1960; me, 1953), and the parts of the book that touch upon the achy journey of bodily aging resonate: we have commiserable challenges in that regard. Her renditions of (over) exercising gave me the good laugh that comes from self-recognition, but she is also sharp about the ego-erasing salve of hard exercise and why a person would apply that to the self (in short, to shut down the goddamn chattering in the brain and the brain-adjacent ricochet rooms of social media—to give whatever is the self [what is the self?] a respite from its own incessant and spastic and wasteful nattering on).

The momentary annulment of anxiety produced by a hard run is what this book is about, elevated to the metaphysical—a maundering and divagating about meaning and purpose as she finds herself in the middle of Dante's road. I understand her urges in this space—is the answer in zen/yoga, exercise endorphins, substances and their abuse, nature, exhausting labor, companionship? She tries to tie together as a single search for life-meaning an exposition about 19th-century romantics (the Wordsworths, Coleridge) and transcendentalists (Emerson, Fuller), her father's suicide because he was a closeted gay man and her mother issues around gender (all of which impact her own relationships), nirvana/samsara, and the perhaps unique modern torture of trying to find self-fulfillment in a capitalist regime.

All this is, of course, a mosh pit and a mess generated in part by the word games with which we tease ourselves about ultimate questions (zen is notorious for this, believing that its koans and paradoxes and contradictions burn off the undergrowth of logic and clear the field for ripening insights when, in fact, they are just willful confusions so that older people can lord it over the neophytes).

I've long since abandoned this questing/questioning because it interferes with actually living one's life with all available fullness.

(These word plays are also based on the false assumption that the words map on to reality, that they echo and broadcast some already-existing content that the words uncover and reveal, when the truth is that the words are their own world, mapped on to nothing but the urges of the speakers and the need for communal illusion.)

Who cares if life has an ultimate meaning or is extruded from a divinity or (equally nonsensical) is an outgrowth of a sentient energy permeating the universe? Even if the assertion basic to all these is true—there is something, an energy or a being, that can be tagged as the reason why there is something rather than nothing and answers the question of life, the universe and everything—it doesn't solve inflation at the gas pump, doesn't feed the hungry, doesn't explain why we have so many fucking streaming services, and so on.

As the philosophers in *The Hitchhiker's Guide* found out when Deep Thought gave them the answer of "42," the answer depends on the question. But I'd go one step more—why have a question at all? It is pretty clear that we are born, we live, and we die and that is it, and in that time frame, it is as imperative as possible to love well, eat and drink well, pay close attention to everything, take nourishment from the absurd humor of the universe, and die peacefully in bed. We damage ourselves if we think that such a mundane life-arc as this betrays something noble about human nature, devalues that vaunted human urge for creativity and discovery and blah blah blah ("we are destined to live among the stars")—that somehow our overreaching and the inflicting of suffering is a sign of our dark greatness as a species.

Yet, as is true, as Bechdel's struggles demonstrate, we are also very much a species that devises intricate afflictions that tie our lives into knots and then spends vast energies slicing through those knots to land in an undone place of peace—until boredom settles in and the self-suffering begins again. The zen folks are correct in that we generate endless cycles of suffering for ourselves and others—but no amount of sitting and mantra-mouthing is going to change that.

Bechdel handles how she cycles through her cycles with a good deal of wit and self-deprecation, though at times I felt there were one or two cycles more than needed—the book could use some tightening. But Bechdel occupies a cultural and artistic space where her all-too-human explorations of family,

friends and gender satisfy a low-level constant yearning in her audiences for relatability and friendliness. Her messiness is like the messiness of all of us—I see myself in her, I see her in myself, and we share vulnerabilities. No wonder her previous work, Fun Home, got the musical theatre treatment it did because she has a good ability to create an intimacy with people she doesn't know and who don't know her but who, for the moment, have agreed to act on a time-limited basis as if they are close and trusting and understanding and accepting.

If the human species does have one special gift, it is in creating fictions like this that can behave like actual worlds that, for the moment, calm the anxious waters and repeal our isolations.

Blotter

(September 2022)

I've been a denizen of Weehawken, NJ, for over 20 years. I've been reading through the "Weehawken Police Blotter (1898-1903)" from The Weehawken Time Machine [1], maintained by the Weehawken Historical Commission, as part of casual effort to learn more about my burg and gather material that could be used for articles, stories and other projects.

The blotter, titled "Sergeant's Blotter/September 1st, 1898" on the inside front cover, is primarily handwritten (though from October 1, 1900, to March 27, 1901 [pp. 116-152], someone typed up the entries, with the handwriting kicking back in on the third entry for March 27 [p. 153] and going forward). Perhaps this was an experiment—after all, the typewriter was a modern invention at this point, having come to market in the 1860s and 1870s, and perhaps whoever was in charge of the blotter thought it was time for the police department to step up technologically.

As I read through the entries, I tried to tease out what living was like at that time, not just the processes but the sensibility of it: the smell of horses and the ozone tang of the electricity going through the trolley wires, the cacophony of the trainyards and ferry terminal (especially when, in 1903, they began the boring of the tunnels down on Baldwin Avenue that would eventually reach into Manhattan and are in such dire shape today), the temperatures (old pictures show that the huge trees we have today were not that huge along the Boulevard, so it must have been hotter in the summer—in fact, there are several entries of people being taken to the hospital for heat prostration), the greater physical energy needed to get through a day (not just the hard labor of working but also getting from one place to another—there were trolleys but things mostly could not move faster than the speeding of a cantering horse), the greater physical dangers and how they affected daily movements (lots of stories about people being crushed, drowned, crashed into, dismembered, not to mention just plain dinged and bruised).

The blotter-writers were not ethnographers, of course, and can't be faulted for leaving out the really interesting things about people's lives because they were not being paid to be inquisitive, so this is where the imagination (fed by other sources) gets to have its field of play, which I will do in a moment.

But for me, the anchor of things helps me anchor my writing. For instance, many entries announce that someone has gone missing (often children, but not always), and to help people find them, the blotter-writer describes the clothes the person wore when last seen (this is how I learned about "congress gaiters"). But I want to also know what these clothes felt like on the body and in the hand, what they smelled like, how were they made, and so on.

To me, the book chronicles an astonishing number of dead animals, usually cats, dogs and horses. (George Vatcky, dead animal collector, was the go-to guy for removal, though he might have had a bit more to handle than he could handle since many entries announce that he had been notified but then had to be notified several other times—perhaps just too many carcasses to collect.) I want to know how the situation played out when Vatcky had to haul a dead horse onto a wagon pulled by other horses (did the other horses have something to say about one of their own being lugged away?), especially when many of these dead animals had already gotten a head start on decomposing. Where did the carcasses go (there is mentioned a Town Pound): buried, incinerated, dumped in the river? How much was he paid: per species, per incident, per pound? And paid how often? Did he follow "best practices"? (Several items mention the S.P.C.A., so perhaps he worked in conjunction with them.) Inquiring minds want to know.

Horses underwent a fair amount of damage, it appeared, being spooked and bolting or run into by a trolley car or poorly driven (slipping down hillsides or getting caught in railroad tracks) or just plain stolen (though not sure how you could hide a large wagon pulled by a horse, especially when the blotter-writers gave very detailed horse descriptions, down to how many hands high they were and the coloring of their bodies, manes, tails, and feet). The horses must also have had to ride the ferry because some of the businesses noted in the lost or stolen reports had New York City addresses—another terror for the horses to face.

Dogs got it in the neck quite often. Many reports of a dog biting an adult or a child and the police officer shooting the dog (or sometimes shooting the dog on the request of the owner, something that happened with horses as well). I tried to imagine that scene—where did the shooting take place? back yard? basement? who got to witness this? and if the children were around—did they see, hear? Was Vatcky then notified (and how, since no radios)? Was the officer trained to do this properly to minimize pain or damage (S.P.C.A.?)? I mean, a

dog is one thing, but shooting a horse is another altogether—where to place the muzzle?

Cats just seemed to die of their own accord, though there is one entry about a cat biting a child and having to be clubbed on the head to get it to let go—wonder what the child had done to provoke the attack? And it's the cat that gets the execution.

Some notable things: technology collisions between trolleys and horses with wagons; lots of children wandering away, sometimes running away, from home (the notations rarely say if the child was found and returned); people getting fined for riding their bikes on the sidewalks (a town ordinance, it turns out); bodies floating in the river, sometimes of abandoned infants; bodies being crushed by the trains in the railyards along the river (many stories of limbs being cut off, fractures, breaks, maimings); lots of drunk and disorderly notifications for both men and women; larcenies, petit and grand; people gathered up for "safe keeping" because they're too drunk to fend for themselves; "demented people" carted off to the County Jail for "examination by the County Physician"—wonder how that went at a place called Snake Hill.

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The bulk of the blotter entries are one-offs—people enter and exit, soon gone from sight.

But some names come before the bar of justice multiple times for judgement and punishment.

From these entries, it's possible to sketch out something like a biography, limited, of course, but also fiction's fertile ground.

Introducing Ellen Giles

Ellen first appears in the blotter on Nov. 19, 1898, arrested by Officer Chamberlain and charged with being "drunk and disorderly." She is listed as 38 years of age and "of boat [at the] foot of 17th St."

Many entries in the blotter use the phrase "of boat" or "of boat lying" [and sometimes "laying"] to describe where someone lives. The area mentioned was near the Erie Rail Road Co. Weehawken yards, according to the map of Hudson County, New Jersey 1909 Plate 012.[2] It could not have been a very pleasant spot—noisy, dirty, smelly (not only the stink of the machinery but also the nearby

stockyards and poultry yards and the river itself, with the occasional corpses, human and animal, floating along with whatever effluent came from upstream).

And the life of a single woman "of boat," though she may have had a son: a March 31, 1900, entry named a James Giles Jr., 18 years of age, "of boat lying at foot of 17th St." arrested for disorderly conduct (based on a warrant) and fined $5. Apparently, he couldn't pay it and was therefore committed (mostly likely to the county jail) in default.

From the first entry in 1898 to the final one on June 13, 1903, she was arrested 22 times (and if the blotters continued before 1898 and after 1903, I am sure there are probably more entries for her). The usual charge was "drunk and disorderly," but she had some variations on the charges: a drunken condition, charge distroying [sic] property; habitual drunkard; disorderly and calling vile names; disorderly and loitering about the Station House; disorderly person.

The "loitering" accusation is interesting because it comes late in her roster (March 28, 1902). What was she actually doing to be charged with loitering? And each time she does this, she is arrested by Station House Keeper George Frasch; sometimes the punishment is being committed to the county jail for a time, sometimes Ellen/Nellie is "repremanded [sic] and discharged."

(Side note: The name change happens in 1902; in June, she is Ellen, and in December, she is Nellie. Also, her age fluctuates: in the space of two months, from December 1902 to February 1903, she ages two years, from 41 to 43, and during March 1903, when she's nicked three times, her age hovers around 42 and 43.

(I like to think she is just messing with them: when the sergeant or station master or whoever has to handle her at the station asks for name and age, she just says what pops into her head—after all, she is being indicted for being disorderly, so she might as well be disorderly. Or just says, "Guess, if you're so smart—you got it written down there." And so they do.)

As for the loitering: I think she had a thing for George, or they had a thing for each other, but he couldn't acknowledge it because of his domestic situation (and perhaps he also had grown tired of it), so he kept arresting her and sending her away in one manner or another. She is out on the street in front of the station, in whatever manner of drunk she is at the time of day, just walking back and forth. George watches through the window. Up and down she goes, glancing at the window every now and then, a defiant but stupefied look on her face,

perhaps every once in a while standing stock-still, arms akimbo, staring hard enough that the window glass would shatter if looks were hammers.

George's fellows in the station house (assuming a couple are around and not out shooting horses or rousting kids on bicycles off the sidewalks) give each other knowing looks behind his back—a finger by the side of the nose sort of thing—and George is aware of this, a slow burn of shame and annoyance creeping up the back of his neck. Perhaps someone clears his throat; someone else repeats that; the kind of clearing of the throat that says (if gutturals had a vocabulary), "Hey, George, what d'ya got goin' on over there, eh?" followed by a sly needling grin.

Meanwhile, Ellen/Nellie is doing her Dance of the Loiter, and George is her only audience, and throats are being cleared and knowing looks exchanged and it's hot in the station house and George is worried that Ellen/Nellie will tell his wife (or whoever his domestic partner is—we shouldn't assume a conformity) and the pressure "to do something" to avoid embarrassment and ribbing builds and builds until George, jamming on his headgear (watch cap, helmet—not sure what the station house uniform entailed), traipses out to the perambulating Ellen/Nellie and does his formal shtick of having her name inscribed in the blotter of life.

I want to learn about what the actual process entailed: Does George get to set the level of punishment or does this go to a judge of some sort because she can be fined, reprimanded and discharged, or sent to the county jail—there doesn't seem to be any consistency in these rulings. If she is committed, where does she stay while they call in whatever transportation they use to cart people out to the jail at Snake Hill in Secaucus? Is there a bathroom of some sort? What if she's still menstruating (after all, she's only in her late 30s)? How much is a fine of $5 in today's money (one website calculated it as $168)—not an easy sum to rustle up on demand, especially if your only lodging is "of boat lying." (And what kind of boat—presumably more than a dinghy, but was it sheltered from the seasons and could she store clean clothes—and how did the clothes get washed? And bodies get washed? The questions unfold unendingly like two facing mirrors.)

I also wonder if grief abides in Ellen/Nellie. Assuming that James Giles is her son, 18 years of age, born when she was 20, he follows her wayward path, unfathered/untethered as he is. (And the father—love of her life who trashed her and drove her to these extremes, from which she could not—perhaps did not—

want to pull back, given the pain?) On November 18, 1900, James is taken to the hospital "in a very sick condition"—perhaps he did not recover, disappeared into a pauper's grave because Ellen/Nellie couldn't even pay the fine to keep herself out of jail, much less afford last rites for her son. (The county did have a potter's field,[3] and I assume that the town's Poor Master Quinn or Poormaster William Finley consigned unclaimed remains as part of their remit, just like George Vatcky's job of discarding Weehawken's dead animals).

When they did commit her to the county jail, how did they get her there—how did they get anyone there, including her as well as the deemed insane, the tubercular, the smallpox-ridden? What were the vehicles? What were the protocols? What roads (and how rough to ride)? Manacled or unmanacled? And then there, for 30 or 90 days—how could she be sure they would let her go? With whom was she housed? What were her days (and nights) like, especially if she did not have access to her substances (or perhaps she did, clandestine black markets in the wards)? Speaking of that, where did she get her alcohol if she could not pay her fine?

And yet all we have are the repeated telegraphic scribbles by a flourished hand in a 400-page police blotter. I wonder if she has guest appearances in other police blotters, both before and after this one. When was her last entry? Die young or old? Did she end up being one of the approximately 10,000 unmourned people buried in a pauper's grave at Snake Hill? If so, what was that last journey like?

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[1] https://weehawkentimemachine.omeka.net/items/show/2970)
[2] https://wardmapsgifts.com/products/hudson-county-new-jersey-1909-plate-012-union-weehawken-and-west-hoboken
[3] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Snake_Hill ; https://weirdnj .com/stories/abandoned/snake-hill/ ; https://www.nj.com/inside -jersey/2014/10/the_mystery_of_secaucus_snake_hill.html

Snake Hill, Memory and Memorials

(October 2022)

In my last essay, I spoke about the Weehawken police blotter and about teasing out people's narratives from its telegraphic entries. I also mentioned how people were sent to a place called Snake Hill, Hudson County's complex of buildings housing the cast-offs of society, with a penitentiary, infectious disease hospitals, an alms house and, most notoriously, burial grounds holding at least 10,000 people over its century of use, most of whom now lie under the New Jersey Turnpike and the playing fields of what is now known as Laurel Hill Park.

In 2003, when the turnpike authority discovered the interments as it began building its off-ramp to the Secaucus Junction train station, it reluctantly undertook the disinterment and reburial of about 4,500 remains, the largest such effort in the history of the United States (a tale told in the 2007 documentary, *Snake Hill*). The story of excavating the burial ledgers and other paperwork connected to the cemeteries was another heroic story, and with that documentation, officials were able to identify about 900 people.

I went out to Laurel Hill Park, the deodorized name of the former Snake Hill complex, knowing that I walked over the graves of more than half the people logged into the burial journals as having been buried there. I also knew that most likely everyone there with me that day on the playing fields and at the boat launch did not know what lay beneath them. Nor did the thousands of motorists on the New Jersey Turnpike or the hundreds of people housed in the apartments and condos now part of the Secaucus Junction site.

I was not sure what I was supposed to feel. Perhaps I don't need to feel anything, that is, any regret or anger or even curiosity—after all, everything that happened there happened a long time ago, and eventually all the memories will dissolve along with the generations of people holding them.

I also traveled to Maple Park Grove Cemetery in Hackensack, where the remains of those taken from Snake Hill were remaindered and a cenotaph erected, listing the names of everyone scratched into the burial registers, not just those taken from the site (though the body-bearers couldn't have made that list since according to one of the people interviewed in the documentary, very few people could be identified).

So, the situation in Hackensack is that while everyone has been named, there is no way to know if any one named person is in the cemetery vault or still

under the playing fields and turnpike traffic scrum in Secaucus. Even though known, still unknown.

And the cenotaph is not well maintained: the inscription in marble above the incised tree are both discolored, making the words difficult to read. It's tucked off in a corner of the landscape and, at least on the day I was there, the area behind the memorial was full of trash and dead grass clippings. Ignored once again.

The whole story is a maddening one of neglect and abuse, but perhaps it just bears no relevance to our struggles today (though, as I sketch it out, I have to write that phrase a little bit tongue in cheek): a county administration mired in a history of corruption, a state authority careless about the niceties of building a state-spanning project, thousands of voiceless poor people dying uneulogized in a place no different in function than a landfill, a handful of people dedicated to the truth being told and actually bringing a small part of that truth into the light.

(It's quite likely that if Snake Hill happened in 2022, the story might turn out differently because of different technologies [e.g., DNA, lidar, ground penetrating radar] and more environmental oversight of the construction project—though I tend to think that the forces arrayed against the dead people would still be strong enough to keep them in the ground and out of the public memory and the bond markets.)

Of course, the writerly part of me thinks that the story is a powerful one to tell, with identifiable heroes and villains, a clear moral dichotomy and a bittersweet victory. But is it? What needle would it move to tell this story? What is the dramatic conflict—not the frictional conflict of battle but the conflict of moral choices where the outcome is not ordained or even known by the chooser? (In other words, what is the gray mystery play aspect of this brightly colored landscape?)

However, I can't give it up completely, and I think the story (or a story) lies not in the grand sweep of large actors but in the individual battle against the inhuman conditions. In this case, Ellen Giles, the heroine (?) of my last essay, goes to prison for one of her 90-day stints in the county jail for being drunk and disorderly.

Ellen was in the county jail often enough, as my record of her shows. What did she think about when she went? Did she know people there who knew her because she had been there so often—the weird intimacy of the jailer and the

jailed? Or even the jailed and the jailed? (She encounters "old friends" when she arrives who are not friends but at least recognizable.) How did she spend her days? How was the detox for her (or were there black markets in the jail that gave access to the needed substances)? Did she want to leave when her stint was up? Who kept track of her days? Did she have a cell or was it dormitory style? Panopticon? How often did the abuse happen? Hygiene (showers, periods, bathrooms)?

So, Ellen, how do you feel being dragooned into the service of historical memory? What's that, you say? Let me get writing that down.

The Spotted Lanternfly

(November 2022)

It perched on the tip of my right shoe ("it" being a spotted lanternfly, known Linnaeusly as Lycorma delicatula). The directive from the state agency tasked with insect assassination stated that I should crush these creatures whenever and wherever I could because they were considered an "invasive species," that is, migrants setting up house in a place where those already here didn't want any new kids on their blocks.

But it sat on my shoetip. I couldn't, wouldn't, smash my own foot, so to carry out the prime directive meant I needed to shift it to the concrete where I could deal out death with a quick Vibram smash of a shoe sole.

I wiggled my toes. Nothing. SLF seemed unconcerned by its imminent demise – by anything, really, no fight or flight response, just placid on my shoe. I flexed the front part of my foot upward – it just rode the wave. I zigged my foot, then zagged it – it rode the to and the fro.

So, I studied it, this planthopper insect related to the stink bug that sucks the sap of grapes and other related plants though it prefers Ailanthus altissima, the tree of heaven, which, irony of ironies, is itself considered an invasive species. (To deepen the irony, both biological migrants originate in China.)

It bears spots, as the name states (though not technically a fly), with an outer pair of bland salmon-colored wings covering a haute couture set of stippled underwings with flashes of red, black and white.

But life moves on. I reached down and flicked it off my shoe, thus turning it into prey.

Except. Why.

Reports about the effectiveness of citizen stompery stopping the spread of SLF show a minimal impact on the spread of the species – in other words, no amount of stomping will stop its range. (Though one could imagine a universe in which citizens are willingly dragooned into believing that SLF extinction is somehow tied to their own redemption and bank accounts and they thus volunteer to hunt down every specimen until they can look up at the moon with red-rimmed eyes and say, "The last is gone!" While the overlords who ordered the killing slip quietly away with their riches.)

So, why should I stomp it? What civic virtue do I fulfill by killing a creature that has done no harm to me, who did not get to choose its fate, whose effect as an invasive species is far, far less than the damage done by the invasiveness of my own species?

But why not stomp it? Why not grant the id some pleasure while asserting my Genesis dominion over all the life that creeps upon the world? There are many who love the taste of dominion on the tongue, and who am I to say they should be denied their flavors?

Luckily for the SLF, I got distracted by my brain churning through how kill or not-kill would affect my own character, my own self-regard – the SLF saved by solecism and introspection. Being a planthopper, it did what it does best: it hopped away (despite their wings, they hop better than they fly) to live another day of feasting on sap and excreting honeydew.

I also continued on, though with far less certainty about where I would end up and what my brain would publish – and, to be honest, aware that the Vibram sole hovered just above me as always, the date of its descent unknown but certain.

Lizzo and the Flute

(December 2022)

I am sometimes a bit late to come to things, and certainly Lizzo is one of them.

But her profile in the November issue of *Vanity Fair* and the pearl-clutching kerfuffle over her playing of James Madison's crystal flute at the Library of Congress (more on that in a moment) made me spend a nice Saturday morning watching Lizzo videos and tracking down the batshit ramblings of people like Ben Shapiro.

I like her videos and I liked her profile. She's entertaining, raunchy, loving, high spirited, confident and fun.

The flute thing? Back in September, Carla Hayden, director of the Library of Congress (who also happens to be the first woman and first Black person to be director of the LoC), reached out to Lizzo, who is a trained flautist, to play a crystal flute belonging to James Madison, the fourth American president who was a slaveowner (who never freed his slaves, even at his death), architect of the three-fifths-of-a-person calculus for slaves in the Constitution and head of the effort to deport all freed Blacks to Liberia.

She played it at the LoC and then later at her Washington, D.C., concert (videos of both are easily found online). And, to make it even more special, this Black woman of pop culture fame was the first person to ever play the flute, given as a gift to Madison by Claude Laurent, a French crystal flute maker (I guess that was a thing then), to celebrate his second term.

And Western civilization collapsed, at least on the right side of the political seesaw, because Lizzo, in playing the flute at her concert, twerked when she did. (Though, if you watch Lizzo's entertaining TED Talk on the origins of twerking – dubbed in one link as a TED Twerk – what she did in D.C. when she played the flute was, at best, a twerkette, a slight butt shake to make a funny point.)

Forbes did a nice job of compiling some of the strenuous right-wing upchucks, to wit:

> For some reason, the simple act of twerking is a move guaranteed to boil the blood of right-wing culture warriors; it's their kryptonite, a dance move which practically requires a trigger warning in advance, lest they burst a blood vessel in blinding rage.

> Jenna Ellis, a former campaign lawyer for Donald Trump, said Lizzo's performance was a "desecration, purposefully, of America's history." Matt Walsh, a right-wing influencer, described Lizzo's performance as "a form of racial retribution, according to the woke Left."
>
> Strategist Greg Price tweeted: "The Library of Congress really took out a 200-year-old flute that belonged to James Madison just so Lizzo could twerk with it. They degrade our history and then call you racist if you actually value it."
>
> James Bradley, who is currently running for US Senate in California, compared Lizzo's performance to somebody taking "a dump on the American flag."
>
> Of course, Ben Shapiro also chimed in, framing Lizzo's actions as deliberately provocative, essentially blaming her for the reactionary backlash. "If all we had seen was the clip of Lizzo playing the flute in the halls of the Library of Congress while wearing a semi-modest outfit, everyone would have shrugged. But that's not the clip everyone championed as groundbreaking: it was the clip where she bragged about twerking."

Shapiro, on one of his podcasts, talks about how the actions of this "significantly overweight African American woman" vulgarized (that was his word) American history and degraded both the culture and the gentility (yes, that was his word) of America's founders.

And cue the long sigh, the rueful shaking of the head.

Would that we lived in a country that could see that what the LoC and Lizzo did, without a great deal of fanfare or hype, was the closest thing this country can have at this moment to an act of grace, a salvific act that was, at the same time, historic, fun, shattering and healing: a woman James Madison would have enslaved playing a flute owned by the American people offered to her by another woman Madison would have enslaved in a building owned by the American people in a moment of common enjoyment infused with a feeling of satisfaction at the progress made by the American experiment to create a multidimensional democracy.

Like Lizzo said, history can be freaking cool.

2021

Masking

(January 2021)

It's not clear for how long we will be required/exhorted/begged to wear masks in our pandemic times, but the mask itself has already changed so much about how we live our lives. We have all heard about how masks have morphed into political litmus tests and re-routed social relationships, but who knew they'd generate a significant economic upside: Etsy's third-quarter earnings release showed $2.6 billion in gross merchandise sales for the quarter, of which 11% was for masks. As the newsletter *Hustle* pointed out, "Here's a more tangible number: Etsy slanged 24 million masks in the September quarter."

At my work, we're facing another curveball thrown by masks: what kinds of pictures to use to accompany our stories, pamphlets, reports and so on. Because of the campuses' restrictions/guidelines about masks, social distancing, testing procedures and so on, the department's leaders have laid down a rule (unwritten but sort-of mandatory) that any images of people must show proper mask-wearing and social distancing to reinforce the mandates governing campus life. If we do use a pre-COVID image, it must be labeled as such so that no one will think the University is flouting laws and procedures. (This doesn't apply to images like formal headshots or historical pictures.)

The problem I have with this is not the rule itself (I should also add that pictures of Zoom meetings have become a staple in our reporting on events) but the effect. To put it bluntly, pictures of people wearing masks are ugly—not the people themselves, of course, but the effect of a one-third face staring out at the viewer. No amount of smizing can overcome the fact that the eyes, eyebrows and forehead cannot carry the full emotional range of a fully exposed face. In a conversation I once had with Bill Moyers, he said that "the human face has the best production values," but without access to those values, the image, at best, can only be an ornament to the story since its ability to add value to the narrative has been deleted by deleting two-thirds of its expressive equipment. In most cases, I think it would be better not to have an image at all.

Most likely, we'll continue down this path because no one really has the time or energy to propose anything different, but I think that if we wanted to, we could create some lovely alternatives to the photograph that would expand our aesthetic options.

For instance, we could do some version of what the Wall Street Journal has done with its hedcuts, a technique that resembles engravings. We could solicit work from the students in the art department, asking them to illustrate stories using the multiple techniques at their disposal (and perhaps even pay them for their work through the work-study program). We could even schedule photo set-ups, using protocols that photographers and filmmakers are using to ensure safety on the set and in the studio. (I recently saw an AT&T commercial where two people, without masks, did the commercial with a small-print disclaimer saying that the production followed all recommended safety practices. It wasn't anything vigorous or stunning, but it did get us back to a state where two people in a shared space shared something of human interest to both of them.)

I am sure there are many more things that design departments and communications offices can do to avoid the trap of using pictures of people with masks attached to them so that we don't forget about how much we need—we crave—the qualities of beauty, surprise, delight, humor, engagement, connection to enrich and fortify us.

This (admittedly minor) aesthetic struggle in our department is also a reflection of the way masks, even if they are COVID necessities, have had a corrosive effect on human relationships and interactions. Take me, for example. Our neighborhood's "mask master" has now chosen to give me the complete cold-shoulder when she sees me out on my daily run without a mask because, even though I have explained to her that wearing the mask while running is unhealthy and I choose my routes so that my path doesn't cross with anyone else's path, I am not following what she believes is the orthodoxy and so therefore I must be banished from her life, and all our pre-COVID shared pleasantries buy me no slack from her shunning.

My hope is that we will be able to dispense with them soon, but I fear, given what I see about how this disease works, that we Americans have bollixed things up so much that we won't be able to. So, we need to figure out how we can preserve the human sociality we need while also defending ourselves from the disease. COVID has forced us humans to undergo a grand unplanned experiment on the durability and truthfulness of our expectations, beliefs, fantasies, practices, hates, loves, philosophies, theologies and all the other what-not gathered in our mental attics.

We're only about a year into this stress test, but while the masks and all they stand in for have unmasked the deep fractures in American society and

our civil-war readiness, at the same, they have also sparked funny, courageous and heartfelt exit strategies out of the craziness. American society is in much need of renovation, and perhaps we can turn our masks into masques with new choreography, art, mutual aid, compassion, reason, trust and humor as their programs.

Housing Rages

(February 2021)

I have sites I go to regularly to get my intellectual fixes, and one of them is 99% *Invisible*, a perfect site for one like me who loves to study the social, political and economic effects of the built environment.

The site is currently running a five-part series about homelessness and housing called *According to Need*, produced by Katie Mingle, who also does the on-air narration. Any thumbnail description I give of the project will not do justice to its depth, breadth and heart, but I can attest to its power to enrage and shame at one and the same time.

I was listening to the series on Saturday, December 19, 2020. In Chapter 2, when Mingle is interviewing the operators who staff 2-1-1, the hotline set up by Alameda County in California to handle self-reports of homelessness, she recounts an incident involving a homeless man getting dialysis and the availability of a bed in a shelter. During the day, the operators continually check in with the area shelters on the availability of beds. Mingle does a good job exploring the struggle the operators have in trying to match need with inventory—some shelters only take mothers with children but not fathers with children, some focus on domestic violence and so on, and it seems to be simply a matter of luck that a caller with needs and a facility that can meet those needs cross paths at the same time through the earpiece of the operators.

In this case, five beds had become available in a men's shelter. Thomas, who is calling 2-1-1 at 5:10 p.m. to check on the situation, is eligible for one of them—if he can get from his dialysis treatment center to the shelter by 6 p.m. But Thomas has no earthly way to get there: no money for an Uber and public transportation will take too long. The operator knows that there is a fund for Lyft rides, but it has certain restrictions that Thomas does not in any way meet, but she decides to order Thomas the ride anyway.

Thomas, relief filling his voice, is waiting for the ride to come, but he can't connect with the driver, despite the operator telling Thomas where he is located. The driver cancels the order and drives away. The operator dials up another ride, and it suddenly becomes a race against time. Mingle records the three-way conversation the operator sets up among Thomas, the driver and herself and she tries to connect the two. I can hear Thomas' voice shouting, "I've got a

green shirt on, I'm standing in the middle of the parking lot" while the operator is relaying the information to the driver.

Finally, they connect. The operator notes that Thomas will most likely be late but hopefully by not too much, and she hopes he can convince the shelter to let him in. (Mingle doesn't say if he made it or not.)

Pause for a moment to take all this in as we sit in the richest country history has ever known: the sound of a man's voice full of desperation and fear because he may lose the chance to have a roof over his head for a night.

Earlier in the day, on this Saturday, I did what I usually do on Saturday morning after a week of slinging content for the University: I get up at 6 a.m., make coffee, and sit in the kitchen listening, first, to Innovation Hub from WGBH in Boston, and then On the Media from WNYC in New York. I give myself a quiet couple of hours to have a connected intellectual experience without notifications and emails interrupting the head space.

Innovation Hub had a great show on the history of grocery stores in the United States, and in one segment of the conversation, Benjamin Lorr, author of T*he Secret Life of Groceries: The Dark Miracle of the American Supermarket*, who was being interviewed, put paid to the notion that consumers can buy their way out of taking responsibility for the capitalist damage being done to the earth and its inhabitants. Their continued self-deception will only lead to damage being done to people far away and definitely out of sight and out of mind. (Listen to his explanation of the supply chain for shrimp.)

In *On the Media*, co-host Bob Garfield interviewed Shoshana Zuboff, professor emeritus at Harvard Business School and author of *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*, about the data extraction and human futures markets that comprise much of our economy. Her testimony about the way the big tech companies essentially consider the information of human beings as being no different than what oil and gas are to Exxon is both a frightening rendition of just how at the mercy people are to extractive corporate practices as well as a perfect description of capitalism's pitiless logic of turning anything, no matter how private, into a public commodity.

So, all this simmers in my brain as I listen to Chapter 2. I should also add that as I was listening to Chapter 2, I was also catching up on work that I hadn't been able to finish during the week, a situation I do not like but seemingly can't avoid because the work week gets so fragmented and discontinuous because of

meetings and phone calls about the meetings and so on and so on. (The usual bureaucratic slog.)

Back to Thomas and his quest: as I listened to the description of Thomas and the driver trying to find each other, I found my heart racing as if I were watching some scripted "action thriller": would the hero be able to defeat the evil at the moment when all seems lost? A stupid response given the stakes involved in this situation, but it shows just how templated our emotions have become after being tutored for thousands of hours by our media dream-machine.

So, the chapter ends, and I'm sitting at my desk finishing up my nonsense work, just poking along. The Marvelous María Beatriz comes from the bedroom, where she'd been Zooming with her friends in the Gambia, and asks me how I'm doing. And seemingly from out of nowhere (though clearly not from nowhere, seeing how my heart had been prepped all morning), I am enraged and in tears as I explain about Thomas and rail about how could a society let something like homelessness happen when we have every resource to ensure that it doesn't have to happen.

And I am really sobbing, not just moved but hollowed out by what I'm speaking about, a gut-deep sadness that is also a righteous anger. The MMB, as is her wont and her training, lets me speak, helps me frame, gets me to connect, soothes the beast. And things come back to the normal which should not be the normal but is the normal at this moment, our home, our cats, our luck so far in the pandemic, our love, our being intact and vital—our possibilities.

Of course, as the routine takes over, the sadness softens, the anger decelerates. But the question that blurted out of me still echoes: "How can we let this happen when we have every tool we need at hand to make it stop forever?" I hear that echo in the despicable haggling over a COVID relief bill, allowing full deductions for business entertainment but literally starving people with niggardly unemployment benefits and emaciated support for small businesses. Not to mention the griftopia that is our government and the civil war that is our society.

David Graeber, in *Debt: The First 5,000 Years* (one of my definite favorites), concludes his massive study of the topic by saying that the market system under which we live can only continue to function by constantly converting, through constant violence, love into debt. That is, converting the linkages that bind human to human into commodities stripped of context and affection, thus made

ready for trade and exploitation. We should no longer allow this to happen, we really shouldn't, not only for the moral reasons but also for survival reasons since we can't keep using the way of the market to live our lives because the market will eventually eat up those lives the way the snake eats its tail.

I really hope Thomas got at least one good night's rest. There are too many Thomases.

WFH

(March 2021)

I can attest to the truth of the adage these days that people are less "working from home" and more "living where they work." While I have no desire to sit in my work cubicle again (this time masked, Plexiglased and Team meeting'd, the physical bondage the outward sign of the inward bondage all wage slavery imposes), WFH has its mental, physical and emotional abrasions as well, all of which have been documented in articles by everyone from business writers to academics pumping up their publishing credits.

For me, the hardest task has been drawing lines between home and life, a task accomplished before by a commute and things like doffing my work clothes and slipping into home clothes as soon as I got through the door. Doing that crossed my body and my brain over a clear(ish) border between the work gulag and my homeland.

With WFH, that border turns blurry because phones and computers tether me to the work in a way that puts me "on call" all the time and makes me feel that I can't/shouldn't step away from any device on which I can be contacted. (From the bosses' end, the expectation is definitely that I should be on call all the time because where else do I have to be if I am working from home except at my desk and at their beck?)

But this presents less of an actual problem than it sounds—it just means that I have to create new disciplines to fend off work incursions into my real life. Thus, my regimen of multiple 10-minute walks a day around my neighborhood without phone in hand, leaving notes in the WhatsApp group that I am taking my lunch break and signing off for the evening to that same group are some of signals I've sent out to say, "This far and no further."

Whether or not these line-drawings set the notice I want them to set to those who need to be notified, they set the notice for me, reminding me to to pretend I have agency even if I don't have it fully.

These new working arrangements also have their meta-level of discussion, beyond the instrumental: What is work? Why are we working like this and not like something else? Why do we tie income to work? And so on. At this level, one topic that has occupied me has been thinking about how we map out these territories we call "work" and "home" and how we now allow—in fact, have been

forced to allow—the former to substitute for the latter, as if "work" is the primary answer to the question, What is my purpose in life?

This is all appropriate for a capitalist system, but it's nevertheless vexing to get no relief from the regime of working by switching from a cubicle to my home desk—in fact, I've let the fox slip inside so that now I have to pay for arrangements to make the fox comfortable, payments that I won't have reimbursed—upgrades on computers, internet and phone service, increased utility costs—as well as changing physical set-ups to accommodate more bodies in a restricted space (requiring new desks and chairs).

And I'm a lucky one in this lottery because I only have myself, the Marvelous María Beatriz and four cats to arrange. I can't imagine what life is like for people with more restricted means and spaces—families packed into small apartments or having to sit in the Taco Bell parking lot to get the free Wi-Fi to be in online classes.

So, I shouldn't be complaining, but I am, because while many are discussing how the pandemic has irrevocably shifted the shape of how we live, in many respects that's just a surface rearrangement. We're still being governed by structures that limit the creativity and ingenuity of our lives, in some respects even more than before because of the ways the rulers have used the pandemic to restrict freedoms and curtail resistance. While some may see the disruptions of the old guard as the start of new ways of doing things more freely and widely (e.g., colleges and universities may no longer be able to gatekeep who gets the credentials to get into the club), it's more likely the case that the disruptions of the old guard will just lead to a new guard playing the old scarcity and austerity games in new ways.

But for the moment the metrics are good: I have a job and food on the table and my health. But it's difficult not to feel the ghost weight of the other shoe waiting to drop, hard not to feel that disaster shuffles in the wings, and hard knowing that I have so few protections at my back when the collapse comes.

Pronouns

(April 2021)

I've noticed lately in some email signatures a list of pronouns that, I'm assuming, the senders want me to use if I refer back to them. According to several sites I visited to read up on this practice, called "signposting," people and organizations are doing this to show respect for, as one site said, "transgender, non-binary, and gender diverse" human beings. As another put it, "Calling someone by a pronoun that is not theirs is just as bad as calling them by a name that is not theirs. It's careless, and repeated it becomes rude. It makes the person you're speaking about feel not-known, not-seen. If that happens to someone constantly, every day, it wears them down. It's tiring. It's painful. Don't do that to people!"

However, reading through sites like mypronouns.org shows that signposting pronoun choice is not really about aligning pronouns with gender identity (as one article on the site put it, "The name or pronouns someone goes by do not necessarily indicate anything about the person's gender or other identities").

Signposting is about disrupting "the normalization and privilege of assumption," that process by which someone looks at someone else and based on some set of cues assumes that that person can be referred to in certain ways. Selecting one's pronouns is a way of messing with people's minds by saying that there is no, and never has been, a necessary bond between word and chosen identity: "A person who goes by 'she' could actually be a man, a woman, both, neither, or something else entirely."

There is probably some good humanitarian impulse at heart in this assumption-breaking since it seems aimed at gearing down the abuse of people different from oneself and creating more inclusivity for more voices and narratives. No harm in promoting that.

It does, of course, plant more social landmines in the social landscape, with increased opportunities for embarrassingly mispronouning someone (yes, that is also the name of a practice) and awkward etiquettes about how we introduce ourselves to each other: "Hello, I'm Pat, and my pronoun in casual social situations is 'she' but 'they' used as a singular pronoun in professional situations. And what are your pronouns?"

And the sets of pronouns one might choose from (and also have to keep in mind) are very much like "let a thousand flowers bloom"— Wikipedia has a fascinating entry on the topic.[1]

Here are some excerpts from my reading, just to give a flavor of the grappling going on about this effort:

> To keep references as neutral and ungendered as possible, some have suggested that "they" can be used as a singular pronoun, such as "The person walked into the room; they sat in the chair." [My personal interjection: Why not "The person walked into the room and sat in the chair"?]
>
> Yet, it may be that a person prefers that a set of proper pronouns be used when someone refers to that person (such as ze, hir, hirs, hirself). Of course, the only way to know this is to ask the person (yet the etiquette of when to ask this in the course of an interaction is unclear—in a state of evolution).
>
> Or it could be a combination, such as "They think highly of hirself"—decoded: an individual person thinks highly of that same individual person's singular self.
>
> Rex Wilde Consulting suggests practice sessions to accustom one's tongue to the new linguistic convention in order to make a sentence like "There's a new person on my team and I really like working with them" come across as natural.

As a person who makes a living as a writer, my impulse is to rewrite rather than pronoun (and thus, perhaps, to mispronoun), both to ride herd on my cranky retrograde editorial opinions ("They think highly of themself" used as a self-reference by a single person will never be right to me) and to avoid mishaps that, honestly, I don't have the patience to endure:

> ORIGINAL
> "She is a great student. I'm sorry, I meant to say he is a great student. He's been reading all of the assignments very thoroughly and it's been a pleasure to work with him."
>
> REWRITE
> "Jan is a great student who reads all the assignments very thoroughly and is a pleasure to work with."

The bigger question here for me, as it is always is in matters like this, is does properly pronouning increase the emancipation of humans from the predations of global capitalism or is it another instance of mistaking an ideology about

internal states of being and satisfaction for a grander emancipatory narrative and program?

I tend to think the latter, but there is also truth in saying that monumental change must be built, in part, on the small-scale efforts of individuals to align their lives with openness, respect and humility along with an insistence that the others around them honor and forward those efforts (or, at the very least, shut up and get out of the way).

So, I will pronoun people as best I can but also insist that those same people see their personal struggles as part of the liberation the world needs from the death march of capitalism. Otherwise, the practice is just a selfish affectation.

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[1] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gender_neutrality_in_languages_with_gendered_third-person_pronouns

When the Police Came to Our Classrooms

(June 2021)

Many moons ago, I taught in the School of Human Services at New Hampshire College, which offered a weekend degree program where those working in human services could get a master's degree. I was also in charge of assessing prior learning credit (which required a lot of training, I found out) as well as, for one of my years, running the registrar's office (including setting up the commencement exercises). I have had immense, immense respect since then for registrars and their staffs and also no desire ever to do that kind of work again.

I loved working at the school for a couple of reasons. One was the students—the salt of the professions, really—the supervisors and those whom they supervised all equal in our classroom. Whether you turned over paper or turned over patients didn't matter—they were all going through the training together, face to face, life to life.

The second reason was the ideology of our program. We taught from the core principle that the human services in a corporate capitalist country like ours were meant to keep the lid on social unrest and short-circuit any efforts people made to govern their own lives outside of what their betters thought was best for them. How we ever got away with teaching this modified Marxism always mystified me, but we brought in the students (and thus the money), passed all our accreditation tests and ran a solid academic program that met all the arcane requirements of higher education.

In 1970, the Massachusetts legislature enacted the Quinn Bill, which would give police officers a salary bump if they earned advanced degrees. And there sat our program just across the state line—one weekend a month, Friday to Sunday. We suddenly began to see more police officers in the classroom, which unnerved us a little because the police were one of the demons at the heart of what we taught our students about power, property and control.

And their presence also unnerved our students, many of whom had had unpleasant run-ins with the police in the course of their human service work.

The staff, after long, heartfelt discussions, decided not to change the trajectory of the program at all. In our teaching, the police were part of an infrastructure of oppression, regardless of how individual officers were as individual people.

But we also instituted more opportunities during what we were doing academically in the classroom to give everyone the chance to share their stories. We brought in facilitators well versed in running meetings through consensus, borrowing from Quaker and anarchist processes the best ways that people can talk to each other without everything descending into Hobbesian warfare.

We didn't do this all day all the time. In fact, we tried to sneak in these times for sharing so that people weren't suddenly on their guards because they now had to be in "sharing mode." Several of us would start up conversations in the corners during break times, or we would order in a lunch occasionally rather than releasing people to go off on their own. Call it building community through the side-door.

Because in the end, building community is what we were trying to do—at the very least, a community of people who, often finding themselves on opposite sides of law and compassion, were able to bring to their actions an understanding of how each group labored under a regime that did not have their best interests at heart and who exploited their good faith and urge to do good works to maintain their own privileges.

I won't deny the road was rocky, which is usually the case when you're walking the road as you build it. But I think we managed to pry open enough head space in our students to accommodate the stories each of them had to tell so that they could do their jobs aware of the pressures they all had to endure in surviving their professions and in the process, at the very least, cut each other some slack.

Current proposals to defund the police function in society bring to mind the discussions our students had about the best ways to serve those in society who are damaged, lost, angry, "starving hysterical naked" because, for the most part, those discussions are not taking place now as part of the proposals. While the presence of police officers in our classroom was at first unsettling, everyone realized that of course they had to be there because the only way to break open the blinders that our institutional personas place on us is through talk, talk and more talk.

That's not happening now as people settle down in their keeps inside their moats with bridges drawn up. What we need is another Occupy effort to entice people to at least lift their heads above their battlements to see what's going on and take a risk to join in. In fact, the way Occupy worked, through its focus on horizontal decision-making, is probably the best method to do this work,

as David Graeber points out in *The Democracy Project* about the Occupy Wall Street movement:

> Many have objected to the apparent military origins of the term "occupation." … But in fact what we are doing is an occupation. The military analogy is appropriate. It's not even really an analogy. We are seizing space and defending it by means of various lines of force: moral, psychological, and physical. The key is that once we do liberate this space, we always, immediately, transform it into a space of love and caring. (258)

I believe that that is what we were trying to do in our program: build a space that gave people normally at odds with one another the chance to know, love and care about one another. We could not control what happened after that; we could not even state that what we were doing would make any difference in the overall scheme of things.

But revolutions in understanding do not come about through wholesale changes in systems and practices. They come about because people learn new ways to talk about old things and thus turn them into new things, newly seen, freshly understood, energetically practiced. Occupy the Police might not be a bad way to have this dialogue because what is happening now is not dialogue but declamation, not open-source conversation but closed-in declarations of principle.

Naming the Birds

(August 2021)

According to the American Ornithological Society, there are about 150 North American birds out of over 1,000 species (that number according to *The Birds of North America*) that have eponymous names, that is, bearing the names of people to identify the bird.

A news story on NPR [1] described an effort to change the identification of those birds named after people with a racist or supremacist biography, such as Bachman's sparrow, found in the southeastern United States. Backman was an antebellum Lutheran minister in South Carolina who promoted the inferiority of black people to justify slavery. This is part of a larger effort to change all the eponymous names regardless of their backgrounds into descriptions that only depict the birds themselves.

Some may think such undoing is unnecessary (and there are some, as there always are) who feel that this is (make your choice) cancel culture run amok, wokeness run amok or a destruction of heritage run amok.

And since it only involves a subset of about 150 North American birds. it's not like it's a really huge number, so why get all exercised about decolonizing the names of some birds and shifting them all to have purely explanatory labels. Is it really necessary?

Yes, it is.

I am all for such renaming efforts, whether that means changing a high school named after Robert E. Lee or retiring Confederate monuments raised to terrorize Black people from parks and squares and promenades to a museum full of damning context.

Do we do the same with Washington and Jefferson and Columbus? Why not? Just because many have erected multiple cottage glorification industries around such people does not exempt them from judgment and, if needed, banishment.

Will this create cynicism among the people about the glories of the United States? I hope so. There is something healthy in teaching people that the grand principles of the U.S. experiment in democracy are built on a foundation of death and destruction, with slavery as the template, to the point where even bird names are infected by the lingering disease.

All that movements for racial justice are doing is reminding those who want to hold on to heritage and myth and exceptionalism and privilege that, "Yes, believe what you want, but you must be reminded, forcefully if needed, that all you hold onto is nothing but a corpse filled with nightmares, and until you let go of it, we will continue to try to pry it out of your hands."

Possibility for truth and reconciliation? Perhaps on some high, abstract moral level, but as history has shown, reconciliations on that upper level have rarely profited Black people on such lower levels as jobs, wealth accumulation, and equality, to name just a few.

The recent decision by Evanston, Illinois, to provide reparations to its Black citizens shows the limitation of efforts based on a toothless notion of reconciliation. Instead of identifying those who had been materially damaged by policies like redlining and refunding to them all the wealth they should have been able accumulate over time, the city instead went for a more generic approach about better housing and other kinds of fiddling at the margins.

But reparations, while it does include the transfer of wealth, cash on the barrelhead, means much, much more than that, something Ta-Nehisi Coates' testimony in 2019 to Congress about reparations pointed out. In an interview inNew York Magazine, Coates said this: "It's so crucial that it not just be a question of the money but it actually be a question of some sort of attempt to alter how we remember the past.... My hope would be there would be a profound reimagining not just of the African-American past and what was done to African-Americans in America and thus the American past in itself, but our responsibilities and how we deal with people in general."

This could involve a suite of policy decisions that would be quite different in shape but unified in principle: élite universities need to do something different from the military for not awarding Black people GI Bill benefits from the FHA for denying mortgages to Black people to the cities that hosted exterminations like Tulsa, Oklahoma, or Wilmington, North Carolina.

Will this happen? I admire those fighting for racial justice, and I hope their efforts can cleanse the body politic. But I have severe doubts that any of this will "alter how we remember the past," to use Coates' words, because I can't see people taking the necessary steps to change the structures grounded in racism that govern power and wealth in this country.

And can the white supremacy ideology that informs these structures ever be eradicated? As Coates noted,

> This is a country that would not exist without slavery. It's in the bones…It's in the economies, it's in the cultures, it's in the politics, it's everywhere…. For some 250 years, a quarter of a millennia, it tolerated the enslavement of people. It tolerated the doctrines that justified that enslavement. It tolerated the culture, it tolerated the politics. Then what followed was an era of pogroms, of Jim Crow, of massacres, of death, of robbery, of raping. And what followed that? An era of mass incarceration where we built the largest prison state ever known to man and we built it on the basis of racism and white supremacy….What good does it do a doctor to act like cancer isn't a big deal just because he hopes for a cure?

But as the bird names effort shows, you do what you can where you can to alter the remembering of the past, no matter how loudly people denigrate the effort as cancel culture or betrayal of heritage. It's the right thing to do, and so it should be done.

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[1] https://www.npr.org/2021/06/05/1002944505/monuments-and-teams-have-changed-names-as-america-reckons-with-racism-birds-are-

Rag and Bone Men

(September 2021)

At some family event, my father said that when he was kid, what he really wanted to be when he grew up was a rag and bone man. An odd revelation, given that he'd had two careers—one in the Air Force and one in the plastics industry—that allowed him to provide his family the whole check-off list of middle-class comforts.

But the moment he said it, I could see it. He grew up during the Depression into a household ethic of saving; because everyone was on such short rations, nothing could go to waste. Then, when the war barged in, saving became a national obligation. Getting the most out of the least had been baked in.

He spoke about the rag and bone man who came around to collect whatever domestic thrift couldn't transfigure, like rusted iron bolts extracted from the cellar walls (and, yes, rags and bones), and away they would go into his wagon. Drawn by a horse. Who could afford a truck much less the petroleum to run it? And the horse gave something back that the truck couldn't, which could just be pitched in with everything else for a small return on the equine dollar.

I'm sure my father knew, even as a kid, that it was a mucky job full of noisome odors and tetanus, but something in it spoke to my father's spirit of both thrift and simple living—a working-class romanticism, in a way, the satisfaction of doing something useful, of doing something right, even if not celebrated or renowned.

In our burg of Weehawken, we have a version of the rag and bone men. Every morning, a squad of men (and they are all men, at the moment) wheel out garbage cans set on hand-pushed trucks equipped with brooms and long-handled swivel-headed dust pans, and off they go to clean the streets and sidewalks of the town.

One of them, who lives two doors over, is a true RBM—things he finds as he wanders the streets eventually make it into his backyard and from there (we assume) into the worldwide market of the used and devalued. Lots of metal—metal seems especially lucrative. And lots of just stuff—not classifiable, not even describable, but clearly of use to someone somewhere in the vast nooks of the capitalist system.

Others just do their routes, sweeping up fallen leaves in the fall or the drift-down of seeds in the spring or the jetsam of a consumer culture (White Castle

wrappers, flattened outer boxes of Nutter Butters, hubcaps, WWE fan cards, a hand-written half-page of a grocery list escaped from the recycling bin, a tai chi shoe, cigarette butts, crumpled face masks—even the inventory-genius of Walt Whitman would eventually be defeated by trying to inventory the cast-offs on our streets).

Do their efforts make the streets and sidewalks cleaner? I really can't say (how does one measure that?), but I'm also not sure that that best gauges their efforts.

Clearly, if the town's Department of Public Works really wanted to clean the streets efficiently, then a street sweeper machine, like the ones used in Union City, the next town over, would be the way to go. Yes, a cost and a maintenance, but the mayor would have the chance to show off the new purchase before it got all street-scratched, even put it in the Memorial Day parade, and get the political pay-off from the appearance of progress.

But the town hasn't done that. Instead, I can only assume that the town pays people to do this work because it's more important for these men to have a job and something to do each day than for the town to have a shiny new vehicle.

Because, truth be told, if these men didn't have this job, it would be impossible for them to find work of any kind since they are on the old side, physically worn-down, probably inexpert in many of the soft skills needed to survive our bureaucratic systems—they would be superfluous men and have to be paid for in some other fashion sure to be undignified and demeaning, given the way we treat people on the margins in this country. At least here, they have connections, purpose, income, independence, self-respect and visibility to me, an excellent investment by the town in the welfare of its least powerful citizens.

As I think more about this, the rag and bone men aren't the street cleaners but the town itself doing what made the whole enterprise attractive to my father: saving what would otherwise be discarded, finding value in what others might consider rubbish, giving work dignity, helping the men feel that what they do each day makes our common places better, that "working class" still has a place in our lexicon and deserves respect.stands.

Hair Today

(October 2021)

Mitch, played by Billy Crystal in the 1990 movie *City Slickers*, has a rather emphatic middle-aged concern: he has more hair in his ears and on his back than where he really wants to have the hair to prove his manliness.

This I can relate to. My grandfather (my mother's father) had a lush head of blond hair even as an old man, but that was not the trait I got. Instead, I got my father's genome: the beginning of a monk's pate in my mid-20s followed by chrome dome in my 30s, the iconic deforestation of male pattern baldness.

And the hair in the ears? Every follicle that Mitch feared has appeared, so there is that grooming to attend to as well.

Does any of this mean anything? Silly question when applied to human beings: of course, it means something because everything has to mean something to the featherless bipeds trying to outlast their expiration dates or else they will feel even more bereft than they already do about their "humdrum lives," to quote the cinematic philosopher Lina Lamont.

Dip in to the tonsorial debate about the Black coiffure to learn how important hair has become to identifying an identity (especially the sector about cultural appropriation) or the ongoing discussion about the modern practice of depilatorizing the entire female body or wigs for Orthodox women or disappearing hair altogether with head/body coverings.

Odd—though not really—how most of this concern about hair concerns women. But not all. The baldness of the male chips away at self-esteem (one website calls the hair loss "a cancer of the spirit") and men carry, just as women carry, the weight of social hair judgments, in this case about virility (e.g., Samson), which connects to youth and aging, which connects to power and powerlessness. Before long, three middle-aged bourgeois men are up on horses being tutored by a grizzled old coot about self-reliance and the code of the West to repair their sense of loss.

But I take much pleasure in the following adage: God made only a few perfect heads. The rest he hid under hair. So, be the light of the world, chrome dome. Don't rue the loss, celebrate the shine.

The Grey Cashmere Dress Overcoat

(November 2021)

The Marvelous María Beatriz and I have been doing some cleaning-up, and we came across the grey cashmere dress overcoat.

The husband of our next-door neighbor died about four years ago—he had been plagued with Parkinson's for a couple of decades, and the body just gave out.

Several days after his passing, my neighbor called me to ask if I would like to have her husband's grey cashmere dress overcoat, accessorized with a snappy grey and mauve silk scarf. When I tried it on, it fit like a non-O.J. Simpson glove, as if built bespoke for my body. (Which made me remember his body, which had shrunk over time, with more stoop and slope, a fall-off from his pre-Parkinson pictures of a robust Air Force veteran.)

When I modeled the coat for the Marvelous María Beatriz, I had the same feeling as when I tried it on earlier: I didn't so much put the coat as the coat settled itself onto my body, as if two unlinked pieces had found their match. I've had this feeling with other articles of clothing: the time-rumpled flannel shirt, a UniQlo-brand long-sleeved shirt of a cotton that soothes as it slides over torso and arms.

What to call this feeling, this "fitness"? Perhaps just that: fitness. Rightness. Something that pokes through the buffer layer of abstractions and metaphors that we use to veneer our lives and trap us in the notion that we are the center of some universe. (Not really. Not ever.)

This "thingness" is not easy to define and may not be word-amenable at all because it is not about words but tactility, nerve-messages wired in from the whole body electric, not just from the neck up and through the eyes and ears or a VR headset.

A recent review I read of several books about the bodily consequences of digital technologies—of screens and icons—touched upon how a continual online presence sequesters the body from itself, privileging the abstracted sensation over the felt experience. Yes, to be sure, something experienced online is felt, but there is a difference between brain-felt and body-including-brain-in-space-and-time-felt, and it's the latter that digital technologies displace.

Who knows what all this means for the evolution of a species that suffers emotionally if it does not get enough tactile stimulation, which is prone to mistake idealistic vapors for concrete realities (and then slaughter others in service to the mistake), that imagines brave new worlds while it shits where it eats. "Thingness" keeps us anchored and vested. A grey cashmere dress coat settles onto my body like a rhyming couplet—and that feeling is just what it is, unadorned by meaning, unharassed by symbol. It feels real, and that is all I can say about it.

Michael Benedikt, in his *For an Architecture of Reality* (a constant re-read of mine), actually makes a pretty good attempt to capture how the grey coat felt. At the risk of an overlong quote, here is what he says, and at the end, just substitute "the body that wears the grey cashmere dress coat" for "architecture":

> There are valued times in almost everyone's experience when the world is perceived afresh...At these times, our perceptions are not at all sentimental. They are, rather, matter of fact, neutral and undesiring - yet suffused with an unreasoned joy at the simple correspondence of appearance and reality, at the evident rightness of things as they are.... The world becomes singularly meaningful, yet without being "symbolical." Objects and colors do not point to other realms, signs say what they have to and fall silent.... Precisely from such moments, I believe, we build our best and necessary sense of an independent yet meaningful reality. I should like to call them *direct esthetic experiences of the real* and suggest the following: in our media-saturated times it falls to architecture to have the direct esthetic experience of real at the center of its concerns.

Action steps for this? First, decouple from technology and the false sense it gives of always being up-to-date and on point.

Second, once decoupled, apply the adjective "slow" to the acts of living, and then practice the acts: slow talk, slow tasking (otherwise known as "unitasking"), slow listening, slow thinking. As the Zen mantra goes, "When you breathe, just breathe."

We need to recover what Benedikt calls "the evident rightness of things as they are" because weathering the political times ahead will require all of us to be grounded in reality so that we are not ground down to nothing. The grey cashmere dress coat is not ideologically neutral—it reminds us that we have a center worth fighting to maintain against everything that wants to knock us off-center and feast upon our bones.

Sci-Fi Infrastructure

(December 2021)

While *Dune* takes place on an imagined planet (though purportedly "real," that is, following some canon of physical laws), the city of Arakeen, the imperial center, seems to have no infrastructure. Or, more accurately, while it has immense walls, buildings, rooms, staging areas, warehouses, and such, it doesn't seem to have any toilets (and if they exist, what is the infrastructure on a desert planet to keep them clean and sanitary?). And while a kitchen is mentioned by Baron Vladimir Harkonnen as he eats a meal in front of the paralyzed Duke Leto, no one else ever seems to sit down for dinner or, for that matter, clean the plates after the meal is done.

The Fremen have the excuse that their suits recycle all things watery in the body, though there's no explanation, in the movie, at least, for how poop is processed. (And how and where do those suits get made? There must be fabrication sites—and from where do the raw materials come from?)

Perhaps I shouldn't be surprised that an action movie wouldn't want to spend screen time and real estate on explaining how people brush their teeth in the morning (and where all the spit goes when it goes down the drain) because the realness that it goes for is a cinematic realness that ignores common sense and actual lived life for the purpose of anesthetizing logic for the sake of trading on fantasies. Dune may think it presents a "real" world, but it really only presents enough detail to create an armature for holding up its fables and fictions. In this world, people don't pee, shower, digest, give off smells—that would distract from the "magic."

Of course, the movie's blindness to the frameworks that hold up the whole only reflects a real-world blindness to our real-world infrastructure that keeps masses of people alive and relatively healthy as they live. People who live in countries where water always comes out of faucets like taking such systems for granted; thinking about them and about paying to keep them intact takes away their magic, which causes the pain felt by humans when they have to make decisions.

Water systems, energy grids, roads, bridges—essentially everything that makes a modern mass society possible without descent into war—must be maintained. While it might be nice to imagine that the toothpaste spit gone down the drain has miraculously disappeared, it will not be so nice when the aging

sewer pipe that whisks it away suddenly fractures and basements feel the wrath of flood and feces.

Perhaps—one can dream—part 2 of *Dune* will foreground the civil engineers who make the world possible. Legions of them will march forward with their neonized safety vests, hard hats and gear belts buttressed by the armamentarium of science and beauty to build a world in which people can live full, healthy lives while the parasitic royalty that feed off their efforts engage in annihilating battles somewhere in the distant background until they've eliminated themselves for the benefit of us all.

Denis Villeneuve, are you listening?

P.S.—For a humorous take on what realism in film might look like, watch this piece by David Mitchell and Robert Webb about a director who believes in realism a little bit too much: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HtQNULEudss

2020

Making Sense of Non-sense

(January 2020)

There comes a time when it doesn't make sense to try to make sense of things. I've concluded this from reading David Javerbaum's occasionally functioning Tweet of God, the Twitter account of the Almighty.

Much of Javerbaum's word-slinging is just outright hilarious (as it should be, given his pedigree as a writer and producer on The Daily Show for 11 years), at least to me, who likes a humor whose clever snark reveals a nugget of truth I hadn't known was true until I heard it voiced (and which does a good deal of cliché- and sentimentality-puncturing along the way).

A mini-selection:

> Good things come to those with money.
>
> Science is true whether or not you believe it, but religion is true whether or not it's true.
>
> Out of curiosity, where were you all thinking of moving after you're done destroying the Earth? Because I assume you've thought that through.
>
> All your dreams can come true if you only have the courage to pursue them with a psychopathic disregard of basic human morality.
>
> Human beings are the only creatures on earth with the potential to make themselves the only creatures on earth.

I could go on, but better to read them for yourself for the good tonic effect.

But as funny as most of them are, Javerbaum's renderings only provide a respite, not a solution, since no amount of sarcasm, irony, satire, mockery or ridicule can neutralize the radioactive whining and self-victimizing diffusing from the White House and its environs. We're all irradiated well past any safety level for this stuff, toxified beyond repair.

The Democratic debates, though, have provided something of a breather from the Chernobyl on the Potomac, but watching them reminded me of something someone (Gore Vidal?) once said that anyone wanting to run for president should be disqualified because of insanity.

And the impeachment proceedings? Enough said.

To paraphrase James Baldwin, why would anyone want to be president of a house that's burning down?

So, where can one look for relief and inspiration? I sometimes find it in the students with whom we work, who, God bless them, still believe that the values of chesed [charity] they've imbibed from the Torah should be the guiding principles of their lives. I have always been impressed with the number of hours hundreds of volunteers put into working with local schools on science projects, organizing top-level conferences on medical ethics, traveling on humanitarian missions and helping high school students navigate college admissions, to name just a few of the dozens of projects in play at any moment.

I also find it in our faculty, especially those connected with the Benjamin N. Cardozo School of Law, where the immigration lawyers have battled the administration's multiple assaults and the Innocence Project has freed over 300 people from injustice. They do admirable work with admirable results.

Truth be told, there are hundreds of projects in play throughout the country helmed by people committed to emancipation and justice, fighting the good fight because that is the only fight worth fighting. There is no lack of energy in the hinterlands outside Washington, D.C.; what's lacking is a movement and institutions to aggregate it into a force that can reshape vocabularies and redirect priorities. That this hasn't happened yet is not a cause for despair but a call to those of us looking for something to do to go and do something.

Yes, the Tweets of God play in the back part of my mind, reminders of how human foibles are ever ready to sabotage our utopias and deflate our ideals. Fine. The trick is to use the foibles as a checklist rather than let them act as sappers, using them to build imperfect ideals and rickety paradises rather than letting them keep us from making the attempt to make things better. Three maxims: Never let the perfect be the enemy of the good, finished is better than perfect and sometimes one has to take the bull by the tail and face the situation.

If we can make things that are good-enough to get us through, that maybe aren't the kingdom of heaven on earth but are much more than the land of Mordor we have now, we will have done much. The Tweet of God says, "The road to enlightenment always leads through the valley of morons." But it doesn't have to stop there. Let's take that road that runs right through all of us and do great things.

On the Clock

(February 2020)

Emily Guendelsberger's *On the Clock: What Low-Wage Work Did to Me and How It Drives America Insane* is definitely a must-read: but who must read it? Who must read it are those who will never read it, the masters who dictate the work conditions under which others have to work to create the masters' profits. The book covers three low-tier jobs at which she worked. One of the jobs is at an Amazon fulfillment center (the others are McDonald's and a customer service call center). It would be great if Jeff Bezos not only read this book but also worked for at least one Christmas season as a picker, trekking 15 miles per day while popping free pain meds from vending machines. (Yes, free: rather than change the job to make it less brutal, it's more profitable to give out Ibuprofen gratis to the damaged workers.)

But he won't do either. And even if he did, it wouldn't change anything. No ray of enlightenment would direct him to change conditions so that the workers could work in a more humane place if it meant customers would have to wait longer to get their consumer needs filled. In fact, what it might convince him to do is to go even more full-bore into automating the picking process as much as possible in order to dispense with humans altogether.

In other words, what Guendelsberger exposes in each of her jobs is the cyborg-job mindset at the lower depths of our particular brand of capitalism. Empathy and morality, though vital to human interactions, "are often illogical within the simple framework of free-market capitalism," and so, by design, they must be eliminated as much as possible: "Life gets marginally crappier for workers everywhere. But it's supposed to. It's designed to....Corporations have weighed the costs of high turnover against the costs of making the experience of work less miserable, and, because workers and customers are both kind of stuck with them, they choose bad service, terrible work conditions, and high turnover. It's not because it's some law of nature—it's like this because the unskilled labor pool can't vote with their feet when everywhere sucks."

She draws a direct line between the crappiness of these work situations and the slings and arrows suffered by the lower end of the labor pool: depression, pain, suicide, abrasive stress, villainous uncertainties: "So why is America so crazy? It's inescapable chronic stress built into the way we work and live....Is it surprising that Americans have started exhibiting unhelpful physical, mental,

and social adaptations to chronic stress en masse? Our bodies believe that this is the apocalypse."

She ends her book with this call to action: "Imagine a better world, one you'd like to live in. Imagine a world that's kinder and less stressful than this one, a world built on human rather than shark values." She exhorts her readers to reach out to others who also think "the status quo is cruel and ridiculous," and through this expansive sharing, "you'll become a part of something bigger than yourself—and, weirdly, you'll feel more in control of your life than you have in years [and] you'll start feeling like a human being again. You'll know what do from there."

Hmm…maybe.

I'm all for the kind of sharing that Guendelsberger suggests – after all, this is how political movements get started, have to get started. But that once we do share, we'll know "what to do from there" – against Amazon? Against the techno-Taylorism that grinds down human choice to the barest minimum needed to function during a day? Against the masters of the universe and their shark's way of thinking? Because to achieve what Guendelsberger wants does require a class war, and who among us knows "what to do from there"?

Others, however, don't go the class-war route but instead try to reconfigure the conversation about the thirst for growth that drives the free market. Aaron Timms wrote an interesting piece on the degrowth movement for The New Republic (Jan-Feb 2020), "Beyond the Growth Gospel." Degrowth, at least the variety he describes, is a wholesale rejection of mass consumerist society in favor of a more Amish way of life, as one of the people Timms interviews calls it, a repudiation of the modern in favor of simpler, more human-centered ways of living which will, when practiced, save the planet from overheating.

Though, to be honest, much of what Timms conveys in his piece about the degrowth's arguments makes them sound more like a Puritanical harangue against sinful luxury than a workable plan of social and economic resistance and transformation. They seems to want not only a new system but a new people to inhabit that system who will rejoice in privation and the rudimentary: "What the degrowthers seek, in their priestliest utterings, is not only a new society but also a complete reset of the psychological habitus of everyday life….a project to build a new person."

As Timms notes, this particular conjuration of degrowth cannot solve climate change since its time horizon is far beyond the current house-on-fire situation in

which the human race finds itself. And it certainly will not appeal to the billions of people who are already living a version of degrowth and want desperately to escape from it.

So, it seems that we are back to where we started, working in jobs that drive us crazy in a world disintegrating because of the very sharkish hunger for profit that makes the job so crappy to begin with.

What to do?

It's back to the warfare – there's no other option. We can't consumer our way out of our dilemmas, we can't dispense with modern comforts, we can't robot-worker and universal-basic-income ourselves into prosperity and peace, we can't democratic-socialism ourselves into social harmony: it is "workers of the world, unite."

A really Guendelsbergerian "you'll know what do from there" moment can only happen when that unification happens, and in our society, that can only be through unions or union-like activities – uni(on)ification – that push back and push back against the free-market omnivore, not just to get larger and larger pieces of an oligarchic pie but to creatively destroy it.

This is not an easy historical task. Astra Taylor wrote about the challenges and abysms of this task this in a very cogent way in the May 17, 2019, issue of The New Republic. But she stressed that while enormous and difficult, accomplishing the overhaul is not impossible since it's been done before, and it is being done already in many places in the world, though very locally and with limited scalability.

Slavoj Žižek, in *First as Tragedy, Then as Farce*, points out that communism is something of Platonic ideal, eternal in some fashion, because even if particular manifestations of it don't work out, there is always a need to use its lens to examine why a certain time and place becomes barbaric and divided. This is such a time and place, and this is why, as Taylor asserts, "what Engels somewhat melodramatically, but also alluringly, called the 'kingdom of freedom' can only be achieved by cooperation, not competition—and by breaking the power of a system that hoards resources and makes it seem there's not enough to go around."

A Letter to Astra Taylor

(March 2020)

Dear Ms. Taylor:

I just finished *Democracy May Not Exist, But We'll Miss It When It's Gone*. I've also read *The People's Platform* and your work in *The New Republic*.

Reading your words in the midst of this electoral round-and-round and the impeachment tango is invigorating, maddening, saddening and back to inspirational all in one go, but they also can't help becoming marbled other commentaries about a polarized society, the continuing toxicity of our racial history and the "golden straitjacket" of our Constitution (to use a phrase quoted in your book), among so many other topics, until it becomes difficult to know where and how to begin to conduct one's life, especially for someone like me who has only two or three decades to go before shuffling off the mortal coil.

Having read books like Daniel Kahneman's *Thinking Fast and Slow* and Richard Thaler's *Misbehaving* and other updates on neuroscience about how humans make decisions, I'm not assured that humans over a long stretch of time can perform the delicate juggling acts needed to make democracy work (which you illustrated with Antonio Gramsci)—they just don't seem built, literally, to do that kind of fine-grained tension-balancing.

Of course, in smaller groupings, as you point out, as with Barcelona en Comú, it may be possible to go against the human neurograin and increase democratic practices in our social lives. But as you also point out, scale is important, and if what is happening in Barcelona can't expand to counteract the World Trade Organization and the other scaled-up organizations dedicated to the sanctity of mobile capital, then I don't see how the battle against undemocracy can be won.

Democracy, as you've explained, doesn't seem designed to enlarge itself in the way autocratic institutions can, and clearly, the autocracy of the market shapes our lives and choices far more deeply than culture wars, identity politics or other kinds of distracting performative social media-mediated behaviors that engage people's emotions but not their rationality or their creativity or their patience. (Also, let us not forget that it is always easier to give over responsibility, and thus any feelings of guilt, to fearless leaders than it is to suffer through the existential ambiguities of human life.)

It's hard to know in the thick of things if we are at a critical turning point in our history or if we're just in another phase of muddling through, as we always seem to do, and things will turn out mostly all right for most people (though, as always, with significant blood sacrifice). I think we are at a critical turning point for the country, but even if that could be verified in some way, it still doesn't give one guidance on what to do and where to go next. Where are the spaces for having the discussions needed to shift understandings and redefine vocabularies? What are the conditions under which we can pledge our fortunes to one another and take the risk of trusting strangers to be our comrades? Or is it just easier, as I said above, to follow the autocrat and keep things simple (which it seems many in this country have no qualms about doing)?

Of course, I have to figure this out myself, but your book offers a solid source for these necessary discussions, which I think I will begin by cooking a good paella and inviting friends over to talk about "living in the tension." The dinner table may be the quark of democracy, the smallest building block upon which to anchor the transformation which we need to undergo.

Two for the Road

(April 2020)

Who needs another Hamlet?

On one mid-week evening, I was covering an event, an alumni networking affair on "investment banking in 2020" – a usual alumni event to keep them involved and connected, since alumni are the lowest hanging fruit on the donor tree, ready for the solicitor's donation touch.

The two panelists and their moderator/wrangler told a two-tier story. The upper tier, jargony and bullish, talked about shifts in the financial landscape and where investment banks, though outgunned in assets by private equity companies, hedge funds and VCs, can still play a role in a more targeted boutique fashion, offering investment advice to various shires in the economic landscape farming this or that or some other niche crop.

The lower tier – the honest tier – held their dire assessments about the carious debt held by corporations, the laggard economy (despite presidential boosterism), the continued financialization of the economy leading to profits made without the companies making them doing any productive work. Echoes of 2007, said one of the panelists, and it wouldn't be out of line to sell all your assets now in anticipation of the returning juggernaut of a 2008.

I sat there thinking two things. First, assets? LOL. Second, we are screwed once again.

A polite Q&A, nibbles and drinks afterwards, and then 200 alums and professionals deliquesce into the night.

The event met at mid-town on the east side, which meant that my two legs offered the best means of westering to Port Authority (I don't taxi, Lyft or Uber). As I poled my way past the halal and dirty water dog street carts and through the diamond district to the LED squeal of Times Square, my head reviewed, and reviewed once again, what had just been said and how everyone had just blown past it because there is virtue in shared amnesia and in believing that the tsunami will hit everyone else, but it won't hit me.

Just before Eighth Avenue, the bark from below struck my ear: "Give me some money because I'm hungry!" I looked down on the grizzled white man squatted on his cardboard, anger in his voice, anger in the cracked outheld

palm, a grimy Peruvian-style wool hat jammed down over his grey-raging hair: "Give me some money!"

But I was still steeping my thoughts, and by the time his second demand reached me, I had already passed him. There is a floating beggar boundary in situations like this that dictates whether you'll turn back to give money or move on, and I had passed it: easier to move forward and forget.

Except that at the intersection of the street and avenue, I almost tripped over a man with his legs extended into the sidewalk – and they were just legs because the man had no feet. The shafts of his brown legs ended in clubheads, and for a moment I couldn't tell if they were legs or shillelaghs. He spoke in a gentled voice, palm raised like a beggar in a biblical painting, but I was past him as well before all of him registered.

Ten yards, 20 yards – and I stopped, well beyond beggar boundary. And, of course, the tumult on the sidewalk, like the magnets and lasers in a cyclotron, fused the street bits and my thoughts into meaning and action. The catastrophe so casually decanted into the ears of the alumni, which would evaporate within hours because, after all, they believed they would not be the ones paying the price, was already in motion: I had just passed two signposts.

I chided myself as I turned to return to them with dollars in my hand, knowing it wouldn't do much but would do more than the nothing I had already given to them.

It was as I turned again to head south to Port Authority that the title of this piece came to the surface: "Who the hell needs another Hamlet?"

Just that morning I'd read that another production of Hamlet was in the city (even our local theater company is producing a version). On my trek west I noticed that yet another revival of Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? was being mounted. Is this really the way to address our condition, another application of art-balm to soothe our selves? I just paid two dollars into the apocalypse fund only a decade out from our last one, confirmed by a hundred comfortable people at the well-appointed law firm hosting the event. Art, like autocracy, is the refuge when democracy doesn't work.

For the rest of my walk, I noodled these thoughts, wending and weaving through the tide of bodies, cars and noise. New York City never leaves you alone. It will gun for you by vehicle, gawking tourist or subway showtime, no matter how big your Buddha bubble, how noise-cancelling your headphones, how tunnel-

visioned you've trained your eyes. We curse the assault and really can't do without it because without it, how would we know the world, know ourselves, know our futures, see what is broken and learn how to howl for relief?

* * * * *

Post-corona-apocalypse

If the virus has done anything, it's only made even more manifest the fractures that rattled me on that mild and troubled evening.

Nothing in the American system is prepared to handle something which requires collective and competent action by dedicated public servants acting on the behalf of a society that has invested in public goods and downplays the sanctity of entrepreneurial individualism.

The virus has called our bluff, and there is going to be a price to pay.

I Say My Hell Is the Closet I'm Stuck Inside

(May 2020)

There is so much to write about as I scroll through my COVID news feed, but I find it difficult to say anything fresh and liberating. There is no value added being the one billionth person calling out 45 for his gargantuan mess-up of the response to our most current plague, and the narrow vocabulary of the trolls, ideologues, media and punditocracy makes it difficult to find intellectual off-ramps and scenic overlooks where one can feel the sting that comes with new skin and new ideas.

Feels like we're inside Dave Matthews' "So Much to Say":

> Cause here we have been standing for a long long time
> Treading trodden trails for a long long time
> I say my hell is the closet I'm stuck inside
> Can't see the light…
> So much to say, so much to say, so much to say, so much to say
> So much to say, so much to say, so much to say, so much to say
> Cause here we have been standing for a long long time
> Treading trodden trails for a long long time, time, time, time, time, time, time
> "So they won't be behind."

Some might say, of course, that it's a fool's errand to muck among the trolls and traumas, the idiocies and ideologues, and better to do what one can on one's path to lessen cruelty and brighten misfortune, especially if it's local and limited.

Well, yes, compassion is always and everywhere a good thing to practice, but I don't accept the underlying belief that the power of good works accumulates somewhere and will deploy itself to deflect the avalanche to the side just in time to save the village, that good will outgain evil and that those who do evil will get their just deserts.

In fact, I often feel that doing good works is the real fool's errand because it underestimates the savagery and soullessness of the enemy—and enemy, not adversary, is the proper word. An enemy like the one we face in this country today, which I would name as the Republican Party and its leader along with every person self-named as Republican and conservative, should be destroyed since the party has shown no sign that good intentions will change its intentions or that moral arguments will argue it into sanity.

Admittedly, I have not done extensive research on how it should be destroyed, but I don't forswear the motivating anger that governs this desire to destroy what I consider my enemy.

We live in a time when anger may be the healthiest defense against our current craziness. Even in our pandemic times, the rank stupidity of so many things fans itself out in front of us every day. I watch 45's face purse in disgust as he denounces immigrants, but I don't see any similar outrage on his face when reports come in of massive lead contamination of American children. I hear the thuggish drawl of Lindsay Graham speak about the beneficial trickle-down of tax cuts for the wealthy, but I don't hear any denunciation of the conditions that put the United States high on the list for rates of infant mortality.

These atrocities go on, but it's not just a list of the aristocracy's faults. We, the "ordinary folk," the pluribus, have forgotten how to be skeptical citizens, forgotten that people in power should never be fully believed or trusted, forgotten that when people want a Mussolini to make the trains run on time, democracy is dead. This goes especially for our condition today: social distancing and all of its attendant assertions of state power over individuals might need to be tolerated to curb COVID-19, but we need to make sure that these powers remain temporary and contingent and do not get added to the already over-stuffed armamentarium of executive power.

Many, many years ago, I wrote the following: "The touchstone for this anger must be the Constitution, its enumerated liberties, its energy for equality. Instead of Peter Finch's 'I'm mad as hell, and I'm not going to take it anymore,' we should be shouting, 'I'm mad as hell, and it's time I started acting like a citizen.' If our anger drives us to that rather than either violence or self-loathing, then it's possible to regain the democracy that the Constitution makes us promise ourselves."

I no longer believe this. I think we need stronger measures. I'm not sure what they are, but I do know we need them. And now.

A COVID Reading of The Plague

(June 2020)

I thought re-reading *The Plague* by Albert Camus would be a perfect fit for our quarantine times. It wasn't.

I say "re-reading" because I first encountered the book at the age of 15 while attending an all-boy's Catholic high school run by the Christian Brothers. I had had a conventional Catholic upbringing for a boy in the early 1960s: first confession, first communion, confirmation, altar boy (speaking the Mass in Latin)—the usual sequencing. The folks on my father's side were Portuguese Catholics, and every once in a while, when our Air Force family was stationed near the Atlantic coast of Connecticut, we'd make our way to the festa, a yearly celebration in honor of Mary. Her statue would be shoulder-carried by rough-edged fisherman from the church to the festival hall (one year, I did my part in the sacred transportation, bearing Mary's weight while dressed in a suit that gave me a penitential sweat over the mile-long course to the hall).

At the hall, a barnlike building with a high reach and large forgiving windows that, when opened, created a soothing cross-ventilation no matter how hot it got outside, old Portuguese women, dressed in black wearing heavy orthopedic shoes, their hair pulled back and up and netted, cooked the food we would eat in enormous pots settled on a line of gas burners, while others readied the plates and glasses and did manifold preparatory miracles. Soon there would be the communal meal, then bingo and raffles and music and dancing and prayers, then the return of the statue to the church (this time by truck).

In memory, this all felt good: warm, loving, simple, solidifying, buoyed by the sensory recall of the food smells and the glints of light off the colored cellphone that enwrapped the raffled-off fruit baskets and the rogues' gallery of old women seated along one long wall on slatted wooden folding chairs with small glasses of sherry in their hands chattering up the air.

So, yes, a conventional still-pre-Vatican middleclass Catholic piety for a Catholic child, easy to wear, easy to invoke, unmarked at the moment by the doubts and changes taking place in Italy and South America.

Freshman religion class at the all-boy's high school, with Father John (name changed) in the lead. What we newbies didn't know was that Father John was having a crisis of faith about his calling, and he let some of that slip into the

curriculum he served to us, assigning, for a reason I'm sure must have made sense to him at the time, The Plague by Albert Camus.

But, oh what a gift, at least to me—I have no recollection of what anyone else in class took away from the assignment. Camus' novel is about what it takes, morally and socially, to fight an implacable foe without the comfort of knowing that everyone's suffering, both of the infected and the collateral others who must share in their afflictions, has purpose and meaning. Religious faith does abide in the novel through the character of Father Paneloux, but even he can only sustain his faith by accepting without critical engagement or the balm of skepticism the notion that what God does is good regardless of how it appears to us. All he can offer his flock is an all-or-nothing proposition: either accept the faith or be damned because you do not accept wholly and without question.

Camus' sympathies are clearly with Dr. Bernard Rieux, who coordinates the medical resistance to the disease, and Jean Tarrou, a man who feels "plague-stricken" by the propensity of humans to kill each other and vows to always take the victim's side in life's battles. They do what they do to save whom they can save without any guarantee that what they do will, in fact, accomplish anything good at all. They aim to become Camus' idea of a saint: a battered, weary warrior against all that inflicts suffering on their fellow humans, committed to doing one's job in the face of adversity, their recompense knowing that they held to as true a course of action as they could discern out of the chaos of their living.

Here's how Camus states it in the novel's penultimate paragraph, as Rieux explains why he kept the chronicle of the plague upon which the novel is based:

> None the less, he knew that that tale he had to tell could not be one of a final victory. It could be only the record of what had had to be done, and what assuredly would have to be done again in the never ending fight against terror and its relentless onslaughts, despite their personal afflictions, by all who, while unable to be saints but refusing to bow down to pestilences, strive their utmost to be healers.

For the 15-year-old, this simple affirmation of a life of modesty and commitment uncompensated by any divine guarantees cleansed away the baroque ornamentation that Catholic theology had glued to the edifice of my spirit. No more the wrestling with the paradox of a loving god permitting the death of children; better to go out and do what one can to save the children without having to justify it by torturous beliefs in the unbelievable. As Rieux says throughout the book, the important thing is to know one's job and get down to doing it.

As we make our way through whatever this pandemic is, we do not face the existential shriving of the soul that the citizens of Oran faced in their isolation, anger, fear, separation, abandonment, and purposeless suffering. This language and this sensibility about life is simply not the language of our times. There are some superficial analogues, such as the "sainthood" of Rieux and Tarrou with the hero-naming of the medical people handling the crisis, the hubris of officials in both Oran and Washington, D.C., believing that their politics and bromides would immunize them from the coming decimation, or the clueless platitudinizing that "we are all in this together" when plainly we are not.

But Camus' book can't do anything to teach us about the mysteries and knots of our current humanity because American politics and culture have made us deaf to what Camus has to say about proper conduct and the modesty needed to live a moral life that buffers suffering and resists oppression. Our American ears are too loud with self-absorption and racial hatreds and social media bombast to hear a voice counseling us "to take, in every predicament, the victims' side, so as to reduce the damage done." Reducing damage and minimizing cruelty seem not to be our goals as we push to "open our society" while knowing full well that those who are weak, aged and marginalized will pay the price for our faux liberation.

For my own part, meeting up with this old friend did me good, bringing me back to a breakpoint in my life when intellectual ferment led to an effervescent change in heart and life-direction, a moment too-little repeated in life and still much-hungered for. Did re-reading help me find my way through our pandemic? Marching forward with a revived friendship to a new breakpoint is about the only thing I can imagine that justifies what we're going through. If we're not doing that, if our only hope is to get to back to normal, then we will be like the citizens of Oran before the fall of the plague: "Our townsfolk were like everybody else, wrapped up in themselves; in other words they were humanists; they disbelieved in pestilences....They forgot to be modest, that was all, and thought that everything still was possible for them; which presupposed that pestilences were impossible....They fancied themselves free, and no one will ever be free so long as there are pestilences."

Will We Get The Insurrection We Need This Time Around?

(July 2020)

Even our harmless burg of Weehawken, New Jersey, has had its Black Lives Matter/George Floyd vigils—two, in fact, one held in Hamilton Park and the other along the wide boulevard that runs atop the palisades—with our eternal mayor, Richard Turner, making his face-masked political rounds from one physically distanced group to another, various police officers and elected officials kneeling and signs of every size and shape and syllable.

I'm not sure where to go next in this essay since the thing that has struck me most over the past weeks of protests and the reactions they have triggered is how uninspired I have been by their energy and earnestness and the rightness of their cause. As I dig into my unsparked response, I've realized that though I am impressed by the energy and earnestness of those who have taken to the streets (and the communal experiment in Seattle intrigues me), I'm suspect about the "rightness of the cause," at least as it's voiced by Black Lives Matter (BLM) and purports to carry BLM's objectives forward.

The About BLM section on the group's website is an intellectual mess. BLM is a "collection of liberators" running an "inclusive and spacious movement" that, at the same time, restricts its efforts to helping only "ALL Black lives striving for liberation," and further confines "Black lives" to mean "Black queer and trans folks, disabled folks, undocumented folks, folks with records, women, and all Black lives along the gender spectrum"—whatever that means.

BLM also disqualifies any prior Black nationalism or Black liberation movements as having been "narrow" efforts that have "marginalized" their adherents (take that, Huey Newton and Fred Hampton!). BLM's antidotal institution-building effort is "a movement that brings all of us to the front"—again, whatever that means.

Perhaps none of this matters—after all, who gives any credence to the "About Us" section on any website, a place filled with what webmaster Steve Krug calls "happy talk"?

But then, when you're receiving grants from major philanthro-capitalists like the Ford Foundation and a sudden avalanche of large corporations want to ride on your train, your business in the world very much matters. BLM does have,

hidden under its ornamentation of identity politics and gender affirmations and odes to "Black imagination and innovation, and centering Black joy," a very hardcore mission: "to eradicate white supremacy and build local power to intervene in violence inflicted on Black communities by the state and vigilantes [and create] a world where Black lives are no longer systematically targeted for demise."

This is language I can hang on to: clear, bold, limited in scope, anchored in evidence and having a metric for success and accountability.

But it is not the program for social and political liberation that BLM thinks it is (and that conservatives fear it is) because what BLM does is being done within the confines of acceptable protest—acceptable, that is, to those that push the levers of power and acceptably confined within the golden cage of celebrity and status.

Contrast "About BLM" to the words of Fred Hampton, deputy chairman of the national Black Panther Party, in a 1969 speech about the Party's goals:

> We got to face some facts. That the masses are poor...and when I talk about the masses, I'm talking about the white masses. I'm talking about the black masses and the brown masses, and the yellow masses, too. We've got to face the fact that some people say you fight fire best with fire, but we say you put fire out best with water. We say you don't fight racism with racism. We're gonna fight racism with solidarity. We say you don't fight capitalism with no Black capitalism; you fight capitalism with socialism.

As Amy Sonnie and James Tracy noted in *Hillbilly Nationalists, Urban Race Rebels, and Black Power*, "the [original] Rainbow Coalition initiated by the Panthers united poor white, Blacks, and Latinos in a 'vanguard of the dispossessed.'"

For these words and the deeds they inspired, Fred Hampton was assassinated by Chicago police on Dec. 4, 1969. No such targeting will ever be considered for BLM because, unlike the Panthers, who "policed the police" through armed self-defense and provided direct basic services to people who needed them (breakfast programs, screening for sickle cell anemia, legal assistance, to name a few), BLM will work with city hall (i.e., the philanthro-capitalists, the political machers, the C-suite executives) to effect change within the system's definition of acceptable change, that is, change that does not upend the system but only repairs the fraying margins.

There's no doubt that life would be better for many people if every agendum on the BLM's list, along with those of the affiliated Movement for Black Lives, came to pass. Better, but not the fundamental resurrection this country needs.

So, while I am all for people exercising their freedoms in whatever manner of protest they desire, such movements still lack a thorough grounding in the study and analysis of what is really needed to dismantle oppression and exploitation, and because of that, the protests become performances of preferences rather than the first phase of building new institutions for a new world.camp.

Quarantine Love

(August 2020)

Unlike many, I have loved this COVID-19 quarantine.

I have loved working from home. No more hauling the body along transportation routes to sit at a desk to do what I am doing without having to make all that outlay of energy and inconvenience.

I have loved the increased attention to domestic life that the Marvelous María Beatriz and I have shared, from the breadmaking to our selected Netflix choices to reading in bed side-by-side.

I have loved the physical distancing in the streets and parks, the supermarkets and laundromats, on my running routes.

I have loved using the alternate technologies to connect with others – I've connected far more than I would have if I had had to, in pre-COVID fashion, negotiate a time and place and physically transport myself there.

I see this quarantine giving us the gift of what hibernation gives: a reprieve, a breather, a slower pace, a pressure reduction, a chance for repair, the balm of quiet and a release from the taskmaster of a schedule.

Of course this state of things appeals to me, the man who at the age of 15 thought that a vocation with the Trappists looked like a rather good deal and who has always felt a monastic pull.

And feeling this does not mean that I'm unaware of the privileges I have that allow me to feel it: my job is secure for the moment, I have the money to pay for my broadband, I don't have to deal with the hospital hellscape in either my work state (New York) or my home state (New Jersey). I am in a protected space for these moments, and the protection feels nurturing and the respite welcome.

I don't know – no one knows – what the post-COVID world will bring to the United States and the rest of the nations, which makes it difficult to organize efforts to hang on to some of the gains that ordinary people have gotten under the duress of the pandemic: slightly more generous unemployment benefits, a greater push towards a health care system not tied to employment, basic cash support that delinks income from employment.

It also makes it difficult to organize against the accrual of more power by our executives to surveille people, restrict liberties, impose medical solutions (such

as mandatory vaccinations), and shovel public money into private hands. The present administration, even in the midst of the crisis, has continued enacting the regulatory rollbacks and the dismantling of the bureaucracy along with its crony capitalism that seems to make up the wrecking crew's politics.

However…

I'm hoping—selfishly, I admit—that post-COVID, along with all the burdens that opening up will bring (burdens that feel, at least at the moment, exhausting and deflationary), I can retain some of the quarantine vibe and practices. The delinking from scheduled time counts as a small bulwark against our masters' inevitable efforts to discipline our impulses and place us back into harness. The physical distancing gives us some space to see one another in full sovereign form and relieves us from the exhausting social performing that proximity requires. The comfort of being in one place at one time gives me the chance to get a grip on myself: stop, look, listen, refine, depose, confirm.

I assume I am in the minority in thinking these thoughts, and given all the destruction that has come about because of this pandemic, these thoughts are probably ethically suspect as well, given the relatively protected perch from which I sing them.

But there they are anyway, written on a bright Saturday afternoon in a situation where I have no obligation but to sit comfortably and consider openly whatever comes to sit next to me. I don't have to be anywhere, I don't have to meet anyone, I don't have any life-demons nagging at me or guilts undermining me.

In quarantine, I have felt more myself than I have felt in a long time. I don't really want to give that up.

The Lost Pleasures of Eldorado

(September 2020)

The historic commission of our wee little burg of Weehawken has digitized items in their collections and put them online. (Weehawken's fame claim is being the site of the Burr-Hamilton duel, but there is a lot more to this hamlet than that.)

So I've used a little bit of my quarantine time ration to read about Eldorado—not the fabled city of gold but a 25-acre pleasure park built by the Palisades Amusement and Exhibition Company in 1891, which included a casino, a castle built in the Rhenish style that offered food and drink and views of the Hudson River and New York City skyline (such as it was then) and a fantastical fountain populated with nymphs and satyrs that glowed under electric lights at night. Bolossy Kiralfy, one of the Kiralfy brothers, the other being Imre, was named as General Manager/Amusement Director.

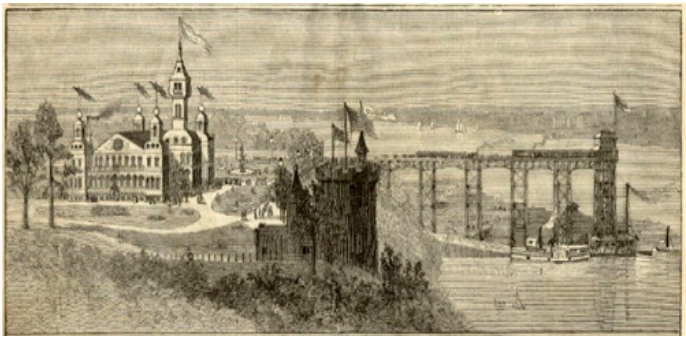
(Side note: The Kiralfy Brothers were well known burlesque and spectacle producers in Europe and the United States toward the end of the 19th century. Reading through the accomplishments on their Wikipedia page, it's clear these guys deserve some spectacular theater about themselves. Note for a future project.)

At the heart of Eldorado squatted a gigantic Roman-style amphitheater that seated 8,000 people and staged such operatic delights as "King Solomon Mines" (an 1891 Kiralfy production) and "Egypt Through Centuries" (courtesy of Augusto Francioli, an Italian ballet master) with thousands of actors and a zooful of animals. (More on this in a moment.)

The amphitheater even got its own article in the October 31, 1891, issue of Scientific American, which laid out in engineering-speak the ponderous dimensions of the place, which measured 445 feet in length and 350 feet in width and housed a "grand stand"—their spelling—where the audience perched itself and two playing areas: a ground-level arena and a stage five feet above that 140 feet wide and 330 feet long. The grand stand was punctuated by dozens of archways that led to internal entrances and exits and fronted by a broad staircase rising up 30 feet (like the steps of the Doges Palace in Venice) to bring the spectacle-goers into the magic world of the theater.

REAR VIEW OF THE AMPHITHEATRE AND ARENA.

But how, you might ask, if you have some basic geological knowledge of the area, did the audience members ascend the steep palisades on top of which Weehawken perches to get to this wondrous place? That took another amazing invention: a 197-foot tall elevated railway that brought the New York passengers coming in by ferry to the top of the palisade, and from there they could go by train to Eldorado or, if they wanted more adventure, to the race track in Guttenberg, several miles north of Weehawken.



John H. Bonn, president of the North Hudson Country Railway Association, was the mastermind behind this. His goal was not to bring people to Eldorado but to solve a transportation problem caused by people wanting to get from North Hudson to 42nd Street in New York City as quickly and efficiently as possible. The only ways to get to the ferry terminal were steep roads crowded by the traffic coming to and from the trainyards and piers along the Hudson River. Weehawken was an important terminus for commerce moving from New York City to north New Jersey as well as western New York State, so the area along the river was really clogged, and getting to and from the area caused a lot of headaches for people. (Yes, traffic jams in 1891.)

He reportedly spent $750,000 on this project (a 2020 equivalent of over $21 million). As a retrospective article in 1926 put it, "its cost was staggering to the people of those days, when a workman made less per day than he now earns in an hour. But, Mr. Bonn did not hesitate, and the traffic which his road attracted proved that his vision was more than idle dreaming."

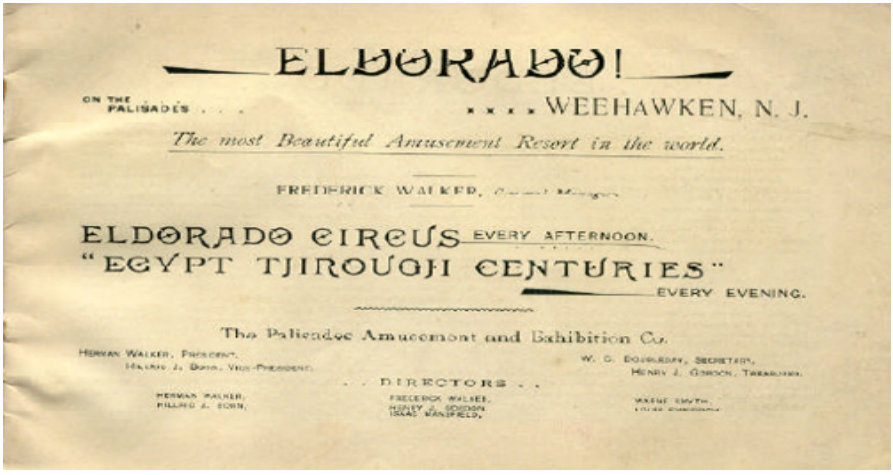
Three elevator cars, each one about 21' by 12' with a 10-foot height, could whisk 400 people per trip from the river's shore to the waiting room at the top of the trestle and then back. As the local newspaper calculated it, "The average is

100 passengers per minute, or of 60,000 per day of ten hours, almost 150,000 in twenty-four hours."

The train would travel hundreds of feet above the land below along a cut in the palisade to reduce the grade until it reached the grounds of Eldorado. From there it traveled to "a magnificent station on Park avenue," where the tracks turned north for West New York and Guttenberg.

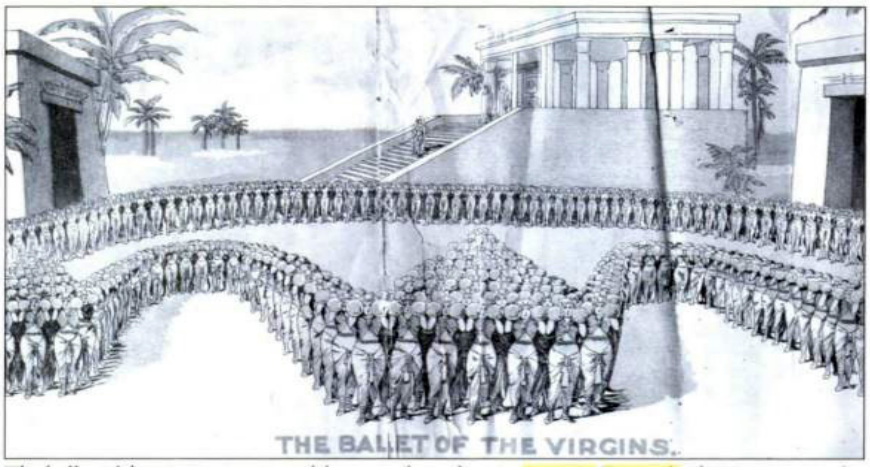
When it opened in 1891, crowds crossed from New York City by ferry to visit the wonders of Eldorado. Yes, there was the casino and the fountain and the delights of the promenade. But the shows, the wonder of wonders, the magnificence of the magnificent—the draw that drew and drew, where 50 cents (75 cents if you wanted to splurge) would get you a seat—no, a place in history—to watch "Egypt Through Centuries," the show of the 1892 season.

(Bolossy Karalfy did the inaugural show in 1891, "King Solomon's Mines," but a dispute between him and the other members of the organization led to Francioli taking over the production in 1892.)



A five-act extravaganza covering 110 centuries of Egyptian history, the highlights of the show included the sacrifice of 100 virgins to Osiris, the great pyramids and the pilgrimage to Mecca, the birth of Moses, Cleopatra and her court, the Suez Canal and the fall of Alexandria. On the stage and in the arena were fire eaters, jugglers, camels, donkeys, an army on horseback, cannons and fireworks.

The sacrifice of the virgins, according to the program, was called the Ballet of the Virgins (choreography was Francioli's passion). In Weehawken, a history about the town, the image of this ballet from the program has this description: "The ballet involved the sacrifice to Osiris of hundreds of virgins who, dancing their way into the Nile River to their deaths, caused the riverbanks to overflow and sustain the crops."



The finale was "The Bombardment of Alexandria," where entrenched Arabs fight it out with English soldiers and sailors, underscored by drums, blaring trumpets, cannon and musket fire, camels hither and thither, and cavalrymen galloping about, until "the fanatical Arabs" take to their heels amid the smoke and fire which cover the city. "The spectacle ends with the Viceroy of Egypt and Admiral Seymour standing triumphant amid Alexandria's smoking ruins, while the rebel Chief Arabi-Pasha kneels in chains before them with his fanatical followers dead about him. Such was the entertainment offered in the open air on the heights of Weehawken!"

But by 1894, it was all gone. Transportation modes changed (an electric trolley could now make it up and down the steep roads with ease), ticket sales languished, the racetrack foundered—and that was that. The casino was still used after 1894 for boxing matches and vaudeville acts, and Karl Bitter, the sculptor, took over the Rhenish castle as a studio, but in 1898, a fire engulfed everything left over.

The 25 acres of the amusement park were sold off as house lots on "Eldorado Heights," as the business prospectus called it; the highway now called Boulevard East was being built out, and the cars took over.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AT 2 O'CLOCK P. M.

ON THE GROUND.

In 1902, a Philadelphia concern bought the railway trestle for $2,300 (roughly $60,000 today) and tore it down. And Eldorado vanished, remembered only by a plaque where the base of the trestle stood and Eldorado Place, a tree-lined street of lovely old houses.

It must have been a heady three years, though, with historical centuries careening around the stage, an airborne train ride to an elevator that brought you from the heights to the Hudson's breadth, then the return on the undulating Hudson River to the city the prospectus called "the metropolis of the new world."

When I go on my daily walks, which take me around the perimeter of Eldorado's footprint, I look for the escaping camel or the virgin trying to sneak away from the death dance, or cast an ear for the plash of the fountain's water gleaming under electric lights and the murmur of hundreds of people promenading under a dulcet evening sky.

Then COVID goes away for a while, and that is a very good thing.

The Fire Next time

(October 2020)

James Baldwin published *The Fire Next Time* in 1963, and in a few respects it reads "dated," such as using the convention of the royal "he" to mean "all people" though it really feels sometimes that Baldwin is just referring to males

But his descriptions of racial trauma and his outline of what he feels needs to happen to heal it have not dated at all. Not at all.

The book consists of two essays. The first, and shorter, is "My Dungeon Shook: Letter to My Nephew on the One Hundredth Anniversary of the Emancipation." In this letter, he counsels his nephew to hold on to two beliefs—actually, one unbelief and one grant of emancipation that circle each other like a binary star, each gravity affecting the other's, neither gravity able to stand stable alone.

The first is the unbelief: "You can only be destroyed by believing that you really are what the white world calls a nigger. I tell you this because I love you, and please don't you ever forget it."

The second is the emancipation granted to his nephew by holding fast to the unbelief:

> I said that it was intended that you should perish in the ghetto ... [and] you have, and many of us have, defeated this intention; and, by a terrible law, a terrible paradox, those innocents who believed that your imprisonment made them safe are losing their grasp of reality. But these men are your brothers—your lost, younger brothers. And if the word integration means anything, this is what it means: that we, with love, shall force our brothers to see themselves as they are, to cease fleeing from reality and begin to change it. For this is your home, my friend, do not be driven from it; great men have done great things here, and will again, and we can make America what America must become.

In the second essay, "Down at the Cross: Letter from a Region in My Mind" (which had appeared in the November 10, 1962, issue of *The New Yorker*), Baldwin explores more deeply the physics of how the declaration of personhood by the powerless can set up the conditions for the emancipation of the powerful from their fever dreams and incarcerated desires, leading to a safer life for all. Here is how Baldwin closes the essay, equal parts soaring hopefulness and dire prophecy (an understandable double-offering, given Baldwin's description in the essay of his adolescent marination in the Black Christian church):

> … here we are … trapped in the gaudiest, most valuable, and most improbable water wheel the world has ever seen. Everything now, we must assume, is in our hands; we have no right to assume otherwise. If we—and now I mean the relatively conscious whites and the relatively conscious blacks, who must, like lovers, insist on, or create, the consciousness of the others—do not falter in our duty now, we may be able, handful that we are, to end the racial nightmare, and achieve our country, and change the history of the world. If we do not now dare everything, the fulfillment of that prophecy, re-created from the Bible in song by a slave, is upon us: *God gave Noah the rainbow sign, No more water, the fire next time!*

I confess to feeling, if not mouthing, a double "Amen" at words like this, an Amen with a hallelujah in it and an Amen with "I'm boarding up the windows and getting ready for the storm." And I also confess to having long harbored a similar prophetic hope about the United States being the only nation with the spiritual and monetary resources for bringing the kingdom of heaven upon the earth.

Of course, after this, I had to re-watch Raoul Peck's exquisite sculpture of a documentary about Baldwin, *I Am Not Your Negro*, so that I could have Baldwin's voice again in my ears, a voice at once arch and saddened, where he insisted that the problem of race was not about race at all but about how white people needed to examine why hating the Negro the way they did was necessary to live the lives they had chosen to live.

As much as I love Baldwin's quest as a writer and a black man at this point in his life to describe a way out and a way forward for the nation, to me, at least, it sets such an unfair redemptive historical weight on the shoulders of "the Negro" (that term acting for Baldwin the way the land of Wakanda in *The Black Panther* acted for black audiences when the movie came out in 2018—a place of perfection that holds the power of emancipation for the world). He clearly didn't want and didn't expect the Negroes of his day to be the Virgils leading white people through the harrowing of their souls, but there is still a part of him that hopes the power and beauty, as he saw it, of his fellow Negroes would catalyze the nation's fulfillment of its core emancipatory principles and the consequent melting away of white supremacy.

However, in the United States of 2020, whatever edge that Baldwin's call for whites to shrive their souls carried has now been blunted by a ramping up of the very hatreds Baldwin tried to excavate and expose, hatreds now applied broadbrush against all those designated non-white.

This is not Baldwin's fault, of course. The fault lies in the narrowness of the program, so to speak: love white people enough to get them to 'fess up to their

sins and then, so blessed, see them take up the historical project of creating, alongside their brothers and sisters, a free, egalitarian and welcoming society. I suspect that Baldwin also suspected that the program was not sufficient to the task. "People are not, for example, terribly anxious to be equal (equal, after all, to what and to whom?) but they love the idea of being superior. And this human truth has an especially grinding force here ... "

This is the program in play at the moment, of earnest discussions about white fragility and equally earnest instructions about how to be anti-racist. Yet the urgency of these examinations has tailed off over the summer and even as protests against racial injustice continue in Portland and elsewhere, people still fighting the good fight, that fight only gets airtime if there's violence attached to it and Black Lives Matter matters less to the media than the trolling of BLM by the president and his praetorians.

What is the better program, the one with longer legs and more stamina? Oh, to answer that requires more hubris and knowledge than I have, and I do not have enough time left in my life to gather what I need to begin an answer. But here is the sketchiest of sketches in response. Towards the end of his life (though, of course, he didn't know that at the time), King began to connect the dots between capitalist economics and the hatreds he fought against. He, like Baldwin, knew that the visible conflicts called "racial" were only proxies for the deeper conflicts of a system that premised its power and profits on exploiting a divided populace and disabling any alliances among the have-nots to fight the haves.

Dismantling that system is the harder program, but it's also a program that has well over a century and a half of thought and practice behind it. Do white people need to dig out their white supremist roots? Absolutely. But they won't get that done by reading nonsense like *White Fragility* or worry-beading their white guilt or brassily declaring that they don't have racist bones in their bodies. It will only come when they work for a truly democratic society in solidarity with all those labeled as "non-white" and the Other who have been boxed in to the margins by fear and violence—democratic in its politics, in its economics, in its ethics, in its aesthetics. It will take lots of pitchforks as well as lot of meetings, but it can be done.

Only then will the white supremacist bones be left to bleach in the sand (along with all those other toxic skeletons that hold us up while keeping us imprisoned), and we can get to the land promised to us all in our Declaration,

the preamble of the Constitution, the Civil War amendments and [add your own piece of inspiration here].

FINAL NOTE: For a great examination of democracy, read Astra Taylor's *Democracy May Not Exist, But We'll Miss It When It's Gone*. And for a look at the way solidarity needs to look, feel and work, see episode 4 of *Immigration Nation* on Netflix (though you should watch the whole damn thing and let the fear and loathing and anger and cruelty that is Trumpworld along the border sift into your soul).

Immigration Nation

(November 2020)

I struggle to write anything useful about the Netflix documentary Immigration Nation because whatever I say can never do honor to the torment and distress and razor cruelty on display during every second of every episode.

For some reason known only to the gods and the Department of Homeland Security, executive producers Christina Clusiau and Shaul Schwarz were given three years of open access to the operations of U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE). What they managed to capture is startling in its overall range and depth, but there are moments when I see what they have recorded and am stunned by its intimate surgery of the death-dance that the immigrants and the agents are forced to share by this administration. (More than once I said to myself, "How did they *ever* get that shot?") Though, as is clear again and again in every story in every episode, the dying never happens to the agents—they are just the escorts, absolved of any guilt by the mantra of "just enforcing the law."

It is also clear, as noted in episode 5 by John Amaya, a former deputy chief of staff at ICE, that whatever the *law* says is "the right way" to seek entry into the United States, the *policy from the government* (at least in his personal opinion) is "to tear families apart, which to me is unconscionable, and bring them maximum pain and use [the pain] as a deterrent."

Some may look at *Immigration Nation* (if they look at it at all) as fake news, a partisan take-down of ICE, a leftist argument for open borders, an anarchist attack on American culture, a slur against the police. But it was ICE's belief, when they granted the two filmmakers access, that the end product would justify their work and compliment them for doing it. Several articles detailed ICE's effort to dilute the documentary and block it from being shown when the producers delivered the goods, most of which were beaten back. (Clusiau and Schwarz did agree, reluctantly, to blacking out the last names of the agents who spoke on camera.)

In other words, the ICE agents were taken aback when the people they saw in action on the screen came across as underlings rather than heroes, janissaries rather than protectors.

But as shocking as the xenophobia and cruelty is, it shouldn't be *that* shocking. After all, what is American history but a succession of civil wars fueled by hatred and fear of the Other (even if that Other is one's next-door neighbors),

with occasional pauses for a collective hatred of some other Other that "unites" the nation (the Germans, the Japanese, Al Qaeda) until the citizens can get back to their usual work of hating others and hoping to secede from them.

As Richard Kreitner points out in *Break It Up: Secession, Division and the Secret History of America's Imperfect Union*, division is, and has always been, something of a national pastime. Robin Wright, in "Is America a Myth?" in the September 8, 2020, issue of *The New Yorker*, partial-lists the secession movements that have spiced up American history, and as she notes, "today, America is littered with prideful secessionist movements": Texit (Texas), Calexit (California), Verexit (Vermont, which was an independent republic from 1777 to 1791), the Texas Nationalist Movement, Cascadia (a northwestern bio-republic carved out America and Canada), and secessionist efforts in Alaska and Hawaii, the last two states to join the union.

All *Immigration Nation* brings to the fore is another rendition of our secessionist blood sport. It should shock us, dismay us, wither us, but it should not surprise us because rather than the United States of America, we are, and always have been, the Untied States of America, and things are only getting looser by the day. Wright quotes Yale historian David Blight as saying, "in the interior of our minds and our communities, we are already in a period of slow-evolving secession … we are tribes with at least two or more sources of information, facts, narratives, and stories we live in [and] a house divided about what holds the house up."

Yet the myth of American unity dies a hard death. George Packer, in *The Atlantic* of October 2020, talks about the "plastic hour," crucial moments in history when, using the words of philosopher Gershom Scholem, "it is possible to act. If you move then, something happens." Packer seems to think America is in such an hour and that there is an infrastructure for effecting "an era of radical reform that repairs our broken democracy" led by American citizens with "a longing for connection to a unifying American identity."

Packer likens the repair of American democracy to "a complex medical rescue," and he has faith that these American citizens will be able to perform "just the right interventions, in just the right sequence, at just the right speed: amputation, transfusion, multiple-organ transplant, stabilization, rehabilitation."

But will the citizen-surgeons even agree to wear masks? Will red North Dakotans commit to saving lives in blue New York City? Will amnesty be granted

to those who harvest the crops? Will reparations be made where they can be made? Will anybody give anything up so that others who don't have can have?

Some will. Most won't. And we already know this.

There is, of course, no solace or solution in knowing this, but the dismay of knowing is deepened by the wrenching irony of watching people migrate from the ends of the earth to establish lives on American soil at a moment when so many already inhabiting that soil have little or no faith that living here has any value that they are bound to respect, nourish and enlarge.

Catwrangling

(December 2020)

We have four indoor cats who let us take care of them, and then we have the feral contingent who belly up to the bar for breakfast and dinner and occasionally shelter overnight in Chez Feline, our thrown-together lodging made out of a Rubbermaid tub and insulation.

Why do we do this? Why do we spend a considerable amount of money taking care of other mammals who, in the words of conservatives, are "takers" and not "makers"?

I think the easy answer, and possibly even the right one, is that taking on the responsibility of caring for other creatures makes me and the Marvelous María Beatriz feel more fully human, that is, we make a closer approach to modeling the character and temperament of what we consider a human being to be like. We also know that this model human being is a construct, a rhetorical device, a handy-dandy Platonic ideal, and it is wildly incomplete since we've excluded from the "true human being" all the predatory skills Homo sapiens has evolved over the past few million years.

Perhaps a better way to say it is that our catwrangling makes us feel less like a full-blown Homo sapiens by making us feel more like what Homo sapiens could be like without all the dark and driven parts.

Whatever the deeper motivations, we can't deny that we just enjoy the cats' antics and company, and two of the ferals, Bandida and Calaca, have a special connection that is as special as any held with a fellow H. sapiens.

Bandida has her name because her face markings look like the mask of Zorro. Petite of build, she sits in waiting while we bring out the food with her left paw raised, something like a feline analog of holding a teacup with the pinkie extended. Unneutered, the tom cats got to her all the time; as she finished one litter, she'd start gestating another.

About two years ago, she had a litter of five, which we managed to capture and bring inside to foster. With the help of Elfie, a local cat advocate for trap/neuter/release, we also hooked Bandida several months later and got her spayed. We found homes for three of the kittens and kept two, whom we've named Seamus and Fiona (at the time of naming, we were in a love-fest with Seamus Heaney, the Irish poet).

What we also found out as Bandida was in the hospital was that she had given birth to a litter of two, which we literally stumbled across in the backyard. The daughter of our landlady took one in, but the second one refused to be nabbed. We dubbed her Calaca because her face colorings resembled the painted skulls of the Days of the Dead.

So, we charmed Calaca as best we could with dollops of Gerber's chicken dinner on our extended fingertips and daily doses of good food and clean water. We knew that the longer she lived outside, the less chance there was that we could ever get her to be an inside cat, but we needed her to hang around long enough so that we could trap and neuter her when she got old enough.

Which we did, and for five days of recovery we kept her in the cage with food, water and litter until the stitches healed. And then on the sixth day, we put the trap on the back deck and lifted the gate, and off she shot. We thought that was that: we'd done our good deed, and she'd at least be protected from being preyed upon.

Except that Calaca had other plans. Not only did she return to the back deck, she slowly domesticated herself to our presence. First, it was the brief allowance of a scratch behind one ear or the other. When that got comfortable, she offered us that special place where the tail meets the body and where a well-done rubbing raised the haunches and arched the back. Then there was a trill of fingertips under the chin, and before long she allowed us to pick her up and hold her. To this day, before she eats, she wants to head-butt our hands and have us scratch her between the ears, lave a few long-rubs along her spine and do a knuckle-rub on the special place.

How did she do that? Where in her brain does a decision like that get made? We don't know, but we do know what a gift her choosing of us is. No matter what crap is raining down around the world, at least on our back deck, this creature has chosen us to choose her, and the connections are born that make the day-to-day trudge toward one's death feel less brutal and lonely.

Fiona did much the same thing. We were only able to bring her in a week after we got her four siblings, and that week of feral living and training by Bandida made a large difference. We had the kittens in our guest room, with the door blocked off by a jury-rig of cardboard, foamcore and tape. Twice a day, I would bring in five bowls of food and spread them around the room so that they wouldn't poach off each other, and four of them would beeline for the chow while

Fiona would circle the perimeter before she would edge into the bowl that was always farthest from me.

I would also sit there for while and let them clamber over me (one of the great delights of the day), and Fiona would also be on the outside watching. Bit by bit she would inch forward until she touched my leg and lay the length of her body against it. She didn't interact with the other cats; she just acclimated herself. Little by little, little by little each day.

I wondered how a cat thought about these things, decided about these things, because clearly, that's what her behavior showed: measuring distances, calculating risk, making choices. But of more immediate delight was watching her accommodate herself, first to my leg, then a climb up onto the thigh, then a leap from there up to the shoulder, then scurry away as if she had frightened herself by her boldness. Then repeat.

To this day, of our four indoor cats, Fiona is still accustoming herself to being handled, but she has gotten so much better at it. At night, she likes to find the spaces behind bent knees or in the curve where ankle meets foot to settle in for the night. And she will stay settled in even as María Beatriz and I heave ourselves into different positions during the night, riding the flexing covers like a surfer riding a wave.

The comfort that comes from this kind of taking care goes both ways. The cats know on some level that their indoor world (they have never been outside except in carriers to go to the vet) is safe, accoutered with everything they need, and we know, as we provide that world, that these four creatures—at least these four creatures—are not at the mercy of the world that H. sapiens has created outside. We have given them sanctuary, and, in turn, provided ourselves sanctuary from the dank and murderous parts of the species.

The Jews profess the duty of tikkun olam, of repairing the world, and what's always struck me about that duty is that it must come from an underlying assumption that the world has been created broken from its very beginning, its fracture a fundamental element of its being and not the result of some deviation from an ideal of wholeness—that, in fact, wholeness was never the purpose of the creation, just as it is certainly not the evolutionary history of H. sapiens.

I feel that what María Beatriz and I do with and for the cats is our act of tikkun olam, that what we're repairing with our rescue of the cats is the endemic cruelty and isolation that constitutes part of the skin and bones of the broken

world. Our repair, of course, is in the nature of a patch, but what else could it ever be since there is no way, ever, to repair the fundamental fracture at the root of everything. We patch and we patch and we patch and hope that everything holds for as long as it can against the pressure, especially the pressure of our species as it goes about fouling its nest and sowing its discord.

In the meantime, their napping in the sun brings calm and balance to our home, which repairs us, and they do it without giving it a second thought. The least we can do is have that second thought and, in thinking it, move a bit closer to being human.