

**Michael Bettencourt**

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**Collected Essays: Volume 7  
Scene4 - 2014-2019**

Block & Tackle Productions Press



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Block & Tackle Productions Press



Co-Founders Elfin Frederick Vogel and Michael Bettencourt

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**To María Beatriz - always in all ways**



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## Introduction

**T**he 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

**I**n 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 exorbitantly 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.



**2019**



# Simplify

(January 2019)

For some reason, I came across Henry David Thoreau's words "Simplify, simplify, simplify," and they catapulted me back to my undergraduate tenure at Harvard College, when those same words, read by an anxious working/middle-class boy plunged into the heart of the land of privilege, freed him from his anxiety and guided him forward.

I had read *Walden*, of course, as one who had chosen to double-major in American history and literature, and the muscular surety of his words helped anchor me as I swam in a sea of abstractions and vapors.

I decided I would do my thesis on the school he and his brother, John, ran in Concord, where they put into practice pedagogical ideas that ran counter (of course) to the reigning practices of the day. I had decided to go into teaching myself, and studying Thoreau and his ideas seemed like the perfect subject matter.

I loved doing the research for my thesis. Many days were spent at the State House in Boston reading through town reports written in a Palmeresque flair, enveloped in the toasted mustiness of centuries-old rag paper.

On other days, I strapped an Underwood typewriter in a hard-shell case on the back of my bike and rode the 15 miles to Concord Public Library to read through letters, memoirs, histories and other artifacts to understand the social context in which Thoreau and his brother worked, rapping out my notes on index cards.

On those days, I also spent time at Walden Pond itself to take the air. When Thoreau lived there, the book he wrote was not *Walden* but *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, a buddy story about a journey he and his brother had made. The book is a eulogy to John, who had died of tetanus in 1842. In other words, he lived on Emerson's land by the pond as he grieved for the death of his friend and companion. *Walden*, written later, came out of that grief and was, in its way, a rejection of the finality of death—death not as erasure but as transformation so that some of what we enjoyed in living with the living person would journey along with us as we made our own way to our own ending.

I did my thesis (it lives somewhere in the reliquary of Widener Library on the Harvard campus), and I did go on to teach high school students for many years.

The declarative words of Thoreau, both in the triple repetition of the single “simplify” as well as the statement of his independence in the same chapter that begins with “I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived,” carried me along many a day as I worked my way through the Harvard jungle to emerge into a clear plain and a reachable horizon. The aroma of old inks, the velocipedic exhaustion, my 30-pound IBM Selectric with the backspace delete function (magic device!), the flow from confusion to affirmation through grief—these I treasured because they anchored me in the real, which kept me sane.

And as far as I know, I still have the sanity about me.

## By Whatever Light

(February 2019)

**O**n December 26, 2018, the Marvelous María Beatriz was informed that she had an adenocarcinoma in her endometrial wall, “well differentiated” (which we found out was a good thing, since it meant that the cells hadn’t begun to transform themselves into full-drive cancer). On January 14, she underwent surgery to remove the uterus, fallopian tubes and ovaries along with a portion of the lymph nodes, all of which will be assayed by a pathologist. We’re still waiting for that report, but the surgeon and the pathologist who accompanied him in the operating room were pleased by what they saw (and, it has to be said, didn’t see, that is, a cancer in process), so we’re hoping that the surgery will be the end of it.

We started a site on CaringBridge as a way to keep MMB’s world-wide network of friends and family informed about what was going on (we noted that she was getting support from every continent except Australia and Antarctica). What follows is one of a series of essays that we both wrote for the site (in Spanish and English) about our thoughts and feelings concerning this challenge to our lives. Whatever the prognosis, this time that we have spent dealing with the frailties of the body and the frights facing the spirit has done nothing but bind us together more closely and confirm the vows we took twenty years ago to always be there for each other and never be anywhere else.

\* \* \* \* \*

It is one thing to say, in a philosophical way, that your mortality is always threatened. It is quite another to *know* that your mortality is threatened *right now*. Well, not mine but that of the Marvelous María Beatriz, who on Monday, January 14, will undergo a hysterectomy to remove an adenocarcinoma in her endometrial tissue.

Yes, the odds of surviving surgery have improved immensely since that first infusion of ether in the 19th century, but it is not riskless. But we have no other option: we have to take the risk. So, under she will go, and I will wait, believing fully that she will wake up and all will be fine.

What is it that I am feeling? Not fear, not threat, not doom. Apprehension, anxiety – yes to those: “I want this to be over now,” what a child feels in anticipating something bad happening. And not to be denied: what if? Complications can arise, hands slip, bodies break—and then what would my life become?



Of course, our cats know nothing about any of this (even though we did tell them—they listened attentively, then went into the kitchen to eat). They romp, they stretch, they chase their toys, they sit in their crow's nest at the back door and scan the world outside (birds coming to eat the dry food for the strays provide exceptional excitement).

It is a cliché to envy them for their supposed unawareness of their own deaths (we can only suppose because we can't know for sure, but I would bet that they aren't aware), but envy them I will. Yes, we can extract meaning from our travails that will enrich our lives and deepen our empathies, but who would willingly choose to live like that if a choice was available not to?

María Beatriz is built in a way that helps her find extraordinary richness in these moments of frailty and vulnerability—she has a faith-base in spirit and human divinity that gives her confidence in the goodness of things—“the universe does things for a reason”—even as she also undergoes her own doubts and fears. For her, there is a community of spirit and spirits, a camaraderie flesh-based but not limited to or by flesh, an uplift of energy even in the midst of the deepest of pains and the most searing of losses (which she has seen in her work with parents who have lost children to illness). Without ever forgetting who she is, she also knows—*knows*—that there is something greater than she is, which she can trust and draw comfort from, rooted in the spirits of everyone she loves and who loves her.

That is really what it is for her: love, the power of, the forgivingness of, the life-force of, the indestructibility of.

I do not have that, and so I usually take my anxiety straight, no chaser. I don't say this with any pride (you know, that I'm doing the manly thing, facing reality without a cushion), and while I'm open to the idea that times like this can teach us much about our untapped reserves of resilience, they can also teach us about just how contingent and momentary we are, how easy it is to have any day be the last day.

So, whatever strength you take from these journal entries, I take a double dose (the supply is inexhaustible, so I could take even more) because, as has her love always done for me, the dosage nourishes me with hope and friendship, humor and light-heartedness—will allow me to sit in the waiting room fully prepared to meet her on the other side, the *earthly* side, and walk out with every intention of living out the rest of our days (and may they be many more) linked and loving and full of light.

# Sidewalk Dimensions

(March 2019)

**T**he brusque tangle of New York City is not a chaos; it's knitted from millions of micro-patterns as people make their daily shuttles across the cityscape. If you have a certain routine to get to work, you will, eventually, see it coordinated with thousands of others, and if you pay enough attention, you will find yourself part of an unintentional community where, if things go a certain way, you may find yourself acknowledging the others with a nod or a smile, familiarity reinforced each day by repetition. You may never (most likely will never) know each other's names, but you won't be complete strangers to each other as well: a small buffer against the residential anonymity.

My job commute promises me each day a 15-minute walk from my train station to my desk and then another 15 minutes on the return journey. I've discovered my community in the past three years I've worked there: the superintendents lugging out enormous garbage bags every other day and hosing down the sidewalks; the store owner who got me the special crackers I liked; the early-morning-shift counter staff at the Dominican bakery; Jeanine who walks her mastiff, Havoc, and Eduardo with his lovely pit bull, Dolly.

And there are the ones who are making the counter-trip to my trip: the Filipino woman with the lovely smile; the woman of a couple who, when the weather is cold, dresses in a sharp red coat with a matching hat; the young Jewish father with two in a stroller, and the young Jewish mother with two in a stroller and a third clinging to the handle; the father and son, with the father wearing a beret at a rakish angle. We smile or nod our heads in a gesture of recognition.

Actually, it's not quite right about the Jewish parents and their strollers. That was what they were doing when I first saw them. Now, the children are walking and the parents look a bit older and time moves on.

These local habitations move on as well, the avenues and streets on the average looking the same but also more shaved down by traffic and storm, the store owners moving a shade slower as they lay out boxes of plantains—all appearances floating on slow and inevitable tectonics, looking the same but foundationed so differently as time slides.

I've been reading Danny Kahneman's *Thinking Fast and Slow*, and aside from his fascinating investigations about our ramshackle brains, one impression I take away from his work is what contingent creatures we are, never certain

of or certified in anything, surviving through elaborate mechanisms of fooling ourselves, and always on the edge of disaster (for us—for the globe, not so much: it will absorb our depredations, just the way it did with massive meteorites, and continue evolving).

So, finding these open patches of the familiar in the briar of the indifferent is a comfort—pathetic, in a way, but still welcome as they push back against the world’s weight, giving us a bit more breathing room and a brief reprieve from fear.

I take the triumphs when I can on my daily amble. They help me make my leaps across the slow-slipping tectonics of the shifting world and get me to my destination in mostly one piece and mostly of one mind about my life.

# The Passing of a Great One

(April 2019)

I met Don Mason in 1984 in the cafeteria of New Hampshire College. I would go for breakfast, as would he, and he said later that he chatted me up because he sensed a Puritan soul in me that might need a bit of liberation. He was right, as he was right about so many things.

Thus started a multi-decade friendship that was so precious to me because it is so rare to be gifted with a gift as rare as having a Don Mason in your life.

We traveled to Crete in search of Minoan ruins, which we found, while also drinking ouzo in a neighborhood restaurant in Matala and dancing like Zorbas amid the cigarette smoke and clashing music, and mistakenly driving up a goat path in our little Suzuki, having to drive in reverse back to the main road with a steep drop on one side and the hillside to the other. We made it just fine.

We went in search of Crazy Horse, the Lakota warrior, determined to write a screenplay about him. We never wrote the screenplay – we figured two white Anglos had no right, much less talent, to capture the spirit of a man who spoke to eagles for guidance. However, we discovered plenty of other good stuff: the final summer picnic held by extras from the movie *Dances with Wolves*, which took place on the abandoned set of Fort McHenry and featured all of them dressed in the clothes they got to wear in the movie; Alzada, Montana, consisting of a convenience store run by a woman from Troy, New York, and the Stoneville Saloon, three deep in Harleys and featuring a wet tee-shirt contest (which we did not attend, fearing for our lives); chicken-fried steak; more deer than people in Montana; gambling in Deadwood, South Dakota (Don wearing his cowboy hat playing cards beneath a chair hanging from the ceiling claiming to the chair Wild Bill Hickock was sitting in when he was shot by Jack McCall). We drove 1600 miles in four days.

Don introduced me to the wonders of Vietnamese food. He had been doing community development work in San Francisco with Vietnamese groups, who then took him out for meals. When he got back, he said we had to find this food. We usually took a monthly day trip to Boston from New Hampshire to prowl through the book stores and get an urban fix. On our next trip, we walked every byway in Chinatown we could find until, miracles of miracles, we found one literal hole-in-the-wall eatery. He proceeded to order at least a dozen dishes, and I said

that we would never eat all that food. He said we would, and probably more. Again, he was right: we ate all of it.

When he had moved to Florida and I was still in the north, Ida had me come down for a surprise visit for his birthday – but only if I bore a large bag of take-out Vietnamese food. I duly made my purchase and got on the plane, filling the cabin with the redolent aromas of pho and summer rolls and spring rolls and vermicelli dishes. All of us feasted well.

I made many trips to visit the family in Florida, and we would go out for a day of fishing, bringing in the catch at the end of the day, watching while the captain filleted it, then driving back to the house to fry it up and dine like royalty.

Or the time he took me on his Belle Glade tour, driving us around in a red convertible as we visited the places of his triumphs and dangers, including the grounds of US Sugar, where we were chased off the premises by a battered pick-up as we tried to get close enough to talk to the workers housed in concrete dungeons in the middle of nowhere.

And who can forget the eatfests and gabfests at the Mason household in Hooksett, when I would come over, and we'd all spend a day preparing some enormous repast while arguing about books and ideas and philosophies and all sorts of inanities. Young Matthew would jump in, trying to hold his own, and he would often succeed, astonishing us with his insights and his stamina as he tried to keep up with two non-stop-talking autodidacts who enjoyed the fencing while not taking themselves too seriously. Helen and Byron, in the meantime, would go about their own business – I loved being in the presence of their sweet and dynamic selves, each of them in different ways so like their father: serious, calm, tender, engaged. In the course of one of these visits, we'd all feed our bodies with delicious food and feed our souls with comradeship.

The Marvelous María Beatriz and I were so happy when Beth came into Don's life because we could see how happy he was to have Beth as his partner, how her life re-engaged him in life and renewed his sense of purpose and drive. Just as I had had the luck of having a one-of-a-kind Don Mason as my mate, Don had the luck of having a one-of-a-kind Beth as his wife and confidant.

So much more to recall, but it would all come to the same thing: a declaration of love for this man who, even though flawed as we all are, was generous, decent and kind, who put his life on the line and changed for the better what he could change for the better. I will miss him, miss him, miss him so much.

# The Good Widower

(May 2019)

**M**y mother passed away seven months ago, and my father has seemingly adjusted well to being a widower. My mother used to take care of the social aspect of their lives: birthday cards, thank you cards, anniversaries, outreach phone calls, that sort of thing. She was also, of the two, the more outgoing: at her funeral, people spoke about her winning smile, her gregarious nature.

Now my father has taken up these tasks and done so with some relish, finding comfort in the tasks of making sure the birthday cards arrive on the right date and that notes (consolatory, just-to-say-hi-and-checking-in) go out. Her passing has expanded his network.

The mornings are best for him, he's said, when he gets to do his chores and visits. The afternoons are slow, he's said; he tries to read but falls asleep, and there are only so many errands to run in a day.

My sister, who lives the next town over, checks in on him daily, but she has her own load to carry, with a husband undergoing cancer treatments (luckily, he's not incapacitated by them, and they seem to be doing him some healing good). The Marvelous María Beatriz and I are three hours away, so there isn't much of the daily we can do with him or for him.

But my dad seems to be okay, to be doing okay.

Each day, though, is another day of getting older for him, and this he knows as well. The MMB and I visited him last weekend: spent the day at Sturbridge Village (which is about 20 minutes from his house) and took him out for dinner. He really enjoyed himself, getting into earnest conversations with the artisans about tinsmithing, musketry, cabinet-making, and reveling in memories of his childhood, which included many of the same chores the villagers of Sturbridge 1830 had, like fighting off the Rhode Island Red rooster protecting his brood to get to the eggs in the coop (it was my father's job to gather the eggs and clean out the coop) and canning vegetables and other produce on a coal stove in an unair-conditioned kitchen on the second floor. It both amazed him and did not amaze him that a century separated the days of the villagers and his days as a child in New London, Connecticut: after all, we've had great hopes for progress, but many people living in the 21st century really haven't made it into the 21st century yet.

He is also scheduled for surgery to repair an abdominal aneurism, and there is some concern about whether an irregularity he's had in his heartbeat for some years puts him at greater risk during the surgery (surgery always being a non-zero risk activity). We can tell he's a little thrown by this because it highlights his vulnerability as an aging man. He's always been one to keep active (he is the kind of man who has "do push-ups" on his to-do list), but when we were walking around Sturbridge Village, he had to take more frequent rest stops, admitting at one point that "I'm running out of steam," and the crick he's had in his lower spine from a previous injury and surgery seemed to pitch him a few "old man geezer" degrees more forward: a little more stooped, a little slower, a little less sure in his footing.

But we had a great time together and promised that we'll do this again, perhaps at Mystic Seaport, which is not far from where he grew up. I have no doubt that we will be able to keep that promise with him: the doctors will be properly cautious about his heart, the surgery will proceed without incident, and the old man will heal quickly.

What an enormous distance between our caretaking for this simple and treasured man and the troubles roiling billions of lives throughout the world. At least for him we can do some things. We can't hold back the tide, but we entertain him, we can soothe him, we can bury him with respect, we can honor his memory. He is DNA-close to us, he is an elder of our tribe, and given how our brains and bodies are built and have evolved, this is a fate that doesn't feel fated or punishing.

But what bridge over the chasm between that and all the rest? (Much like the question of how quantum physics ever morphs into the physics of big things.) The answer is both obvious and unsatisfying because it requires a continual and exhausting effort to calibrate the compassion given to one man to the people in the concentric circles of intimacy: friends, semi-friends, professional contacts, completely unknown to me. The calibration always falls short, is misdirected, is misunderstood, is dangerous, is completely ineffectual, but there is some moral imperative (coming from where? agreed to by whom?) that we should keep trying to recalibrate, that the world is bettered by our trying (romantic myth? actual fact?).

Right now, I feel that my best efforts of my best self should go towards the MMB and her recovery, my father and his recovery, my brother-in-law and his recovery, my sister and her recovery from her husband's travails (and her

own continuing recovery from cancer), and the cats: a big enough tribe for now. We'll continue to give our "monthly sustainer donations" to the organizations we support (check: circle of impersonal contacts), and we will revel in making dinner for friends on the back deck (as soon as the weather softens).

When we say goodbye and I embrace my father, I can feel the knobs of his spine and the scratch of his beard against my cheek. This is life-purpose enough at this moment.





# Balancing Act

(June 2019)

It's hard not to walk away from a couple of current programs – the gorgeously filmed but ideologically quiescent Netflix documentary *Our Planet*, narrated by David Attenborough, and HBO's *Chernobyl*, about the explosion of a nuclear reactor in 1986 – without thinking that things would be so much better for the earth if humans weren't around.

The two programs overlap when in one segment, *Our Planet* notes that the absence of human pressure in Chernobyl's blast zone has immensely improved the biodiversity of the place. Animal species long thought disappeared now wander through the architectural debris left behind when the area was evacuated, and plant and insect species have crept back in to enrich the landscape. (The same has been noted about the demilitarized zone between North and South Korea.)

*Chernobyl* shows the usual human process, when confronted by disaster, to do everything except tell the truth and correct the mistakes, willing to sacrifice thousands to preserve ideology and fantasy. The leaders and engineers who have created the hellish nuclear technology refuse to believe that they can't control it, and when they're proved wrong, they are paralyzed by their own ignorance.

But there's a mistaken premise at the heart of both of these programs, and that has to do with balance. Attenborough, in his well-rounded tones, talks constantly about the need for humans to find balance with the world in which they live. But nature isn't really about balance, or, more accurately, is not about maintaining a balance that favors us to the point where we can merrily go our way shitting where we eat without suffering any consequences.

Nature is not Gaia but entropy; it doesn't care if we're comfortable or not. If we screw up one arrangement, it will create another arrangement regardless of whether that keeps us warm or kills off the species. It's done much species-killing before, and it will do so again.

But the human species is not without resources here to restore, not balance, but fitness. Much, if not all, of the problems modern humans face come from mindsets grounded in austerity, scarcity and technological utopianism. (Witness Jeff Bezos' recent witless maunderings about shipping people off the earth to live in revolving space tubes as the equivalent of paradise.) People can change

these mindsets in more healthful directions, but the leadership for that is not going to come from Bezos and his ilk, nor can the savior tools be AI and neural networks with unrenovated biases driving the coding of the algorithms.

In her really excellent take-down of Bezos' technoblab, Caitlin Johnstone concludes that we need to rethink the linkages between profit and invention, money and motivation, inequality and ill-health to achieve the fitness we need. Her conclusion is worth quoting at length:

[We can] dramatically improve our collective ability to reverse this extinction event and all we have to do is get saner, stop punishing each other, start sharing and start collaborating. The only issue we have as humans is that a handful of highly competitive, highly sociopathic and yet incredibly mediocre people have all the power to build our future for us with virtually no input from anyone else. Because all the power in the form of all the money has been allowed to pool into the hands of those most willing to do whatever it takes to get it, we have just a few ruthless yet surprisingly dumb individuals calling the shots on the future of all living beings. The competitive mindset that gave rise to Jeff Bezos is the exact opposite of the kind of collaborative, harmonious mindset we'll need if we're going to overcome the challenges we face on the horizon. [1]

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[1] [<https://caitlinjohnstone.com/2019/05/12/bezos-reveals-his-ugly-vision-for-the-world-hes-trying-to-rule/>]

# Departures and Arrivals

(July 2019)

I am going to start this essay with a reference to the 2003 movie *Love Actually*, which may put some readers off their feed, but I promise to try to make the reference pay off.

(The critical debate about this movie could occupy its own essay, but I'll leave that to my betters to tackle.)

The reference is, of course, to Hugh Grant's opening voiceover about the comings and goings in airports, especially the greetings of separated people coming together - the joy, the relief, the "love is everywhere."

Whether such things can actually happen in the soulless holding pens that are modern airport terminals (at least for those of us permanently in economy class) is not my point. I'm more interested in what happens in those moments in our lives of rupture and suture, of farewell and welcome home. For me, at least, these moments are definitional—they snap things into focus about one's life in a way the fuzzy ebb and flow of daily life does not.

Departures. The Marvelous Maria Beatriz travels often, and I am her designated Lyft to get her to the airport. (So far, no hair-raising near-misses for boarding.) Her leaving never fails to leave me in a knot of doubt and unease because I can't help thinking, "If this were the last time I saw her, could I say that I have been as good a husband and friend and mate as I could have been? What have I missed? What didn't I honor or respect enough? Is there anything I have missed that will leave me forever regretful if this departure is our last sight of each other?"

We all know how easy it is to have our attention thinned out and distracted by the hail of daily events, despite best intentions to "be in the moment" and "stay in the present tense." Of course we miss hitting important marks, get sidetracked by things that seems oh so urgent but which turn out, when finished, not as life-and-death as we thought they were. Coming up short is a feature, not a fault, and no matter how intentional we wish to be, our intentions get melted down by the grind of the daily.

Rather than "living in the present tense," I live "in departure," I try to live as if this were my actual last day on earth (which it very well could be), and I would like to harbor no regrets if I don't wake up in the morning. In some respects, this hearkens back to my old Catholic school teaching about confession: it's less

about declaring your apology for having sinned than about having a clean soul in case the world decides to snatch you away unexpectedly. No regrets.

But at the other end are the welcomings, and these are sweet, not only because they bring joy but also because (because nothing in human life is ever a straight line) the joy gives us a fleeting reprieve from our doubts and regrets. (Probably more of the joy comes from the reprieve than from the solid presence of the person walking into my embrace.) For that moment, all moments are present tense, time not moving forward or back but hovering, a short-lived cleansing before “now” turns into “next.”

We need departures and arrivals in our lives, else things become a grey churn. They may be laced with irony and hedging (I will miss him when he leaves but enjoy the time alone; it’s great to have her back, but I will miss the solitude), but they give things shape and edge, something humans want even if they complain about it.

Life actually.

# The Nuclear Option

(August 2019)

The momentary popularity of the HBO series *Chernobyl*, about the explosion of reactor number four on April 25, 1986, at the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant near the now-abandoned town of Pripyat, Ukraine, was an odd popularity, given that it involves an ongoing disaster that has essentially has no ending, given the toxicity of the elements buried under the sarcophagus that entombs the site and in the air and land of the 19-mile exclusion zone around it.

But the show, as creator and director Craig Mazin has said, was never about the disaster itself, that is, a documentary approach, but about a trio of people struggling to tell the truth in a society premised on secrecy and paranoia. In other words, it's a morality play with heroes, based for the most part on biographical truth but with licenses taken to make it dramatic (such as having Emily Watson play a fictional character composited from other biographies whose role is to advance the plot).

The series has the right mix of what University of Pennsylvania psychologist Paul Rozin calls "benign masochism" (delight that comes from vicariously enjoying pain we know isn't really our pain) and excellent production values.

For the real fright, though, one should read Adam Higginbotham's *Midnight in Chernobyl*, an exhaustive account both technical and journalistic of what went wrong and what should still be feared. The show barely touches upon the terror, cruelty and betrayal that the explosion triggered—the terror created by a technology insufficiently understood but managed with arrogant certitude, the cruelty visited upon the thousands of human bodies thrown against the ruins both to shore them up and bury them, the betrayal by those who were culpable but powerful of those who were faithful but powerless.

Aside from the history, though, is the tale the book tells about nuclear power—its promises, its cheats, its merciless physics. This is an important tale to hear in the current debate about what to do about zeroing out carbon emissions so that we don't destroy the planet upon which we depend for life. There are many advocating, seriously, in the light of Chernobyl and Fukushima, for the revival of nuclear power in a world predicted to grow in population and a consequent hunger for electrical power. New reactor designs are touted

as more stable and generating a less toxic waste that can be stored in more manageable ways (even though we haven't yet gotten a handle on how to store the waste we already have, and we are nowhere near cleaning up our current clutch of nuclear corpses, like the facilities at Hanford, Washington).

I'm not sure where to stand on this. Humans are extraordinarily good at fouling their nests, and there's no reason to believe that a "new nuclear" would avoid that. Yet, if the predictions are right, then the world's people will need the electricity, which can't be fully produced by the "clean" technologies (wind, solar, geothermal, tidal, and so on), at least at their present scale and with the current state of battery technology.

Perhaps there are ways to decentralize electrical production so that we don't need to create gargantuan networks, have "smart" systems that balance usage and production, invest more in conservation, reduce population growth, reconfigure patterns of consumption, but we are still faced with the stark fact that billions more people will need billions more watts to live their lives and that that energy will have to come from somewhere.

Whatever choice we make, it won't be one with a quick roll-out to it, given the regulatory, political and social mountains that must be moved to make any of this happen. Memories of Chernobyl and Fukushima and Three Mile Island, along with the litany of lesser-known nuclear accidents and contaminations over the past century from around the world, will need to be overcome by good arguments, good science, good politics and a large helping of good luck, all while the killer asteroid of climate change bears down on us in a relentless trajectory.

My, my, what to do. In the long run, I believe humans can figure this out using deliberation and logic. But the truth is that we don't have a long run to run out here, and humans usually do things in the short run anyways: that's their creaturely design. So the reincarnation of nuclear power might turn out to be a short run that, despite all the evidence against it, gets a serious reconsideration as our systems begin to shatter and turn feral under the new science of our changing world.

*Chernobyl* and Chernobyl don't have an answer for this quandary, but they do have a caution: unless great care is taken otherwise, whatever technologies get chosen to meet the coming transformation will cause pain, dislocation, injustice and madness for the many along with comforts and victories for the few. And it's impossible not to ask the follow-up question: When in the course of human events has such care ever been taken in the face of a looming disaster?

# Pop-Up Oases

(September 2019)

**T**here is a public piano at Port Authority, set up there by Sing for Hope, available to one and all to play. Every day that I pass by it on my way to the subway, someone sits there and plays. Sometimes the person knows how to play; some even bring sheet music; and several times sing-alongs have formed around the player, gathered voices turning the cavernous Authority into something almost cathedralesque.

The piano itself is clearly donated, the dings, scratches, gouges, furrows, stains, and warps a record of its movements. But an artist has also decorated it, masking the blemishes with whimsy and color. Most of its keys are mostly in tune, like many of the people who come to play it, and its mostly ramshackle, sometimes beautiful, soundings soothe me against the grind of the Authority.

In tune, mostly, and mostly people of color. One black man sits hunched over the bass end of the keyboard pumping three, maybe four notes tops, in some pattern meaningful to him but which no one would consider musical. This he needs to do regardless if anyone else needs him doing it. A black woman playing stride, a young man doing a slow-motion Chopin he somewhat knows, the aforementioned sheet-music-bringer whose pages may show Beethoven, may show Joplin, an Asian woman playing from a songbook with sign propped next to her warning that anyone taking a picture of her owes her money.

New York City is filled with these pop-up oases, infills of space and time in the city's battlescape not allied with profit or hustle or scam or necessity that shock people into being people for a moment—not mask, not persona, not role or title but participant and actor and creator.

Sometimes, as with the cages holding mannequins of children wrapped in mylar blankets that recently appeared on the sidewalks, the shock is meant as an actual shock about our southern border filled with vulnerables.

Sometimes, as with a video that recently made the city's rounds, it's the shock of the memory of being younger brought on by an impromptu sing-along of strangers belting out the Backstreet Boys' "I Want It That Way" as they ride the subway. Suddenly young again, even if you were born after the song was made, suddenly unafraid and unshy.



At other times, as with the pianos, the shock is the shock of delight and amusement along with the added gift of the small lift the music gives to bodies constantly pressed-down by New York's dense sensory fusion that doubles the air pressure at street level.

The fact that people so often come out of themselves to be themselves in a city all about speed and buffers shows just how hungry they are for things that pause the pace and enliven that pause, that call upon them to invent and broadcast and be more than just capitalist fodder.

In the politics of this run-up to 2020, the word "socialism" has suddenly appeared, but it's not referring to a sudden real understanding of socialist politics and the adoption of an emancipatory program to move history forward.

Instead, I see the word as a proxy for talking about an antidote to the stunted sense of self allowed by a capitalist society. To a young cohort of American society, the liberal democracy respected by their elders has not delivered the goods to them, but there's no good way of talking about solutions within the limits set by liberal democratic discourse.

"Socialism," on the other hand, allows them to speak about their discontents and hopes in a vocabulary that owes nothing to their elders and which may give them insights and directions liberal democracy does not permit.

Does this make them socialists? Not yet, at least. But the word "socialism" is like having the piano around. You can sit down and bang out a tune, bang out even more tunes, talk to others about the tunes you've just banged out, and before you know it, choruses of voices begin to gather, new songs are made and sung, people begin to see one another as people, and who knows what such immodesties and majesties that may lead to? The elders don't like it, and they may do vicious things to cut it off, but the urges and impulses can't be denied.

The trick is to find a way to turn the piano playing into political power. Not easy, perhaps not even possible, but what else is there to do in the dissolute age in which we live?

# Medicinal Relationships

(December 2019)

One night this past summer, sitting in the little slice of heaven we call our back deck, the Marvelous María Beatriz and I hosted Jose Luis, an old friend we hadn't seen in a while, and his wife, Rafaela, whom we had never met. They happened to be in our part of New Jersey for an event with family, and luck made it possible for us to cook them dinner and get the origin story of how they met and decided to make a life together.

Among the many topics that floated on the breeze that swept across our table was about Jose Luis' plans for the next five years or so. He likes the scientific research he's doing in Boston about cancer, and he feels he's making significant, if incremental, contributions to the knowledge base about the disease and its possible cures. But he also feels somewhat isolated as well, his colleagues being work colleagues but not ones with whom he'd be able to strike up a friendship and possibly even a longer-term relationship. Originally from Spain, he also feels a pull back to the Iberian homeland, to its very different assumptions from the United States about the value and meaning of a life, as well as to Europe itself and its lengthy histories, which give his mind a greater imaginative playground and grounding.

He would like to walk the full length of the Camino de Santiago. He wants to watch the sun go down from the portico of the Parthenon, then travel to Crete to watch the sun set over Libya from the city of Mátala. He re-reads the Iliad and the Odyssey on a periodic basis to refresh his sense of adventure. He wants to reprise life-changing trips he had made to Italy and Sicily.

But even though his soul wants to wander and re-wander, what he craves most is what the four of us were doing on the slice of heaven: eating, drinking, talking and talking and talking for five hours that slipped by like nothing. These times are the ones he feels gives him the most life, and he can never have enough of them.

He's got a point, and one based in science, which would please the part of his spirit that craves and respects precision. Robert Waldinger, the fourth director of a 75-year-long longitudinal study called the Study of Adult Development at Harvard Medical School, gave a well-received TEDx talk back in 2015 about what the study showed about healthy aging.

The short take: the warmth of relationships throughout life has the greatest positive impact on “life satisfaction.” Not fame, not wealth, but what we did on the back deck spread across as many people and continents as possible for as many years as possible. The relationships, of course, are never all smooth sailing, but whatever negatives come out through bickering or indifference are negated by the knowledge that the people in the relationship are completely reliable no matter what happens: they will never leave you. That solidity is the fundament of a life felt to be happy and rewarding.

Waldinger also talked about how deadly loneliness is as a vector of shortened lifespans and lessened pleasure and how a pursuit of wealth and/or fame only strengthened its toxicity.

Given all this, I think we all reach a point when it no longer makes sense (if it ever did) to “lean in” to work, career, building an extensive résumé, acquiring wealth (which most of us will never have, anyway) but, instead, to “lean back” into the chair on the deck or the shared beer after work or the long-deferred phone call to the sibling we’ve been avoiding and take the good medicine that such actions bring forth.

I have the memory of a Utah Phillips song (I now can’t seem to track it down) where he has a conversation with his upright neighbor, who takes him to task for sitting on his porch engaged in the not-quite-respectable work of making music. This neighbor had hewed to what he thought were the proper rules of his role—steadfast career in a job that was not all that interesting until he earned his retirement—and he castigates Phillips for not having taken the same route.

“You should have a job,” he says, and Phillips replies, “Why?”

“So you can earn money.” “Why?”

“So that you can earn enough to one day retire and enjoy your life.” “That’s what I’m doing right now.”

Choosing “right now” is hard because so many competing shoulds muck up the choosing: should have job, should have fame, should have success. It takes a discipline of resistance, Phillips seems to be saying, to make “right now” the should that governs.

Having Jose Luis and Rafaela show up at our doorstep was the kind of unexpected gift that reminded us to keep sharing, keep lengthening, keep the touch light but constant, warm and invitational.

**2018**



# Flinders and a Lather

(January 2018)

I find it very difficult these days not to be in a lather from the moment I wake up. I sometimes think of Weehawken, where I live, as one of those small shires in Middle Earth suddenly blackened by the stain oozing outward from Washington D.C. (with minor shadows added from Trenton while Chris Christie still roams the governmental grounds). Weehawkenites have sensed all along that something out there was not right, was not well, but this week, with the coming-passage of the Republican mangle called tax overhaul, the illness has crossed our boundaries, soon to punish us and our fellow New Yorkers for not being of the evil lord's clan.

But there is always more to lather the lather. Religious choice being used to undo equality. Gun-toting in all fifty states. Absolving Israel of its colonialism by moving the U.S. embassy to Jerusalem. Countdown clocks on the NYC subway system that aren't correct. The vulnerable minced: DACA, children's health insurance, immigrants ICE'd and families destroyed. The coming patriarchal backlash to #MeToo and a zombie white supremacy still upright married to a zombie racism that seems ineradicable.

I understand why Trump's MAGA call rang brightly inside so many skulls. I don't know if my parents voted for Trump, but they clearly have in their heads an "again" that they would love to see re-enacted in a modern age that has turned strange and dangerous for them (call it "strangerous"), and so do millions of others, who would like the return of the old power structures and comforting vocabularies of virtue and exclusive social membership.

On the other hand, it's not as if the United States hasn't achieved greatness in the past, if by greatness we mean something like building a mass industrial society on our rickety democratic infrastructure that did improve lives across many measures and did not implode (too much). That did happen, and while, rightly, we should point out the suffering that this national enterprise caused and still causes, it is still an achievement of great significance and should not be abandoned, either rhetorically or actually.

It is also important to hold onto the fact that the current corporatist anarchy of our politics is not the only politics this country has ever known. Plenty of voices have described different measures of "great," and plenty of movements have tried to turn those words into actions and institutions, sometimes even

succeeding: Social Security, Medicare, Medicaid, and whatever is left of the “safety net” as well as local and regional experiments to test out “quality of life” arguments about the proper mix of markets, science, and communal living.

For me, the current Trumpian definition of “great” is pinched and greed-worn. I read a piece about the fact that, today, black mothers are three times as likely as white mothers to die from complications of child birth; in New York City, the ratio is 12 to 1. The probable cause? “The discrimination that black women experience in the rest of their lives — the double whammy of race and gender — that may ultimately be the most significant factor in poor maternal outcomes.” The moment of death for these women begins long before they’re giving birth. It begins in the wear and tear on the body of living in a racist society, and that begins at their own births.

Why is solving a situation where “black expectant and new mothers in the U.S. die at about the same rate as women in countries such as Mexico and Uzbekistan” not part of our “great”? Why are we not great in every measure that any civilized society would consider crucial to being civilized, like the measures included in the Human Development Index? Why does Norway best us every year? Why are we not inventing and deploying more revolutionary technologies? Why do we have to tremble as we ride our highways and cross our bridges?

Today, “great again” means the soothing of spirits wounded by a toxic nostalgia, and if our politics continues to use that as its lodestar, we will never be able to reconfigure ourselves, which means that black mothers will die, children will suffer from preventable diseases, and our economic lives will be premised on the lie of “trickle-down economics” and the mythical rationality of a mythical marketplace.

I don’t know how we get to a “great” that is certifiably great. Perhaps all we can do at the present moment is fasten our seatbelts for the bumpy ride, do what we can to keep the dark stain at bay, and hope that the democracy train doesn’t shake itself to flinders before it gets into the station.

# Bring on the Machines

(February 2018)

**M**uch anxiety of late over machine learning, artificial intelligence and the robot advent. Some of it is fevered Skynet-style paranoia, but the increased use of these prostheses in human lives does raise important questions about a society driven by robo-capitalism, which I define as information being used to replace human workers wherever the owners of capital deem it profitable to do so. (For this essay, I am conflating all these terms into the word “robots” until I abandon the term for “information.”)

Replacing workers with machines is not new in capitalist practice – advances in productivity came about in great measure because owners of capital wanted to find ways not to deal with troublesome human beings. And I believe that the owners will continue to do this because, given the logic of the system to which they’ve tied their fortunes, they have no choice. Workers are a drag on profits, and all drags on profit must be whittled away.

Extending this logic of replacing human workers with robots, however, could end up destroying the other half of the capitalist equation, which is that profits come from sales, and sales must be made to people who need/want things. If the income to buy stuff is tied to work, but work for humans is eliminated, then there is no income to buy stuff and the humans become superfluous to the system. It’s the dilemma Henry Ford faced: if he didn’t pay a decent wage to his workers, who would buy the cars his workers made?

The rich can’t make up the difference, and since much of their income comes through rents, they will find that without humans with incomes, their rents will also suffer.

The coming of the robots forces to the surface those ever-present subterranean contradictions in capitalism where a system premised on growth is also whipsawed by the discipline of price, but it does it in a wholly new way: what is important about the robots is not the machinery but the information that powers them, and if there is one truth about the current market system, it does not know how to price information, as Paul Mason points out in his excellent book *Postcapitalism*.

This is because market allocation systems are based on scarcity, but information is not scarce at all, and oftentimes is free for the taking, as in the open-source software and hardware communities.



This gives capitalism a hard nut to crack. If it reduces purchasing power by eliminating human jobs, how will it generate profits? Some sectors could generate a gig economy, putting the onus of salary-making on “independent contractors,” but that isn’t a sustainable model for growth. Studies already show that the gig economy is an economy of impoverishment for its workers. It could, as it usually does, move pieces around the chessboard: offshore that, telecommute this, bring that other thing back on shore, and so on.

But at some point (probably not that far into the future), these avoidances will become like rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic. Without conflict between labor and capital because labor has been eliminated, a falling rate of profit because there aren’t enough people with money to buy stuff, a marketplace that can’t price the value of information, and where greed is no longer a strong enough incentive, what do we have?

We have Trouble, right here in River City, because the whole intellectual underpinning for this system crumbles, without any other vision with enough moxie to take its place (though I wouldn’t give up on communism just yet).

If I were king of the forest, I’d bring on the information machines so that wage work can be eliminated as quickly as possible, and I’d institute a universal basic income as a bridging measure while using the historical rupture to formulate an economic practice that might allow the planet to survive its humans.

All disagreements to this duly noted, but there is no option of muddling through this time. And how dispiriting is that phrase, “muddle through.” Human brains have an immense inventive capacity which can be magnified by the information and neuroscience technologies the human brain is inventing. The crude and exploitative economic system in which humans have mired themselves is certainly not the acme of human development, and perhaps for the first time in the history of their species, humans have the tools and fuel to build themselves out of the trap they’ve built themselves into rather than muddle through from one crisis to the next.

Our post-post-post-modern distrust of grand narratives and idealistic visions is well founded – much slaughter has been done in their names. But one of their benefits was to lift the human gaze above the horizon and enlarge the field of view. We must engage with any grand vision carefully because a grand vision is both a beast and a blessing, but nevertheless we must engage or else risk just inching through our days until we don’t have any days or inches left.

# Virtual

(March 2018)

**M**y good friend is considering converting his money to Bitcoin and has taken enough steps to convince me that he is convinced this is a good move, though I am not at all convinced that his being convinced is a good move because I cannot, for all I read about it, understand Bitcoin's attraction and thus understand why someone would trust Bitcoin to both have value and hold value.

I do understand some things about this situation, though.

I understand the techno-libertarian delight in promoting a transaction medium not mediated by a government and distributed in a decentralized network and which eliminates the messy politics of human society through the grace of code. (Question for the techno-libertarian: why the unquestioned trust in a decentralized network when you have shown, through your own coding skills, the ability to hack into supposedly sacrosanct systems. Maginot Line, anyone?)

I understand that we exchange money virtually all the time (e.g., wiring or transferring dollars into an account) and that bit/byte money is just as actual as the paper in our pockets.

I understand that the value of any money is, in part, based on a faith in the institution issuing it that the institution will work to maintain its value and availability.

In short, virtuality powers our financial systems, but it does so in different ways at different levels. At the level of my making an online transfer, the electronic numbers sent back and forth are a much more efficient way to make the exchange than my taking \$100 out of my account, filling out a deposit slip, depositing it into that other account, and getting my receipt. The 1s and 0s make for a smoother and more auditable process.

But in the investing world, these virtual exchanges become a kind of commodity that can then be traded, as we saw in 2008. Once solid things, like mortgage contracts, became so virtualized that they eventually just melted away: the mortgage sliced into securitized tranches, which were then re-sliced into another "financial product," and so on until, at some point, the end-product had no connection to its starting-product, and no one had any control over anything.

Bitcoin strikes me in the same way. Yes, fiat money, issued by the U.S. government, is, in a way, a faith-based enterprise: I trust that the government will do all it can to maintain the value of the currency, and thus my faith in its powers, so that I and others can exchange it for goods and services that promote our common prosperity. But it's not entirely faith-based. Or, rather, the faith has ties to tangible economic stuff that can inform it and strengthen it; the value is not just pulled from the air or made-up as we go along.

What drives the value of Bitcoin? Bitcoin's underlying blockchain technology is easy to understand because it's a ledger that can't be hacked (yet) to falsify transactions, thus making it easier to trust negotiations and enact contracts. And the miners in the system, who are doing all the verifications in the decentralized ledger to keep it honest, get a reward for their work: Bitcoin. But no one really knows how to value the Bitcoin rewards that miners are receiving. Any value assigned to Bitcoin seems arbitrary, and the volatility of the current run-up and run-down in values, driven in part by new Bitcoin futures exchanges, makes it unreliable as a currency.

Well, my friend will do what he will do and reap what he will reap, and I wish him great luck. My point here is not to explicate Bitcoin but to show how hungry humans are for virtuality, hungry to nest within virtual worlds, hungry to be driven by phantasms, demons, rules-of-thumb, and best guesses and distracted by the endless chatter within their brains, reified in the internet and social media. Visualize a human being as moving through the world enveloped in a fog that is also a screen running endless uncured programming, all of it real, little of it really real, sleepwalking with eyes shut wide.

Man, that sounds so geezerish, doesn't it? The "all that solids melts into air" trope, eh? "I remember when reality was real and not virtual!" and so on.

But let us dig into this a bit more. I'm not talking only about the technological virtualities of our brave new world because we employ other kinds of virtuality as well in our lives, such as political ideologies, religious dogmas, racial prejudices, all of which attack the real in the same way, by reducing complexity and uncertainty into a "just-so" story that can be used for distraction, certification, or both.

Just as modern humans hunger for their screens, they hunger for these other virtualities as well, and they have had a longer historical time to ooze their dark nostalgias into our veins and turn the world into a slaughterhouse several times over. We see this in our current American politics, we saw it in the

Balkans after 1989, and the ooze continues to stain Europe and Russia and Asia today. Google may have created maps of brilliant cartographic detail, but when it comes to the topography of a human being, large swaths are still marked with the faces of monsters and captioned with “unknown.”

These days I find myself resisting the Netflixing of life – finding the one streaming service to rule them all (and because there is no such single service, we are prompted to pay for many of them to stitch together a seamless streaming life). This also includes going to movies and plays, as well as reading fiction. I find myself mistrusting their intent, which feels very much like a cocooning or a softening of the realities round me – escapades for escape.

I find that I don’t want to be affected, I want to be tutored. I don’t want to be moved, I want to be schooled. Something serious and scouring and loving enough of me to wound me.

Modern science may describe reality, at bottom, as nothing but a stew of quarks and zizzing space, but we live at a Newtonian level of falling apples and cluster bombs, of bodies and suffering. This brings to mind favored words from Thoreau: “I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach...I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life, to live so sturdily and Spartan-like as to put to rout all that was not life, to cut a broad swath and shave close, to drive life into a corner, and reduce it to its lowest terms....Be it life or death, we crave only reality. If we are really dying, let us hear the rattle in our throats and feel the cold in the extremities; if we are alive, let us go about our business.”

We need a better thisness, a different diet of real. Delete Facebook and its offspring. Read more, and read real books with bindings and heft. No plays or movies, art galleries – don’t trust the artistic impulse, too often self-indulgent and selfish. Talk with people and try to use a language that honors confusion and dismay and moves us away from our certainties and judgments.

But not only these penitences for penitence’s sake, a dutiful shriving. Also needed is the infusion of satisfaction, maybe even joy, that comes from what Michael Benedikt calls, in *For an Architecture of Reality*, “direct esthetic experiences of the real...there are valued times when the world is perceived afresh: perhaps after a rain...or, alone, one sees again the roundness of an apple. 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 thing as they are.”

He goes on to say that while our modernist selves profess that we live in a solar system of deconstructed worlds, “we are actually one-worldists when it comes to a good cup of coffee” and that “so familiar is the ring of truth, the tenor of reality, the ‘bite and sweet gravity’ (Sontag) of things real and beautiful that if we are, most of us, as I surmise, fairly expert at discerning what is really real from what is not, then there lies a tragedy of some proportion: we will not claim the expertise for fear of appearing unworldly.”

Perhaps this is what my resistance is all about: an effort to become worldly again, to leave Flatland and reënter the three-dimensional world of Spaceland, to pay a deeper attention to paying attention, to clear out the capitalist fogs and phantasms, to exercise my expertise in knowing what is whole and weighted and dense.

But I think it’s even more than that. It’s about reclaiming our mortality.

Becoming more worldly will give us a ballast that the virtual is designed not to give us so that we can admit what we are too afraid to admit about our human lives: that we don’t really know much of anything, we’re mostly powerless to change anything, our lives are mostly wasted, and we hunger for at least one moment of light before we pass away, Spalding Gray’s “perfect moment.”

Techno-utopianism gets in the way of understanding this. Ergo, let’s get rid of the techno-utopianism so that we can redeem our own vaporous yet meaty selves and live lives that take deep joy both in the thingness of our world and the fact that our “too too solid flesh” will one day gently deliquesce. Becoming fully human in the age of machine learning—bone and gristle resolving itself into a dew—may be the most radical action one can take. And that seems to be the road I’m walking these days.

## A Public Jewel

(April 2018)

**E**ach day I take the NYC MTA subway to work after a short bus ride in from New Jersey.

The subway has gotten a lot of bad press over the past few years, ranging from the Big-Dig-level costs of the two-decades-late Second Avenue Subway to the MTA machine shop that hand-manufactures parts that no longer exist anywhere on the planet for the aged signal system.

Add to the industrial challenges of running this nation-sized system the sniping between Governor Andrew Cuomo and Mayor Bill de Blasio over funding, the regional quagmire about transportation financing, and the national infrastructure disgrace, not to mention the horrific stories of trapped passengers and the lesser headaches of delays “after an earlier incident at West 4th,” sick passengers, odorous street people, signal problems, the screwball rescheduling on weekends to accommodate repairs, manspreading, womanspreading, hip-hop dance routines (“It’s showtime!”), beggars (“I’m very sorry to disturb you, but can anybody...”) and the stumps who plant themselves in the doorways and don’t move: all this, and more, and a person might begin to wonder why people of sound mind and body would inflict the subway on themselves.

Several answers to this question. First, of course, most of the millions taking the train don’t have a choice: this is our Uber at \$2.75 a ride. Second, it’s efficient and economical, even with all its mechanical mangles and alchemical financing. Third, it’s one of the few places left in this unequalized city where the Walt Whitman multitudes have a chance to pass by and through each other and where our bubbles get dented, tried and spider-cracked by something real, smelly and felt.

This last point matters most to me. On the day of the women’s march in January 2018, I was waiting at 59th Street Columbus Circle for a train to Port Authority. I was looking down the track practicing my “subway suction” (a term from Garrison Keillor about pulling a subway into the station by the force of one’s stare) when a woman, who was also suctioning, turned to me and said that it was such a shame the subway was in such a shameful condition.

However, she didn’t say it with disdain but as a lament. She spoke about how the systems she traveled in Europe were better because their governing bodies saw the investment in the public space as good for the public and good for the

whole society. A public good, properly managed, was a good that was good for everyone because it reduced the coarseness of common life and strengthened a social patience with the inevitable bumps and grinds that come with humans living cheek-by-jowl to one another.

I spoke about how I saw the subway as this public jewel that deserved better treatment but would not get it in today's America since the country's reigning ideologies are invested in improving shareholder value and the corporate profit rate, and disdain anything to do with improving the quality of public daily life for daily people.

This disdain turns to cruelty when considering the fate of those unlucky enough not to be rich and down on their luck. If the ideologies could have their way, we would not have the poor (nor the black nor the brown nor the lame, halt and infirm) with us any longer. To ensure this happens without the negative fallout from a full-blown extermination campaign, the apocalypse is allowed to happen in slow motion through defunding health facilities, increasing deportations and incarcerations, starving the funds for public housing, work requirements for Medicaid, and so on.

For the price of the cost overruns on some unneeded weapons system, the subway could be fixed, with a maintenance endowment set up for modernization and improvements. But American conservative ideologues have a hatred of "the public" both as a concept and a practice, and subway neglect is one demonstration of this.

The U.S. postal system is another public jewel that deserves much better treatment. Instead, it is financially starved by a pension payment obligation that no other federal agency has to meet. (Two other sins for the ideologues: it is a strongly unionized organization that offers people of color an unprecedented opportunity for success and security.)

All complaints about crappy consumer service duly noted, but it sports the most sophisticated optical character reader system in the world as well as the most extensive address database, it has a presence in almost every municipality in the country, and it will bring a letter to the Navajo reservation in Canyon de Chelly for less than half a dollar, something the shareholders of FedEx or UPS would never do. (And it could provide low-friction banking services, as it once did in the early 20th century.)

Instead, we get Mick Mulvaney, Trump's budget hitman and the new head of the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau, loosening the restrictions on the payday lending industry, using the agency that had been created to protect consumers to enable the predators to feed on consumers more efficiently.

It maddens me to live in a place that does this. Yes, of course, we could band together to vote the bastards out and get our bastards in, but that's never really worked for any length of time, especially when it's not the bastards exercising the real power. There is a "deep state"—though it's not really that deep—where the crews at EPA and Education and Energy and HUD and Justice and the judiciary and fill-in-the-agency-name go about wrecking what few protections we have left against the incursion of the market into every corner of our lives.

These are damages that will really damage us, more than Russian trolling or an inept president or a Congress that "sucks" (Senator Joe Manchin's inimitable phrase), though these will do their damages as well (just ask those tagged as DACA).

In *First as Tragedy, Then as Farce*, Slavoj Žižek notes that conservatism is not a legitimate intellectual philosophy but is the backlash that comes when a revolution has failed to liberate people. In the United States, this means that the failure of even mild revolutions like the New Deal or Johnson's social programs has engendered over five decades of conservative efforts to make sure they never happen again (Medicaid, Medicare and Social Security, sort-of the last remnants of the revolutions, are clearly in the gunner's cross-hairs.)

I'm not a fan of large-bore pronouncements about the end of empires or equating historical periods (e.g., what does the fall of Rome teach us about the United States?), but clearly things are falling apart. For some reason, we are letting a niggardly conservatism punish us for ever having had any pretensions to creating a society consonant with the country's founding pronouncements.

I'll be first to admit that I don't know how to do this, but somehow we need to polish the word "public" to a lustrous revolutionary shine, "We the people, in order to form a more perfect union" should be the liberatory tagline of our common lives. Public assistance, public service, public space, public trust – we need to underscore the nobility and grace in these phrases while, at the same, weaponizing them as barricades against the class war being waged on everyone not in the census of the rich and powerful.





# Prosthetics

(May 2018)

**T**he Marvelous María Beatriz and I finally got around to watching *Blade Runner 2049*, Denis Villeneuve's upgrade of the 1982 version with Harrison Ford (who also appears in the 2017 version). Great on atmosphere, lame on story. We also watched the original because the MMB had never seen it. Same outcome. I had forgotten that.

American audiences did not at first take to the movie, in part because it's sloooooow (Sheila Benson from the Los Angeles Times called it "Blade Crawler") and full of hyperventilated "philosophy" about playing God. And the rapey approach that Deckard (Ford's character) takes toward Rachel (the replicant he loves, played by Sean Young) is retrograde and creepy.

But one idea shared by both movies is "prosthetic memory," a term from Alison Landsberg's 1995 article, "Prosthetic Memory: Total Recall and *Blade Runner*," in *Cyberspace/Cyberbodies/Cyberpunk: Cultures of Technological Embodiment*, reprised in her 2004 book, *Prosthetic Memory: The Transformation of American Remembrance in the Age of Mass Culture*.

Landsberg defines prosthetic memories as "memories which do not come from a person's lived experience in any strict sense." If you watch a film or television program, you will have a memory of narrative events without actually experiencing those events in a corporeal way. Do this enough times with enough media technologies, and it becomes possible for human beings to possess, like the replicants of *Blade Runner*, vivid memories of experiences not their own.

Unlike actual prosthetics, which are supplements to the human body, prosthetic memories become so entangled with the ongoing process of memory-making in the brain and the relation of that process to forming an identity that it becomes impossible to distinguish between real and consumed memories.

Is this a problem that needs solving? Maybe. Fake news, for instance, is "successful" (whatever that means) because the items implant information in the brain that some people cannot disentangle from their own identities: they remember the information as if they had lived it in some way. This connects with the paracosm, a detailed imaginary world that, these days, not only includes Tolkien's Middle-earth but also something we could call Foxland.

But the problems of prosthetic memory, if any, don't have a solution because "solution" implies a distinction between a "pure" memory and a "purchased" memory, and I don't think such a distinction exists for modern technologized human beings. I also don't think it squares with neuroscience research on memory formation and storage. One memory does not exist in one location in the brain but is spread across a neural network, and memories are constantly being edited and reformed according to the emotional needs of the organism. What we say we remember about an incident and the journalistic details of that incident are never cognate.

Does this lead directly to cyborgs in the era of the posthuman? Depends. Is it a problem if a person has memories implanted about visiting a place without actually visiting the location? Are the memories acquired through a virtual reality walk through the woods "lesser" in some way from an actual walk through the woods?

The problem, to me, is less about memory and memorizing per se and more about how we go about choosing the prosthetics that help us get through life. Humans are like web browsers. They can add extensions and plug-ins to extend their functionality, but with this one difference: browsers have been created to serve a particular purpose. Humans do not have such a comfortable destiny. We just keep adding prosthetics as we go along, hoping (if we even pause to think about it) for a combination that brings us some measure of fortune and comfort.

Should we take that pause, there are aids to guide our pausing. Svend Brinkmann's new book, *Stand Firm: Resisting the Self-Improvement Craze*, is a self-help book written to wean people off self-help books promoting positive thinking and multitasking productivity. In a couple of hundred pages he deflates the self-improvement hype and offers in its place a Stoic practice that aims to ground the reader in a wry skepticism toward the riches fanned out in front of us by our prosthetically driven technological regime.

We are cyborgs already—that began when human beings used their first tools to rearrange reality. There's no holding back the technological flood, but we do have ways to control what comes through the floodgates, to balance the meat-based and silicon-based life forms that reside within the local habitation of our brains and bodies. Each of us does have that control, though it's not easy to exercise it, as Brinkmann points out, especially in a time and place when fever dreams seem to rule the day and self-discipline is described by our capitalist overlords as retrograde and dangerous.

But resistance is not futile, however hard it is to resist. Using wry search algorithms in our browser brains will make us better cyborgs, and as better cyborgs, we can tear through the paracosm of reality that cottons around us today right into reality itself. It will give us a bite of the chili pepper to clear our senses, as the MMB would say. And she is always right.



# Trumpgood

(June 2018)

If there's one good thing that's come out of Trump's kleptocratic and kakistocratic reign is that it's forced many of us liberals to think about notions to which we hadn't given much serious thought, such as "citizen" and "patriot" and "progress" (as well as learning obscure Greek-based adjectives describing political systems). Like most liberals, I've held a lazy Whiggish trust that the long arc of history not only bends toward justice but also upward in progress (echoes of New York State's motto, "Excelsior").

Of course, this thinking goes, despite the country's original sin of slavery and its history of white supremacist nativist intolerance, the American experiment of granting more and more people democratic liberty will succeed, although they will have to pay a steep blood sacrifice to become a fellow citizen. That's just how we do it in these parts.

Trump's reign sticks a much-needed sword into the heart of this sentiment and thus liberates us from the false comfort of words like American experiment, American exceptionalism, "land of the free and home of the brave." This April, as we review the fifty years since the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr., we may want to believe that King represents the best of who we can be, but it's more helpful to know that Trump (the phenomenon, not the person) displays the character of our country.

And what is that character? (I am going to wildly generalize here.) Americans don't mind being ruled by oligarchs, whether they be elected to office or run enormous corporations, as long as, at the end of the day, they aren't fleeced completely (the recent tax bill is a good example of this). Americans, in fact, find civic engagement too much work, or, to put it another way, most Americans feel that kvetching continuously without undertaking any repairs and then voting (maybe) once or twice a year is what civic engagement is all about.

The only thing Americans don't like more than poor people is helping poor people, but since the true American despicables can't just be allowed to die on the streets of a supposed Christian nation, Americans will find the most niggardly way to provide assistance, extracting maximum humiliation for minimal sustenance.

America's reputation for engineering ingenuity and inventiveness is undeserved these days since it can't keep its own house in order—bridges fall

down, trains crash. And it can't do this because Americans won't tax themselves (including corporations) to make the repairs, though they don't seem to mind having trillions of their tax dollars spent on killing people in non-American countries for decades at a time. Americans will revolt against taxes to fund their schools but not against militarism.

Americans love the misguided heroism of the individualist ethic, not only believing against physics that people can pull themselves up by their bootstraps but also enjoying the old anti-communist canard that collective action to solve a problem is despotism. Just look at how Senator Elizabeth Warren was vilified for stating the obvious truth that no one succeeds completely by his or her own efforts.

Americans don't like those who aren't Americans but want to be Americans. The high levels of cruelty in today's immigration policies don't seem to bother too many people, just as they are not bothered by the facts about the benefits immigration brings to the country. With righteousness in their voices they will declare that those who have broken the law by coming here must be expelled, though those same people don't seem to mind the law-breaking of their favorite politicians or corporate overlords. Law-and-order screeds are best delivered against those who have no power to fight back.

Americans are by and large an insular people, leery of "change" and second languages, and ignorant of the lives not only in the next country over but even in the next town over. Americans may have a cherished view of themselves as pioneers and explorers, but even if that's only a little bit true, the journey is never undertaken for self-instruction but usually for conquest, to efface rather than meet face-to-face.

Recognizing all this, and more, is a good thing for liberals, believe it or not. We don't have to keep up the fiction that fighting the excesses of the churl will make us "better citizens" and our country a "better country"—we don't have to play the role of disappointed redeemers trying to get people to deploy the better angels of their natures. We can admit that those angels are fictional characters, that Americans are a fraught mix of the good and the retrograde, and that American politics is something like being a lion tamer, directing the beast rather than dominating it with the hope that more good than carnage will be the result (and knowing there always will be carnage, and that the good will never be enough).

We can defetishize democracy and the American experiment, and we don't have to flatter citizens' vanity by telling that they are better and smarter than they really are, or that their consent to being governed is really necessary to their being governed. Instead, we can respect them enough to say that we understand that they don't particularly like having to be citizens and that we'll try to keep our expectations of them reasonable: vote at least once a year in some election and try to get the news from more than one source. That's it. And if you want to put in a little more time and effort on, say, a politician's campaign, even better, but we won't be disappointed if you don't.

And while we're getting them to be good-enough citizens, we can hopefully get in a little Socratic education about what is real and what isn't, without expecting to make any real headway against their settled opinions and grievances.

Let us be more Stoic than evangelical about our democracy, let us be more disappointed than boosterish, so that we can keep a sense of proportion along with a sense of humor. (Trump is, if nothing else, always good for a few laughs.) And let's not oversell what we think America is or what it can do. It would be great if the country could just provide a decent standard of living for all its citizens. The world's policeman, leader of the world order—nice, but secondary to reducing infant mortality and mothers dying from pregnancy and buffering us from the brigands of the marketplace.

This more pragmatic attitude, though, is just a starting point. For me, anyone naming himself or herself a liberal in our day and age should commit to a fifty-year program of building a power-base from local town councils up to the Presidency, doing what the Republicans started doing in 1964 after the Goldwater debacle. The point is to seize power, not to share it with opponents, to become as the Republicans have become, only with a better socio-economic agenda, funnier jokes and a moratorium on conspiracy theories.

In the meantime, though, the country and its leaders won't provide a decent standard of living because the bulk of citizens think that Bernie Sanders is leftist and won't demand better behavior from their rightists in power. The citizenry, instead, has chosen to vote in clowns for entertainment, hunker in for protection (guns are optional), and nurture the Alex-Jonesian, white-male-fear-of-being-emasculated fever dream of the deep state in league with social justice warriors and LGBTQ snowflakes crushing the American conservative yeomanry in its politically correct vice-grip and fostering a new world order led by postmodern deconstructive French philosophes puttering around in limousines drinking



lattés as they discuss how to impose a cultural Marxism (a lá Jordan Peterson) on any survivors of their purge.

It's a bumpy ride by any measure. Cinch the seat-belt and hold on.

# Intellectual Dark Web

(July 2018)

**M**uch reaction to Bari Weiss' May 8 piece in the *New York Times*, "Meet the Renegades of the Intellectual Dark Web," about a covey of cranks and contrarians kvetching that their cranky and contrarian views, like Rodney Dangerfield, don't get enough respect—except that they're being profiled in the *Times* and have to put up with the ignominy of making lots of money off their publications, lectures, podcasts and YouTube videos. Faux outrage has been their excellent marketing program.

However, William Saletan in *Slate* suggests that we should take the portraits seriously and instead of responding with sarcasm, ask ourselves "why so many people have fled to [the Dark Web], what we can learn from it, and why self-satisfied progressives are so quick to dismiss it."

Okay: Why does this Dark Web have so many unself-satisfied non-progressive immigrants within its borders?

This Dark Web is not a new American habitation, but people mired in the nowness of their technologies and the now-intellects these technologies spawn cannot see the Dark Web's historical roots. I just finished reading Richard White's *The Republic For Which It Stands*, a 900-plus-page history of the period from the end of the Civil War to the Progressive era at the turn of the 20th century. The 19th century had its own version of the Dark Web as the country dealt with the crushing changes brought about by an increasingly corporate-style economy built upon the bodies of black, white and immigrant labor while marinating in earlier pieties about manliness, virtue, "the home" and the noble yeoman that hamstrung efforts at both reform and revolution.

The inhabitants of the 19th-century Dark Web saw America threatened by foreign elements whom they believed did not cherish the American volksgeist of home, patriarchy (which included whiteness and the terrorizing of black people), free labor and contract freedom, the sanctity of private property, Protestant ethics, and, above all, American exceptionalism. These are clearly not the concerns of the 21st-century Dark Web. But what links the two Dark Webs is "threat," and that threat comes from "those who are not properly real people, not really us," whether "those" be Eastern European Jews working in the garment trades or "pointy-headed intellectuals" (thank you, George Wallace) who dare to insist on keeping a civil tongue in one's head.

And what is threatened and threatening for the Dark Webbers whom Saletan says are our social and political bellwethers? That politically correct thought-policing oversensitive and unmanly snowflakes will not allow them to say and do what they damn well feel like saying and doing when they want to say and do it against whomever they want to say and do it. They may gussy themselves up as free-speech warriors, but let us name their sanctimony as what it is: an adult-sized childlike tantrum.

Naming it as tantrum, however, does not lessen its viciousness. In the 19th century, black bodies swung from trees and unemployed workers starved in their homes as the threatened beat back the threat. Our current Dark Web denizens employ ridicule, shaming, lying and crocodile tears as their enforcers. In both, the aim is to suppress any challenge by dehuman(demon)izing the challengers to maintain the power of the status quo to continue conferring power and riches upon those dubbed worthy of being rewarded by it and kicking everybody else to the curb.

Part of what makes these Dark Webs so vicious is that they take on the character of scorpions in a bottle, the bottle being a paracosm constricted by fear and the scorpions being fear's offspring: intolerance and status-anxiety, to be sure, but let us not leave out the species' taste for bloodsport as well.

Solutions? The writer in me, of course, wants to rely on the Rortyan belief that new vocabularies will birth new visions and behaviors. What would that new vocabulary be? In reading the reactions to Weiss' piece, the scorpion bottle is built out of the American version of the terms left, right and center.

A better array of terms would be center, left and radical. What about "right"? Conservative ideology is a reaction to a failed revolution and seems to be, in America, the belief system of those filled with fright, resentment and hard-heartedness. It has nothing to contribute to a dialogue about what needs to be done to break America out of the ideological confines that keep it from achieving the revolutionary ends it proposed two and a half centuries ago.

What would left be? Bernie Sanders, I guess. What would radical be? St. Paul when he said that there were no Greeks or Jews, no men or women, only Christians and the enemies of Christianity, though in this case, as Žižek points out, it's those who fight for emancipation and their enemies.

Such a totalizing language/behavior shift will not happen any time soon, but that doesn't mean it can't be nudged along by supporting people who can make political and institutional changes at any level, from schoolboards on up.

But vocabulary-shifting can never be enough because the deep structure of the American state is what needs the overhaul. The liberal/reformist narrative during the time of Trump goes like this: The squires of our American civilization have no interest in the interests of ordinary people. In White's world, this often led to violent rebellion, and just as often led to the rebellion's being crushed. But eventually the squires got part of the message because, at the risk of overusing Frederick Douglass, power gives up nothing unless it's hand is broken open, and Power eventually loosened a finger so that it could hold onto to most of what it still gripped, which is why our lives are not as nasty, brutish and short as the lives of our fellow citizens 150 years ago.

Thus, says the narrative, we need to come together to keep forcing the hand open. We can do it if only we come together and reason our way through and keep the pressure on.

Maybe that will work. Maybe. And maybe something else is needed.

I've never been a strong fan of the Constitution. The received narrative is that it made the country possible in a way the Articles of Confederation could not and thus set the historical stage for creating "E pluribus unum."

But I think the "unum" is the problem. The Constitution can be seen as an Articles of Confederation that worked, written in a way to make the confederating of 13 clashing colonial statelets easier to accomplish and maintain. I think that impulse towards confederation should continue, something along the lines of Switzerland's canton system, and under the umbrella of a constitution that applies certain global principles to guide political and social actions, and then people can confederate with whomever they want and create whatever laws they want, taking the notion of the states as "laboratories of democracy" to another level.

Perhaps New York and California create a canton, while the entire congress of western states creates another – in the latter you can open carry, in the former you can't even own a gun. Perhaps cantons can secede if they wish: New York/California, one of the top 10 economies in the world, might well believe it could do better on its own.

I don't see any profit in trying to forge an "American" people and an "American" nation out of elements that do not want to meld, and, if White's history is accurate, have never wanted to meld. And, really, if "the American people" can't even respond in a healthy and forceful way to the plague of gun violence killing children in our schools, then there isn't much reason to place hope in the more lofty mission of forging a united nation.

Weiss didn't need to delve into an ersatz Dark Web – all she needed to do was look around her, since we are all living in a permanent state of Dark Webness, otherwise known as America, and write about that. The Dark Web of Sam Harris and company is small beer compared to what D.H. Lawrence discovered about the dark web of the American spirit in his *Studies of Classic American Literature*: "The essential American soul is hard, isolate, stoic, and a killer. It has never yet melted."

## Some Summer Reading

(August 2018)

**A**t *the Existentialist Café* by Sarah Bakewell is a satisfying exposition of the philosophies and methods of Sartre, De Beauvoir, Camus, Merleau-Ponty, Heidegger and others, but part of me kept saying to myself as she described their troubles and battles, “Why bother? Just get on with living.” The philosophic impulses she documents felt like such a waste of time, not only for the individuals baking the philosophy but also for the intense wrestling they did with each other over their points of view. Only De Beauvoir and Merleau-Ponty say anything of interest because they both anchor their thoughts in the actual bodies of people. Heidegger and Husserl – so full of themselves. Jaspers comes off as decent. I wanted more about Camus. But such a fuss they all made.

I suppose it’s necessary for humans to do this, to find systems to confront and then explain the ambiguity at the heart of human life – otherwise, what else would they do to fill the conflicted timespan of their lives? (Our cats nap and don’t fret; not an option for Bakewell’s agitated dynamos.) Their oeuvres don’t resolve anything, don’t really explain anything (in the sense of “for once and for all, we have a solution to this problem!”), but the truth of the matter is that none of their bodies of work can bring the calm that comes from knowing, which lies in the provinces of faith and theology – and none of them would want that because a problem solved is boring, like the dog chasing the car actually catching the car: What is to be done?

What does come through is that outside of the truth content of what they create, their feeling of doing something meaningful and living meaningful lives comes from making language. In one sense, their are-ness, their being-ness comes from word-spinning – without the words, there is a body there but not a mind. This languaging we do gives meaning to the word “human,” “word-maker” the really only useful definition there is of that word.

But what about philosophy as a guide for living rather than formal arrangements of positions and principles? It’s not clear to me how any of what they concocted (except perhaps for Camus) could give good advice about how to conduct one’s life. Their philosophies are more like cartographies than road maps; they show the shape and lay of the land but don’t tell you what roads and which turns to take to get from Y to Z.

Perhaps the problem is me and not their edifices, that I don't have the same conviction they have that there is a rigging behind the rigged that can be limned and delivered to an audience, an authority with which "life" speaks to its creations, a codex that catalogues the lights that can pierce the darkness, an anatomist's sketchbook that unveils why this pokes out this way and that concaves that way.

Bakewell does show how important what they were doing was to their own sense of self and purpose in life, almost as if it didn't matter if what they said mattered to others as long as it gave the creators the feeling that they had done something significant with their lives, had pushed back against the fog, etc., etc.

Ideologies seem more powerful than philosophies, or perhaps an ideology is just a philosophy with an army behind it. Ideologies gives guidance, they resolve ambiguity (or at least lessen its confusing effects), they provide answers rather than suggestions, they take their delights from muscular forward action rather than intellectual arabesques, prefer satisfaction over delight.

This is certainly what comes through in *Bring the War Home: The White Power Movement and Paramilitary America* by Kathleen Belew. Belew shows the intricate and foggy connections between the Vietnam War and anti-communism, anti-immigration, anti-statism, racism, Americana mythologies and paramilitary preparations (many of which have been carried out; Timothy McVeigh's Oklahoma bombing in 1995 was not the first and has not been the only assault carried out on American soil by white power paramilitary action).

One of the many things that make the white power world frightening is how easily it maps onto and has roots in the violent origin story of the United States. These guys are the wild offshoots of the somewhat more domesticated white power ideologies instated in some of our government leaders, cultural icons (recall Charlton Heston's teeth-gritted growl about his gun and his cold, dead hand) and cold-war-steeped publications like *National Review*. Trump is not being cynical or clownish when he says that there are fine people in the white power camp and when he pardons Dwight and Steve Hammond, sentenced to five years in prison for lighting multiple fires on public land in Oregon, an incident that gave rise to the armed takeover of the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge in 2016 and provided great propaganda grist to the militia movement.

The paramilitary America that Belew investigates marches, literally and figuratively, to an apocalyptic lyric. No fuzzy categories of phenomenological perception for them. Just a 3-D printed AR-15 (see *Wired's* recent article on the

court case that makes it completely legal to upload the software to 3-D print an untraceable gun [1]) and intense hatred of the Other makes life tolerable, doable, and even enjoyable.

Arms and ideologies have always made for a heady brew, which China Miéville demonstrates in *October*, his story of the Russian Revolution in 1917 in honor of its centennial last year, though as he points out, the “arms” they used were as much pamphlets, newspapers, and speeches as they were pistols and cannons. These were men and women impassioned by lusts, hatreds, and idealist visions, and they sparred with one another to give voice to a word-world that would offer direction, purpose and peace as it eradicated the backward cruelties of the country.

In other words, they had a philosophy in their pockets, and while Miéville doesn't skate past the horrors unleashed once Lenin's hopes were dashed, he says that with a different external environment and different actions by the main participants, the October revolution might have had a better outcome. The failure of its philosophy was “not a given, was not written in any stars” and that humans must continue to give voice to what they are experiencing to continue to be fully human, confounded by mysteries, yes, but still trying to give voice to the void and not, as Henry David Thoreau said it, arrive at death and “discover that I had not lived.”

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[1] <https://www.wired.com/story/a-landmark-legal-shift-opens-pandoras-box-for-diy-guns/>





# Making Ourselves

(September 2018)

Be it life or death, we crave only reality. (Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*)

Go, go, go, said the bird: human kind/Cannot bear very much reality. (T. S. Eliot, "Burnt Norton")

**M**ost of my morning bus rides into Gotham from New Jersey follow the pattern of grabbing a seat, pulling out the phone, and, for the next 20 minutes, looking down a narrow cone of vision into the screen that, at its end, reverses the narrowness into a wider (cyber) world.

All my fellow bus-riding human mammals are doing the same, and, nicely silo'd, we cross the river and spill through the doors into our separate mysterious existences.

On occasion I don't get a seat and have to stand, which is a bother because the herky-jerky training that NJ Transit drivers get, (e.g., be sure to stomp on the brake rather than ease into it so that you throw riders forward, then back) makes it hard to grab on with one hand and hold the phone for reading in the other.

I was the last one on before the bus hit the tunnel, which put me right to the right of driver. For the next 15 minutes, I watched this man drive a bus with craft. He kept two lengths distance from the car in front of him so that he wouldn't have to jam on the brake but could ease the bus to a stop if he needed to stop. He hardly varied in his lane from side to side so that the vehicles in the lane to his left could ease by with confidence.

In short, he gave his passengers the kind of ride that is the best compliment to the conductor of a vehicle: he never reminded his passengers they were on a bus. They could read, do their make-up, muse, or chat in complete safety and convenience and arrive at Port Authority without noticing that time and space had been traveled.

He did his work with care, and it pleased me to watch him do it.

I tell this story because this kind of bodily craft is less valued today, perhaps more than ever, but it has a value that we modernized humans steered by algorithms and other virtual worlds need to revive if we want to exercise some measure of control over the world coming down hard upon us.

This warning is at the heart of Alexanders Langland's *Cræft: An Inquiry Into the Origins and True Meaning of Traditional Crafts*, which is in part a gentle

jeremiad against the loss of our craftings and the dense history and language that infuse them but also a prescription for what ails us: full-bodied physical engagement in making something and the pride that comes from a laboring that wrests meaning and value from the earth.

In another context, this is what Christian Madsbjerg means by his term “thick data” in his book *Sensemaking: The Power of the Humanities in the Age of the Algorithm*. Madsbjerg works with companies to improve their businesses not only by crunching their numbers (which he calls “thin data”) but also through deep investigations into the worlds of the companies’ customers. He has on his staff people trained in sociology or art (as well as the mathematicians) who live with the customers and report back on the totality of their worlds: thick data.

One can only get thick data by joining in the worlds of others deeply enough to feel, below and outside the words and numbers, what waves of emotion and expectation surge through them that influence their actions and shape their points of view.

I don’t know enough to weigh in on the cultural debates about this: let Jaron Lanier and Ray Kurzweil and Zeynep Tufekci and Cathy O’Neill and Sherry Turkle all battle it out, since they know so much more than I and are far more articulate.

This I do know: many of the times happiness has come my way have been when I have immersed myself in making something to the point where my body thinks and my mind bodies, fused and a bit amnesiac about the “normal” importances of the world. Woodworking, gardening, stage-managing, baking—deeds like this shift the ordinary run, which can pilot itself on automatic, into craft, intentional actions and meditated gestures, learning the logics of materials, formatting one’s independence through labor, listening to the lower frequencies, apprenticing in sweat and common sense.

Nothing my phone or computer gives me compares to this, even when I master a software and make code say what I want it to say. True, there is much reality that is not “crafty” in the way I’ve described it—brutal, stupid, terrifying—and Eliot is right when he says we cannot bear very much of that. But the craving that Thoreau champions is this notion of craft, and we do crave that because it gives us our lives back, and for the time we are makers making, we can have dignity and happiness because we are, and we know we are, more than a resource to be extracted by companies or fodder for the fever dreams of hateful leaders. We are people who make, *Homo faber*, who in making things make our selves.

## Death and Kittens

(October 2018)

**M**y mother, Emma, and the mother of the Marvelous María Beatriz, herself named Beatriz, are both in rough shape in their mid-80s. Both are confined (Beatriz at home, Emma in a nursing home) with medical “conditions” which translate to “the engine is just wearing out.” Both have minimal mobility and require dedicated care. Beatriz has a squad of women who care for her during the day and overnight, and Emma has a staff that seem as affectionate and diligent as the institution allows them.

Both are scared. At times, when the breathing comes hard and the heart slams, Beatriz says that either she feels like she’s dying or wants to die. At times, when her kidneys weaken or she refuses to eat or hydrate, Emma loses contact with the world, not knowing who sits with her in the room, and when she returns, she is reluctant to keep keeping on. She says to me, “I want to go home,” with her finger aimed heavenward. Point taken.

What can one do? What can I do? All I can do is be present without judgment, ease their pain and lessen their fears. I say “without judgment” because it is too easy for the feeling-better to think that much of the suffering of the not-feeling-well is self-induced because they aren’t trying hard enough to overcome their conditions: “If only you would . . . .” The time for constructive criticism (if such a thing exists) has passed. They have earned our unconditional attention to and open-ended acceptance of whatever they bear. They’ve earned that by virtue of the suffering that comes with living a human life.

At the other end is my quintet of kittens, snagged from the feral streets at one month from a mother who cared for them but would not bring them in for the human touch. (“Human” is not always synonymous with “destructive.”) They were born around the beginning of June, and the Marvelous MB and I have been fostering them. (We will keep two, find homes for three.) They’ve had their medicines, and they eat more than a can of food per day each at their two daily feedings, having gained a pound each in the last two weeks.

One of the best blood-pressure-reducers at the end of a work day is to sit with them before pre-sleep bed reading and let five kilos of kittens clamber over me. I don’t really do anything to entice them; I just become part of the furniture, and they slide and slither over me as they tussle or rest or leap or gambol.

Sittin' with the kittens  
As they gambol over me  
Sittin' with the kittens  
Their ramble does unscramble me

As far as I can tell, they bear none of the weight our mothers bear, none of the torturing self-consciousness of the conscious self slipping into its deletion. Our comfort for our mothers bends toward distracting them (jokes, movies, stories) when it isn't just holding hands, stroking cheeks, whispering, "Don't worry, Mom, everything will be all right." Keeping vigil is literally a labor of love, one of those things we humans can do for each other that almost absolves us for all the other terrible things we do to each other. Vigil is a time when, after all the logical/rational arrangements have been made for disposal and disbursement, we become kittenish: soft warm mammals in close contact playing, grooming and detailing, resting, sharing food, easing each other's bodies forward through suffering into comfort.

I don't want to draw "lessons," religious or moral, from keeping this vigil. I want, instead, to achieve a forgetfulness of sorts—a stilling of the brain-chatter, a deepening of my own breath—so that I can pay a full attention that she deserves to the person who brought me forward as she herself moves forward into the moment when she no longer suffers.

The kittens will mature, of course, but who they are is pretty much set now: Fiona will always be a bit stand-offish because she had an extra week learning "feral" with her mom before we could get her; Seamus will always be bold since he's spent the longest time with humans. For us, though, we mature best at times like these: called upon to attend to one another, we can surprise ourselves by how open and apt we can be, pulled from the thicket of our ego into a clear space of graceful watchfulness.

## Bodying Forth

(November 2018)

**T**he recent deaths of my mother and mother-in-law, the fostering of five kittens, a withering cold that has clung to me for almost two weeks, and reading Barbara Ehrenreich's new book, *Natural Causes*, has made me aware of how different things would be if social structures and political programs were built upon the body and its sufferings because, as is true, we all have 'em, and they all go south on us at some point.

In the cases of my mother and mother-in-law, their bodies gave out on them long before their bodies stopped working, which meant that much of their last days were in starvation mode blunted by morphine. I thought, and still do think, the situation was barbaric. There was nothing to be gained by their passing away "naturally" and much comfort to be given by increasing the morphine drip. Avoiding this barbarism is certainly my goal at my own end time, and more personal choice about how and when to shuffle off the mortal coil should be part of the process.

Ehrenreich's book makes this "body politic" connection more explicit, explicating how a politics not based in human suffering and human need gives us the ramshackle systems that we have, which are full of capitalist logic and have no empathy.

What passes for politics these days is also ambered in "principles" as opposed to bodies, allowing people to lock-in "positions" rather than experience each other's corporality. I almost think that anyone running for office has to cook a dinner with his or her opponent(s) and serve it to constituents, if for no other reason than to side-step positions in order get the damn food on the table! It's more important to break bread together than to break each other's balls.

The suffering needy body is the source of everything humans do, negative and positive. A politics jiggered to reduce the former and increase the latter would start from the premise, "What can be done to reduce unearned suffering and cruelty for everyone?"

These are my thoughts these days.



# Provider of Content

(December 2018)

I am now over 2½ years into my work as a “communications manager” at Yeshiva University, which has tutored me in the tensions between being a writer and a content provider.

Writing produced by writing and content produced by writing are similar but not the same thing. They both involve words, structure, grammar, syntax and so on, but the content I create fulfills the institution’s need to inform the world about itself multiple times in a day. (The content our team creates is not only longer-form pieces for the news and faculty blogs, which is what I do, but also social media postings for Facebook and Instagram that we push out several times a day).

This is not journalism, at least in any strict sense of that term. We do fact checks, we do run quotes by those quoted, we follow AP Style, and so on, but the record we create is by no means “the first draft of history” because we are not free to write what we witness but must record it for the “higher” purpose of maintaining the University’s, and the University President’s, curated iconography.

There is nothing wrong with this, of course – we’re hired as chroniclers and marketers, not investigators and critiquers, and our paychecks come to us because we successfully fashion an image of an educational institution that is at the same time modern and traditional, moving forward because it stands firm – that sort of campaign-speak.

My fellow writers and I are not always comfortable with this, of course – even if we know that our jobs are about the feel-good and the uncontroversial, it grinds on us to reshape something we’ve taken the time to write because a donor found it not to his or her liking or the president, who wants to style himself as a thought leader, isn’t quite ready to actually step out and lead with a thought that would bring attention to himself.

A recent example of the former concerned the visit of Dr. Elaine Pagels, of Gnostic gospel fame, to deliver a lecture as part of the Seminar on Ancient Judaism. I covered the lecture, and my naïve soul thought that it was a feather in the University’s cap to have the renowned scholar on campus and engaging in intellectual discourse on Christian and Jewish scholarship with Jewish scholars recognized for their own work in the field.



But someone complained about something (even though I've asked to see the complaint, it's never been passed along to me), and I had to take the story down until someone in the President's office wrote up a vanilla account of "Dr. Pagels was here, she talked about the Gospel of Thomas, and we had a Q&A." Nothing about the substance of the lecture or the friendly intellectual sparring in the Q&A segment. And I had to take out what I wrote and install the sanitized wording.

What irritated me about this was not about my writing being overruled but the devaluing of something that an institution of higher learning should treasure because one person saw reason to take exception to having a Christian scholar on a Jewish campus. Where is the spine? Where is the spirited defense of intellectual investigation from the President (which would be a pretty good thought for a thought leader to have)? So, the official record now is just a diary entry, opaque and forgettable.

An example of the latter involves some recent angst over the status of sexual minorities at the University. A student club managed to get permission to hold an event to discuss LGBTQ issues on campus and, more generally, in the Orthodox Jewish world while, just a few days before, the Office of Admissions, which manages the model United Nations conference organized by the University for high school students around the country, refused to allow the student organizers to introduce a paper on the treatment of sexual minorities in certain countries as a topic for discussion, citing a sensitivity to how the subject might trigger negative reactions in the high school students attending.

Again, no guidance from the administration about how to approach these issues, just silence until, hopefully, the subject fades away.

This timidity vexes me, but I cannot be surprised by it. Those in control have decided that the "content" that tells the story of the University will be uplifting without lifting anything off its foundation, will partake of the modern world while inoculating itself against the modern world, will pretend to be a university while maintaining the insular spirit of a yeshiva.

Again, no surprise in this because what the University does to shape its image is what we all do with our own self-imaging efforts. The story of the University is the story it chooses to tell: there's no "true" story or "false" story, there's just the story that serves the creation of a desired identity.

Humans do the same thing. The creature known as *Sapiens* does not have a "self," a central controlling portion of the brain that can be pointed to as the "I,"

but is just a collection of biological algorithms for processing information, overlaid by a set of self-told narratives that only lightly map onto “reality” (whatever that is) but confect coherence and stability for the creature stumbling through life.

The more I look at people, the more I read books like *Homo Deus* by Yuval Noah Harari (author of *Sapiens*) or *Skin in the Game* by Nassim Nicholas Taleb (author of *The Black Swan*) or *The Undoing Project* by Michael Lewis, the more it seems that humans are just an ambulatory mess of false suppositions about what they are and how they function. They prefer to hold on to disproven notions of a self, of an I, of free will, of a special spiritual purpose as they craft false or misleading narratives about themselves. Most of the time this makeshift “works,” in that people can get out of bed in the morning and make it through the day without going mad. But these narratives are themselves a kind of madness, feints and dodges that put off reckonings (and, given the state of the earth’s climate that sustains us all, those reckonings may not be put-offable for much longer).

Does any of this matter? I don’t know. What does “matter” even mean here? If there are no special ends that guide the existence of *Sapiens*, then what people do is what people do. We can make our judgments, voice our angers, work to make right what is wrong, but they’re just sounds we make as we make our way along. Appeals to higher authorities, to natural laws, to self-evident truths – all just-so stories we tell ourselves to keep ourselves calm and forward-moving while the actual inner workings of the corporeal body grind away without any purpose other than maintaining the system in optimal balance.

I saw this without ornamentation when my mother and mother-in-law passed away recently. When the body is shorn of everything except its autonomic functions, the regulatory mechanisms whirr along without anything like commands or suggestions from an “I” – the algorithms process, and that is the alpha and omega of it. All the cloud structures built on top of the autonomic resolve into the vapor of which they’re made, and the only thing left is the carnal running down its clock.

Can a life be lived using these thoughts, a life unpremised and denarrated, a life lived knowing that it’s all made up but still needing to make it through the day? Not at the university-level, to be sure: it needs, and will have, its content. But at the level of the content-maker? That seems to be what the content-maker is struggling with these days.



**2017**



# Is There A Perfect Hate?

(January 2017)

I have a 15-minute walk from my subway stop to my office. As I started my trundle, a young man threw me this question: What is the perfect hate?

The question certainly made me stop. Stare. Hard. He didn't appear crazy: gray sweatshirt, scrubby facial hair, one of those backward-brimmed Kangol hats, smoking a cigarette. And expecting an answer. I answered: "There's no such thing."

He looked vexed by the answer, and before I could ask "why" about his asking, he turned and crossed the street and evaporated. I made my way to work.

Of course, this question stuck with me, built as I am. We'd just been through a political exercise of people honing their serrated angers and now seem destined to suffer four years of institutionalized fury, such as cabinet secretaries pledged to wreck their agencies and an economy geared to inflict pain on everyone except its owners and non-whiteness punished by deportation and insult.

The young man's question seemed the next step, a move into metaphysics: how can all this profane anger be triple-distilled into a perfect spirit? Søren Kierkegaard may have meant his sermon, "Purity of Heart Is to Will One Thing," to teach us how to will the good, but "purity" is not limited to "the good": purity is much more accommodating than that, and everything is invited to use its lexicon.

So, my answer, the proper sensitive liberal one, is wrong. His question is the prelude to a fundamentalism, and as we have seen, many humans seem to like the comforts of designed answers to our messy existence on this planet, especially if those answers can be documented by referring to a book, no matter how error-ridden or fantastical.

But let's bring this man's question down a few notches from the abstract and re-cast it by looking for an answer to "What is the perfect hate?" by looking at "Who is the perfect hater in the age of Trump?" And that would have to be, hands-down, Tomi Lahren of *The Blaze*, dubbed the "alt-right princess" by commentator Jesse Dollemore.

Watch one of her diatribes (that is, technically, what they are) in order to be schooled in the rhetoric of anger. I don't use "rhetoric" loosely, since she

deploys a platoon of bad rhetorical devices against her subjects: red herring, logical fallacy, faulty cause and effect, and so on, with an occasional nod to truth and evidence to keep the flow sounding legit.

Take, for instance, her insistence during her interview with Trevor Noah on the November 30 *The Daily Show* that Black Lives Matter is the new KKK. Noah did his best to demolish the argument through rational discourse and civility, but he was doomed from the start because the game in town is not about using logic to overcome illogic but to enrage and mobilize rather than convince and persuade. As Justin Charity wrote on *The Ringer* on December 7:

[Noah has positioned himself as a civilized man] doing everyone, including Lahren and the people whom she disparages, a favor by hearing her out and then stumping her with a steady handful of counterarguments. But that's not how Lahren works, nor is it really how democratic politics work. Lahren doesn't persuade people. Lahren engages people. She *enrages* people. She mobilizes people. And, in this case, Lahren has exploited the difference between conviction—which liberal pundits fetishize—and mobilization—which conservative pundits just straight-up *do*—to enrich herself and amplify her nonsense at the expense of the many glorified fact-checkers who will lose ground to her in the long run....In a post-fact world, neither Sorkinese eloquence nor reflexive triangulation will save you from people like her. Like [Glenn] Beck and Rush Limbaugh before her, Tomi Lahren lies dramatically to get attention;... the liberal instinct to engage with the lies of firebrands like her will repeatedly backfire.

So, what is the perfect hate? It's not a topic or a people but a mode of presenting that hoovers up information, turns it into a slurry, hoses down the world, and demolishes any opposition by incantation, disparagement, bullshit – in fact, by anything except reason, patience and knowledge, since these were never in play to begin with.

There is no rebuttal to a Tomi Lahren because there is nothing there to rebut. Many online faulted Noah for not being Jon Stewart, whom they believe would have put Lahren in her place, but that's not true. Stewart had his bizarre friendship with Bill O'Reilly, an earlier incarnation of Lahren, and was never able to knock O'Reilly off any of O'Reilly's hobbyhorses. And, really, what "place" could Noah have put Lahren "in" (assuming he could have dodged the messy optics in this country of a black man dissing a white woman)? Being all screed and no argument makes her impregnable.

Clearly, Noah's audience (as well as the audiences of Samantha Bee and John Oliver) has some atavistic attachment to a notion of democracy where

reasonable people argue reasonably about policy and tactics and the best arguments win out by virtue of their substance and “rightness.”

But the framers had a reasonable fear of the democratic mob doing exactly what was done on November 8 because they knew, from their study of ancient history and law, that reason and argument have no defense against the barbarians at the gate: thus the Electoral College, thus the arterial clog called the Senate, anything to slow down the power of Lahren’s voice to mobilize the angels of our worser, not our better, natures.

James Madison was especially conscious of this. He spoke out about the destructiveness of factions (what we today would call parties) and pushed for ways to buffer the workings of the government and its governors from them. But he also knew that he was building a weak dam against a rising tide, and even in his lifetime he saw the coarsening effect of faction in action.

Faction and divisiveness have always been the congenital weakness of American democracy, so the rise of Trump and Lahren signals, to me, the exhaustion of this phase of the national experiment. Just as capitalism seems to be struggling against its own exhaustion (see recent work by Paul Mason and Wolfgang Streeck), this current iteration of democracy (including all forms where it is practiced) seems to have run out of ideas about how to make the world over in its image. (Interestingly, both systems have had concurrent lifespans of about two-and-a-half centuries.)

There are, of course, antidotes to the exhaustion in this country, many experiments going on with cooperatives, local currencies, sustainable energy, and so on. Currently, there are no resources and institutions to aggregate them and scale them up, but they are there despite our national slow-motion train wreck.

This is where our energies should go.

Let’s simply stipulate that Trump’s reign signals the end of the first phase of the American experiment. While we need to continue resisting all of Trump’s incursions in order to keep people as safe and secure as they can be in these retrograde times, let’s also see what we can do to design the next phase of the experiment. Let’s just assume that Trump and Lahren and their ilk are already in the dustbin of history and not waste our energy on them. Let’s evolve a replacement that can sweep away the barbarians after they’ve been consumed by their own decadence and dissolve into dust.





# Trump-proofing America

(February 2017)

**T**he Cooper Hewitt/Smithsonian Design Museum is running an exhibit until February called “By The People: Designing a Better America.” It’s the third in a series of using the re-design of the built environment to make lives better, and this one focuses on poverty in the United States.

These initiatives are local/regional in scope and involve face-to-face engagements, one brick, one story, one narrative thread at a time. These projects not only design places, the process of designing the places also designs the people, establishing the values of coöperation and closeness that many Americans say they cherish and miss the presence of but which they somehow lost hold of in the spasm of the last election.

Linked but not hierarchical, open source rather than copyrighted, anchored in the local rather than atomized in the national, these projects are the antidote to Trumpism’s meanness, barbarian élitism and roughshod irrationality. Not that the people heading these projects can totally dismiss the regime, and not that the execution of the projects preëmpts building a nation-wide resistance movement, but they are the way forward past the exhaustion of national politics, which has clearly run out of ideals, verve, sanity and safety.

Focusing on this kind of lower-level nation-building, based in local needs and employing local brilliance, is the antidote to the whingeing and hand-wringing going on right now among what passes for a “left” in America about what to do about Trump and Trumpism. Projects like the ones on exhibit at Cooper Hewitt don’t so much “solve” racism or class war or xenophobia as out-flank them by reënergizing the concepts of a “commonwealth” and the public sphere and enlarging the circle of who gets to be considered a neighbor and thus worthy of protection.

The modernist impulse has always been to value universal ideals above local allegiances because clannish loyalties have often fueled great carnage and misery. But the truth is that the universal ideals only became manifest in local lives making local improvements to local habitations, where sweat is shared not with abstract “human beings” but with bodies bearing names and suffering frailties. Only by building these local densities can we build the constituency that will resist American Trumpist inclinations in a way that is shared, open source, dynamic and assured.

This approach fits an age where the last great social movement, labor, has been destroyed and where we live in a world fragmented by neoliberalism and information fortresses (e.g., Apple, Facebook, et al) and have had our inner selves “apped” in order to promote profit through market segmentation. Information is as abundant as is the means for sharing it, and only through horizontal networks that use data to uncover connections and patterns can we regain agency over our lives and dissolve the legacy structures that bind us to a decaying economic system and its useless disciplines and punishments.

Dispersed yet united, local yet nationwide, resistant yet accommodating – this is clearly the road the nation needs to follow because the election of Trump has shown us that our national narrative no longer can provide a useful guide for future action. Just listen to Obama’s farewell speech in which he trumpets an outdated vision of American exceptionalism – his way is no longer the way forward, if it ever was.

The blessing of Trump is that he now provides us a great excuse to extinguish so many harmful mythologies about ourselves and design new spaces for an uncertain future. Projects like the ones on display at Cooper Hewitt are the first pages in our new instruction manual.

# On Sadness and Politics

(March 2017)

**M**y recent reading has been more re-reading, going back to (for me) foundational texts that have had a hand in sculpting my understanding of the world.

Richard Rorty's *Contingency, irony, and solidarity* is one of those. The reason for going back to it has to do with our current political situation. I wanted to reexamine his argument, in the latter part of the book, about the divide between public and private lives and the place of politics in each. Rorty knows that the border between the two is porous, but he wants to reserve a "privateness" to the private parts of one's life, which he describes as "ironist," so that the liberal humanist project of solidarity does not bog down in a reliance on unreliable universalist truths about human nature but instead has an anchor in the contingent suffering each person suffers from day to day.

Using Rorty's own insistence that language and its meanings are never finished and always morphable, I feel these days that the topographic divide that Rorty gives to life – private here, public there – has dissolved under the solvent of our current American politics, where tweets act as policy statements, personal presidential gain is the dominant democratic project and we are all forced to take a stand on our common slippery slope, like it or not.

We now breathe the air of a smoldering landscape of anger, intolerance, and triumphalism. However, these fires are not new fires. They have always kept American history on a low boil, flaring up at times in civil wars and genocides, and then falling back, never extinguished.

The heat and pollution of the American burn is what gives Raoul Peck's documentary about James Baldwin, *I Am Not Your Negro*, such a searing effect, at least to me (I've seen it twice). The heavy sadness laced throughout Baldwin's version of the history of black people in white America easily maps onto our republic, in the throes of its latest fever-dream, where many gleefully demonize others and inflict cruelties upon them while using linguistic dodges – national security, the safety of the homeland – to excuse their barbarism.

Not without resistance, though, which is good to see, millions committed to finding ways to stabilize the slippery slope and make the ground more supportive, just as in Baldwin's time the civil rights movement bloodied its way towards something like a victory.

But as important as this resistance is, both in its short-term marching and longer-term institution-building, it will be not sufficient to put out those coal-seam fires burrowing through the American historical record. The fires exist, as Baldwin points out, because the dominant white culture has not faced, and thus has not answered, this question: What is it in you that needs to create the nigger (the “nigger” here not just black people but any people deemed the “other,” whether that be Native Americans or Muslims, and, as the “other,” not even really considered fully human)?

Baldwin’s sadness is also our sadness, his unanswered question the toxin that poisons all efforts at solidarity and forms the basis of a society that seems unable to feel satisfied and purposeful domestically and stands discredited internationally.

However, when Baldwin is asked if he is an optimist, he answers that he is forced to be an optimist because he is alive, and his answer stands for us as well. But because his optimism is not cheerful, we may ask how useful can it be. My answer would be that any chance of putting out those subterranean fires begins by disassembling our ill-structured private American selves, the part of human life that Rorty privileges.

We need to stop believing in principles, like American exceptionalism and white supremacy, that harden our hearts and block our ears.

We need to chuck out most of Christian theology and keep the few tenets concerning charity and resistance mouthed by Jesus, the way Jefferson amended the New Testament to get rid of the miracles and keep the moral teachings.

We need to ’fess up to the truth of how American prosperity required, and still requires, immense blood sacrifices of the powerless and the foreign.

We need to retire the myths of rugged individualism and bootstrapping self-helpery in order to make room for “the more perfect union” we promised ourselves two-and-a-half centuries ago.

We need to become real adults so that we can acquire a deeper acceptance of how our limitations and frailties as meat creatures can, and should, take the piss out of any abstract idealism or righteous crusading and instead bind us in a solidarity of shared bodies and pain.

If, in this country, the people are truly to be the governors, then we, as those “people,” need to become people worthy of governing ourselves. This requires discipline – the species’ simultaneous strength and weakness is that humans

are born in a malleable state and do not, from the womb, come equipped with love, humility, patience, self-deprecation, and humor.

The antidote to Trumpism begins in disciplining our private lives to be a people worthy of exercising power and discretion. The angels of a better nature are built, not summoned; if we do not build them, they will not come. What will take their place will be the demons of our human nature, the ego, appetite, and selfishness embedded in our DNA that may enable the creature to survive a hostile world but ensures that the creature will not become a humane *human* being.

This is, I think, what Baldwin means by linking optimism to being alive: we may not have done it right, but that doesn't mean we can't do it right: the possibility is never foreclosed as long as people are breathing and feel pain in their bodies.

The great gift of Trumpism, if such a phrase can be used, is that it is spurring us (at least some of us) to get it right this time. The fight is public and private, against the external powers and against our own sloth, for a commonwealth peopled by governors schooled for the task. It is not enough to rail against the barbarians and hope they don't invade your home. Better to assume that they will act as barbarians usually do and take it upon yourself to be the best example of the civilization you want to protect, which will also be the best defense against the siege of this wrecking crew.



# On Exact Language

(April 2017)

**T**he current American political situation is now in full deconstructionist mode. Our power-mongers, as all power-mongers do, have bled the truth value out of language. With that accomplished, they can now bully the body politic as they please.

Orwell once said that in times like this, “the restatement of the obvious is the first duty of intelligent men,” and the “re” in “restatement” means that it must be done again and again, like water against rock. Note that he does not say that the duty is to convince anyone of the obvious: people holding on to their savage idealisms will not be convinced to let them go. The only duty is to keep the obvious obvious, in play and a live option (to use William James’ notion in *The Will to Believe*).

This duty requires language that is Adamic, in that it names the thing or the action, the noun or the verb, as exactly as possible and as if it were being named for the first time. Lately I’ve been searching for English nouns and verbs that do just that, less to box them up as a lexicon than to remind myself just how powerful a toolbox the English language can be.

Just a few obvious ones:

- Philtrum – the groove between your nose and upper lip
- Aglet – the hard tip on a shoelace
- Punt – the indentation on the bottom of a wine bottle
- Lunule – the whitish crescent at the base of a fingernail
- Tittle – the dot over an “i” or “j”.
- Glabella – the smooth space between the eyebrows
- Muntin – a strip separating panes of glass in a window sash
- Lemniscate – the infinity symbol
- Fourchette - the strip or shaped piece used for the sides of the fingers of a glove

I am sure Scene4 readers can come up with more examples of the exact names for the things in our lives, but the point of the exercise (beyond just the



delight of discovering the terms) is to remind ourselves that when we restate the obvious, we can do so with precision.

In the 1980s HBO comedy show *Not Necessarily the News*, Rich Hall would have a segment on “sniglets,” which he defined as “any word that doesn’t appear in the dictionary, but should,” things like downpause (for when a car drives under a bridge during a rainstorm) and expresshole (for a person with more than 10 items in the express check-out lane).

What I always liked about sniglets was not just the inventiveness but also how the coinages refreshed our language, extending Adam’s impulse to invent new ways of thinking by creating new language to prompt that thinking.

Since our overlords have fogged up “the obvious” with charges of “fake news” and “alternative facts,” we need a new approach to doing Orwell’s duty that means digging deeper in our word hoard and inventing what we need that we don’t find there. Even before 45 took office, our political vocabularies no longer mapped themselves onto the realities of most citizen’s lives; these days, they map onto nothing but tweet-whims and Bannon’s appetites. Let the “extreme vetting” of our language begin so that we can do our duty of resistance and bring down the current regime.

# Escalations

(May 2017)

In New York, an unwritten code states that standers on an escalator stand to the right while walkers walk on the left. A New York Times article this April presented evidence that if everyone stood together and no one walked, the beneficiaries would not be the walkers (they would have time added to their journey) but the people waiting to get on the escalator. Congestion would be reduced because walkers take up more space than standers.

What's the chance that data and evidence will overcome individual urgency? Not likely. Sam Schwartz, New York City's former traffic commissioner, said people's competitive nature tends to trump logic and science whenever they are confronted with a capacity problem. "I don't believe Americans, any longer (if they ever did), have a rational button."

Given the current state of our state, it would be easy to jump on his last statement, but that's not where I want to go. I'm interested in the unwritten code on the escalator because it's part of a network of etiquettes that nudge people along their daily paths. Many things comprise these protocols, most of which we aren't aware of until something comes along to bring them up to the light.

Take, for instance, the recent failure of the Republicans' health care effort. Once people had the chance to see the overt and hidden benefits of the system, they decided that, even if not perfect, they liked what they had and didn't want it taken away.

Another instance is the "skinny budget" presented by President 45 in March, which unmasked the multiple ways the government is threaded through our lives. It is one thing to wield an ideological cleaver and another to see that what is cleaved affect things like meals to seniors, clean air and water, maintenance of the GPS satellites, and basic and advanced medical research – stuff that keeps people alive and social institutions solid.

Back in 2014, the BBC had an article about mycelia, the fungal network that links plants in an underground system by which they can share nutrients and information, what one researcher called the "wood wide web."

We humans have our mycelia as well, like escalator codes and the "intrusions" of "gummint," and while it may give ideological pleasure to rip out the web and leave everything to the tender mercies of the marketplace, it would

be so much better for everyone if we could push the “rational button” and get a “fat budget” that would make sure that everyone on the escalator is safe on their journey even if that means the walkers don’t get what they think they deserve.

# The Grey Cashmere Dress Overcoat

(June 2017)

**A**fter the husband of our next door neighbor died last year - he had been plagued with Parkinson's for a couple of decades, and his body just gave out - his wife 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 of abstractions and metaphors that we use to veneer our lives, that keeps us inside our own heads and convinces us that we are the center of some universe (and requires a virtual reality to remind us that there is an outside after all).

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 of this means for the evolution of a species that suffers emotionally if it does not get enough tactile stimulation, that 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), 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.

## Keurig Thinking

(July 2017)

**T**he other day I came up with what I thought was a clever term: Keurigization. Seems I was late to the game.

There's a great discussion of the term on MetaFilter called "Measuring Out My Life in K-Cups" (a nod to "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock": "I have measured out my life with coffee spoons") and a site dedicated to the death of the K-Cup ([www.killthekcup.org](http://www.killthekcup.org)), where they have a killer video – literally – where the 9 billion K-Cups thrown into landfills come back for vengeance.

John Sylvan, the inventor of the Keurig coffee machine (the name comes from the Dutch for "excellence"), does not use the machine and has been quoted as saying, "They're kind of expensive to use – plus, it's not like drip coffee is tough to make."

There's a good online 2015 article in *The Atlantic* that takes apart some of the high dudgeon over the device, noting that the Keurig does solve breakroom conflicts about clean-up and coffee-making responsibilities and, from some angles, is a more efficient coffee delivery system (i.e., has a smaller environmental footprint) than Bunn coffee makers or the French press.

Of course, this being the United States under its 21st-century capitalist overlords, Keurigization has leaked into other product lines, such as oatmeal (Nature Valley Bistro cups), wine (Kuvée), tortillas (Flatev), cookies (Chip Smart Cookie Oven), and beer (Pico Home Brew Beer), all of which use the pod technology and are based on the notion that our lives are too [fill in the adjective] to do such simple things as boil water to pour over instant oatmeal or roll out and bake your own damn tortillas.

While arguments about convenience and carbon footprints are interesting, to me they miss this last point about the workings of capitalism, a system which slices reality into finer and finer segments to make products for those segments and extract the profits that come from that segmentation. This is how capitalism works best: divide us, conquer us, laugh all the way to bank, repeat.

What a dull and graceless answer to the catechistic question of "What is the chief end of man?" (The catechism doesn't offer much of an answer either – "to glorify God" – itself a dull and graceless answer to the suffering and anxiety of human life.)

On the other hand, perhaps it will be in the arguments over how best to brew a heady caffeine concoction that we can find reintegration as a community and a re-loving of the senses, where we can un-Keurig ourselves from the K-Cups of our political principles and moral beliefs and brew something human, affectionate and bracing that above all its other merits can be shared, savored, banked in the commons, repeated without end.

# Fire Suppression Leads To Thought Expansion

(August 2017)

One of the Saturday morning radio shows on WNYC in New York is *Reveal*, produced by the Center for Investigative Reporting, located in Emeryville, California. The Center and *Reveal* do vintage journalism – ask questions, pursue leads, verify sources, afflict the comfortable and comfort the afflicted.

A recent broadcast called “America’s Ring of Fire” examined wildfires in the United States, which occur far more often every year than I realized and are a little-known scourge throughout the country.

Reporters on the show interviewed many officials in charge of both putting out the fires when they start and trying to prevent them from happening. These interviews inevitably touched upon the border conflicts between human desires and the physics of the natural world.

I heard many experts talk about their work, and in listening to them, I admired how they married a broad understanding of science with sweaty physical work on the ground. Each anchored each, and as they talked in close detail about what they do, I felt that they were people I could trust: savvy, modest, committed, steeped in the “thingness” of their world, quick to admit their limitations, prompted by what the Jews call *tikkun olam*, repairing the world.

I wish that all members of our political élite exhibited this same trait of acting from knowledge earned rather than ideologically birthed. Do not propose eliminating food stamps unless you have tried for a year to live on the income that qualifies you for the benefit. Do not diminish access to health insurance unless you’ve had to deal with medical bills and an insurance company’s indifference.

Such a litany of prerequisites would be a long one, but, in short, don’t act like you know how people live their lives until you actually sweat along with them as they sweat through their lives. Until you do that, you have no authority to act on their behalf.

I’m not going to hold my breath, though. I am thankful we have people like the wardens and biologists featured in the *Reveal* program, and not everyone in the political élite is clueless about the lives of ordinary people. The trick



today is figuring out how to organize this competent class so that they can suppress Twitter wildfires, weed out the underbrush that allows apparatchiks to hide their schemes, and arrange our territories for sustainable growth.

And these fire suppressors do, we should also do within the provinces of our own lives – clean out our ideological tinder, scale down our own blowhardiness, and let facts put out the embers of hubris.

In many respects, America has always been burning because a country founded on violence and division will always smolder, always rise to a whirlwind to sear the land, and there is always a whirlwind to oblige. As Taylor Mac showed in his epic 24-decade history of popular music, much of American life is fired by a history of pain and damage, making Americans lean readily toward apocalypse and rage.

But none of our history fates us to anything. “America’s Ring of Fire” will consume us all if we let it, and it won’t if we don’t. It’s that simple.

# Niggerized

(September 2017)

Cornel West has the used this term, though I am sure he isn't the only one, to describe a state in which American non-black people are now being treated like American black people, which he described as being "unsafe and unprotected, subjected to unjustified violence, and hated."

Non-black people do not like being niggerized, but that has been what's happening since about the mid-1970s, when economic/political decisions kicked off the hollowing-out of the middle class and the misery-making social and income inequalities we have today.

What do these niggerized people do? They elect Donald Trump to un-niggerize them because Trump promised to return to them the right to feel superior and entitled. This rhetoric, of course, comes across in code, voiced strongly in works like Arlie Russel Hochschild's *Strangers in Their Own Land: Anger and Mourning on the American Right*: *they* have cut in line, *they* have gotten unearned benefits from the government, *they* haven't followed the rules, *they* don't hold themselves accountable like I do for myself. They feel that *these people* have stolen something from them, and they want it back: "Make America Great Again," "take back our country."

The condescension, hypocrisy, whinging and fact-ignorance displayed by the newly niggerized has now been valorized by our government and our media, who are collaborating to honor their pain and do what can be done to restore their pride and make manifest their nostalgia. After all, there is money to be made in this and power to be gained.

In the meantime, those for whom being niggerized has always been their way of life continue to be "unsafe and unprotected, subjected to unjustified violence, and hated." See Castile, Philando.

America does not seem to have a way out of this polarity. The original sin of slavery cannot be erased, nor can the requirement that every niggerized group that wants to un-niggerize itself must offer a blood sacrifice to get the blessings of freedom and democracy. Sometimes more than one sacrifice – many more. With no guarantees.

America is at a dead-end. Its politics, at least those practiced by the professional Washington politicians, is a politics of niggerization: how much can

we impoverish and demean some groups so that our favored groups get more favors: how poor can we make the poor so that the rich can become richer? That is conservative politics today. And the more liberal politicians mirror their conservative peers, the less able they are to make a convincing case that they can protect those who are “unsafe and unprotected, subjected to unjustified violence, and hated.”

America has always been a collision sport with a long and deep trail of casualties. (There is a reason why football is a nationally hallowed sport that will never be derailed because of its concussive damage – it mirrors perfectly the national id.) It is time for other solutions. Here is mine.

I have always thought that the civil war of the 1860s never ended but has simply continued in ultra-slow motion and that this current iteration of America is just another phase of the warfare. This simmering civil instability is America’s most stable heritage – and perhaps it should provide the guideposts for moving forward.

Let us authorize the continuation of the secessionist impulse of the 1860s and divide the land into Swiss-style cantons organized by a new Articles of Confederation. No longer would we be harassed by our guilt or embarrassment over not fulfilling the lofty ideal of “E pluribus unum” – instead, we simply create institutions that reflect the reality of “from many come many, not one, people” (my Latin is not up to the translation) and divvy up the common wealth so that all can get a fresh start.

In this way, the niggerized, either newly minted or always-have-been, might have a better chance at life, liberty and the pursuit of their happinesses with less concussive injury than under the current management. There would also be the ancillary benefit of diluting the American imperial project, which has niggerized countless people across the globe.

Have your own solution? I’d love to hear it. And while you’re mulling it over, hear the fiery tones of Cornel West [1].

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[1] <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oNly7I-eW5A>

## It Is a Lie

(October 2017)

"I always thought old age would be a writer's best chance. . . . Now my memory's gone, all the old fluency's disappeared. I don't write a single sentence without saying to myself, 'It's a lie!' So I know I was right. It's best chance I've ever had."

Samuel Beckett to Lawrence Shainberg, quoted in New Yorker, September 12, 2016.

**T**his quote caught my eye while I was thumbing through the old issue at a laundromat because this is how I feel these days, that everything I write is a lie.

But what do I mean by "lie" and what does Beckett mean by "best chance"?

I used to think that even if I wrote about something that others had written about before, that thing hadn't been written about by me – that is, because my "me" was the only one of its kind in the universe, it had an automatic fresh take, a "unique perspective," and that made what I wrote worthwhile.

Now I think that even if such a fresh "me" exists (an iffy thought), I feel like I'm only adding to a pile of cultural sameness whose prime law seems to be distraction and endearment – distraction from our predatory politico/capitalist regime and, at the same time, endearing us to the havoc so that the system can continue.

So, the "lie" I'm writing is not an untruth – alternate fact, fake news, that sort of thing – but it becomes, to use the generation-revealing lyric, "another brick in the wall." My special "me" doesn't liberate anyone or anything.

And so the question shifts to "Why write?"

Possible answers. Because I simply enjoy the act. Because adding light to a dark night is a good thing, even if, at the moment, it seems the darkness prevails. Because if what you do improves the life of even one person, then what you have done has worth.

All useful self-ratifying excuses – but they come from a sentimentalized Christian ethos that underlies most art work in our culture: self-sacrifice as a good thing, the disciplined life in a wayward universe, the virtuous upward fight against gravity, that good (of some type) will/must win out.

But, of course, this ethos is a lie of the feel-good sort. In art, people will demand that the brave win out over the rogues and will swear that they do want their hearts touched and souls moved to make them better people.

But life as actually lived outside of theaters and museums does not seem ruled by the values people said they sought in the art they took in. Unlike religion, where values are turned into rites and duties that root life in a manufactured meaning, art can give us the feel of living life properly, with compassion and grace, but eventually, like anything that's consumed by humans, it leaves behind more waste than progress, and while the spirit is willing, the flesh is, indeed, weak.

If I take the word "lie," though, and shine the light of "best chance" on it, I think I see clearer what Beckett was getting at. The lie is not an untruth but a solvent. It is the opposite of the certain, the ordained, the fated, the theological.

And old age is the last best chance to tell the lie, to be dissolute (which comes from "dissolve"), because, hopefully, by that time, with memory and fluency gone (both being tools that distract and endear), there is nothing left to either gain or lose by the writing, and freed from achieving an end, the writing can just be, saying what it pleases, wide or thin, with tight grain or veiled fog, freeing the writer and reader from any orthodoxy that sells a certainty or any art that promises a benefit or any advertising that says a thing can replace a soul.

Now I see what he was meaning. This is my best chance. And so, using another Beckett quote (amended) – "Lie again. Lie better." – let the dissolute begin.

# Why Should Religious Beliefs Be Defended?

(November 2017)

**T**his is all about cake-baking and the Supreme Court.

The default position these days seems to be that a religious belief is an unimpeachable excuse for someone not doing what they are responsible for doing. A government official can refuse to issue marriage licenses because she believes gay marriage is a sin. A pharmacist can refuse to fill a prescription for birth control because he believes that contraception/abortion is a sin. A politician can get legislation passed that uses government power to legislate a person's identity, as in the situation of transgender people and bathrooms, often motivated by, if not explicitly stated, a belief in the sinfulness of non-standard gender identity. Even the legal fiction known as a corporation can invoke religious beliefs to deny employees reproductive health care coverage.

Religious belief seems to have effected its own version of “regulatory capture,” similar to what corporations do when they colonize the regulatory agencies charged with overseeing them. I think the time has come to stop giving religious belief such power by demoting it from its current protected status to make it co-equal with all other belief systems and returning it to the private sphere of the individual believer.

One might argue that a hostility towards religious belief is un-American, but as Susan Jacoby shows in *Freethinkers: A History of American Secularism*, opposing religious belief has been vital to shaping the character of the country. Some may argue that the greatness of the United States comes from being a Christian nation, but Jacoby shows that it's equally true that whatever greatness American possesses comes from a strong antipathy to theologies and a concurrent respect for skepticism and rationality.

And while she doesn't state it explicitly, Jacoby's history shows that when religion supports social justice (as in the resistance to slavery or the fight for civil rights), its power to transform increases as its values come closer to a shared universal secular humanism and more distant from their theological underpinnings. This is similar to the way the ability of religion to explain the physical world weakens as science becomes better at modeling reality. No longer does nature send hurricanes to punish the decadence of human society no matter how fervently one may believe that.

Would demoting religious belief be unconstitutional? No, because the Constitution has no affirmative defense of religion, only prohibitions against government action in support of or against religions and their believers. Thomas Jefferson advocated for a wall between church and state for a good reason: religion allied with state power more often than not led to bloodshed, and if not bloodshed, then a stifling conservatism.

Jefferson's wall also ensured that religions could maintain their integrity and thus their authority. A collaboration between religion and politics inevitably degrades both the principles and effectiveness of each to do what they are designed to do. Jefferson knew well the limits and dangers of theocracy.

"Theocracy" is, in fact, the dividing line here. I have no problem with the existence of religions because people in American society have the protected right to congregate and celebrate whatever arcane belief-sets they want, whether that be a resurrected man-god or whatever the flavor du jour at Meetup. No one will be persecuted (at least in theory) for associating with others who share a set of beliefs.

The problem comes when one of those belief-sets, dubbed "religion," uses theocratic principles to sculpt a democratic society into its own image. Democracy and theocracy cannot inhabit the same place and time. The United States can't be both a nation under Christian law-principles and a secular inclusive democracy. Why? Because of the direction of obedience: the former points to a divinity as the source of power, the latter to the people. There is no middle ground here: either the Bible or the Constitution must rule. (And no cheating, either, arguing that God works through the people and their Constitution, as if the Constitution were an added book of the Bible.)

How could we de-religion (awkward coinage) the United States without violating the Constitution? Start with getting them off the public dole. This is part of a larger discussion about all organizations that have been awarded 501 (c)(3) not-for-profit status. As Mark Oppenheimer pointed out in a *Time* article on June 28, 2015, titled "Now's the Time to End Tax Exemptions for Religious Institutions," the "exemption-and-deduction regime has grown into a pointless, incoherent agglomeration of nonsensical loopholes, which can allow rich organizations to horde plentiful assets in the midst of poverty." (John Oliver pointed out these absurdities when he legally turned his show, "Last Week Tonight," into a church.)

Eliminating subsidies for religions by reforming 501(c)(3) is a start, if for no other reason than it gets the government, in the form of the IRS, out of

the business of deciding what is and is not a religion (an act which is in direct contradiction of the First Amendment). The same can be said for any “faith-based” funding from the government to provide services. No country with a clear vision of social justice uses churches to provide soup kitchens for the homeless.

The next step is harder to take because it requires defenders of secularist/humanist/atheist values to demonstrate that religious influence is not automatically a benign influence without, at the same time, looking like they are saying that religious belief should be repressed.

For example, it is not out-of-bounds to point out that fundamentalist vitriol about abortion has fed violence and assassination. It is not out-of-bounds to point out that religious liberty should not be used as a license to discriminate in hiring or deny health care coverage. It is not out-of-bounds to point out that installing a stone monument to the Ten Commandments in a courthouse is government establishment of a religion, which is illegal.

Again, people can believe whatever they want. But in a democracy like ours, the founding documents name the people and not God as the authors of power in the society because of the founders’ clear understanding of the evil effects of an alliance between state and church. This is a distinction that must be maintained.

The secularist/humanist/atheist defenders must also make an affirmative argument for their values as well and show that the nation has been well served by its freethinking traditions: the task is to make Robert Ingersoll as much a household name as Pope Francis. And we need to inject some soul and fire into the undertaking. We can’t kiss the Constitution as some kiss their Bibles in a show of veneration, but neither can we be all cool and rational about our passions for liberty of conscience.

I believe that all belief-sets, whether based in divinities or science, should be put on an equal footing. This is not persecution but equalization. No good social purpose is served any longer by exempting religions from the strictures placed on all of us as citizens.





# A Spiritual Discipline

(December 2017)

**A** spiritual discipline begins in sadness. This thought came to me and then left, without leaving any hints, so here is my best go at it.

I had been thinking about spiritual discipline because I was feeling I needed one. Not a religio-cleansing effort but something that would enlarge the ambit of the spirit, which can get narrowed in the confines of this city.

And then this thought came. I think the connection is that sadness prompts an effort to relieve life of a certain scheduledness, of being on point and on time. Also, sadness asks the body to take a breather. It asks the body to stop pommeling itself with shoulds and judgments, and rest quiet and unbruised for a while.

And because of the way our world is pitched to us these days, the sadness comes from an over-involvement in screens and the cloud and the digital rabbit-holes and chum boxes that can trap us in endless mazes but do nothing to feed any deeper longing that comes from living within the faux three-dimensionality of the two-dimensionality of pixels and code, which may appear to be magic but it lacks magic's draw of awe and delight.

Virginia Heffernan writes about this in her book *Magic and Loss*. In an interview on the podcast *Track Changes*, she spoke about her own five-year quest to de-link herself from her phone screen and re-link herself to the tactility of life: think about using a sextant to know your place rather than GPS and an app. She speaks about the Buddhist/Anglo term "mindfulness" as being a "memory of the present." This present is not a present curated by Apple's minimalist aesthetic designed to protect users from oily-skinned human beings but one concerned about undigitizable food and not losing the sense of immanent thereness that comes with great poetry.

In these states of limits and gentleness, the discipline can begin.

And what was my discipline? To reconnect with friends I had not seen in many years because I had been lazy and careless about these relationships. I had fallen into being willing to let them slide away as part of my own sliding away from my own prior lives. Doing this helped me feel wider, linked, affixed. The discipline is called a "discipline" from its root meaning of "knowledge," which

simply means paying attention to the things that deserve attention: friends, pets, justice, lovers, good food and drink.

I work in an institution, Yeshiva University, where spiritual discipline is a much more serious and on-going enterprise: one's life and the discipline are the same thing, the word made flesh. Rules hem in life. These rules are not rules of thumb but neither are they lines of "if-then" statements. They fall in-between, both loose and tight, both forgiving and demanding. One's day is given over to studying the rules, and both studying the rules and following the rules comprise the Jewish discipline.

Being an outsider, I can only see with anthropological eyes, but I sense a nostalgia at the heart of Modern Orthodoxy, constrained but fierce. The noun "Orthodoxy" reluctantly takes on the adjective "Modern" because Orthodoxers living in modern times have convinced themselves that they must live within these modern times, which require diplomatic engagements with non-Orthodox authorities: the Torah is still central, but it must also share the center if the believers are to find success within their historical moment.

No one at YU argues that the institution should abandon its alliance with the secular world and retreat to the yeshiva, at least out loud, though there are many rabbis there who would do this in a heartbeat if they could: return to a life where studying the beauty of the Torah is life itself. This ache for the shelter of the Torah comes from nostalgia, both in the sense of wanting a past that is/was better than the present and the pain that comes from desiring a home that no longer exists.

As the anthropologist, I can understand this tension through rationality and logic, but because I have no felt experience of the believing going on within Orthodox people, the tension feels heavy and sober and unjoyful to me. It feels like a discipline more in line with our usual sense of discipline, as a means of correction and shrivng. This yeshiva feeling does not attract me at all, but I can understand how the weight of its tradition might feel like an anchor and a harbor to those who believe that there can be no life worth living without a worthwhile anchor and harbor.

I live in a lighter world - no guidelines, just suggestions; no creed, just lots of MacGyvering. At times I need the spiritual reboot, but at least I can turn on my lights on Shabbos while doing it. And the sadness? We live in a fallen world; sadness is a proper response - a feature, not a bug.

**2016**



## Moving to the Dark(ish) Side

(January 2016)

*Innovation Hub* is on my short-list of to-be-listened-to radio programs. Each Saturday morning at 7 a.m., I make my coffee and sit at the kitchen table to sip both beverage and insight. The Marvelous María Beatriz is still snoozing, and the cats are curled up into their own pensiveness.

This show was about “celebrity, the changing nature of,” and it featured a segment with Variety’s Andrew Wallenstein and Tubular Labs’ Allison Stern. (Tubular Labs “tracks 1.5B videos across 30+ platforms including YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, Vine, Twitter, Yahoo, and AOL; as well as analyzes the engagements of 400M+ video viewers.”)

The focus of the discussion was how YouTube and other digital platforms have disrupted the Hollywood process for celebratizing people. Someone sitting at a computer can now become a superstar millionaire. Case in point: PewDiePie, otherwise known as Felix Kjellberg, is best known for playing video games before a massive audience; according to Forbes, he makes \$4 million a year.

Those who name themselves artists may not want to become celebrities, but all artists want to become known for what they do, and they would like that “knownness” to afford them a decent life, no matter how they define that. I would argue that PewDiePie is living the life every artist would like to have: well-paid for doing what he loves to do and the focal point for millions of people’s attention and, at times, admiration. The fact he achieves this by playing video games online for an audience is irrelevant: he entertains and pleases, and reaps his reward for doing so.

I am thinking about these topics more seriously of late because, for the second time in 2015, I am out of a job. The first time happened because my position was eliminated; the second time, because the job and I did not fit together well. As part of my severance, I have access to “outplacement services” to help me find my next position.

This outplacement process is both disruptive and intriguing, the former because it forces me to nitpick myself to find out what my core really is, the latter because it forces me to nitpick myself to find out what my core really is. For so many years I have just had jobs that I could do more or less well enough and that were done just “to pay the rent.” Real life happened outside the job domain.

But now I am engaged in a process where, for the first time in a very long time, not only do I have to dissect and assay my “skills” or “talents,” I also have to make them operate with more vigor for my success. In outplacement lingo, I am my own brand and have to take charge of my brand’s presentation and persistence.

“Brand” lingo has always peeved me because it appears to reduce human complexity to checklists and milestones, substituting spiritual/aesthetic energies with marketing strategies. But as with any language game (to use Richard Rorty’s term), I can deploy brand lingo in ways not intended by its originators to achieve my own ends. This is what I intend to do as I move toward my own version of celebrityhood.

I choose to interpret brand lingo as a modern iteration of “the unexamined life is not worth living.” Central to identifying one’s brand is putting one’s “essential nature” into words, similar to the elevator speech or the script pitch (or what my outplacement firm calls the “summary statement” on the résumé). Doing this is reductive in the way a good hypothesis is reductive: it lessens the noise created by complexity in order to home in on the signal of the self, and then test that signal’s strength, focus, and flexibility.

This testing, if done properly, is an abrasive process, both in how it punishes and scours. Regret is inevitable in this process, for things done and not done (and undone) as well as regret’s close cousin, embarrassment. (“What was I thinking?” is a recurrent refrain for me.) Pride comes in, too, both for (the few) verifiable accomplishments I can identify and the vanity that made me feel those accomplishments were more important than they were.

These regrets and this pride, however, cannot be the sole outcome of the self-exam. (Unless, of course, one wants to be the Jewish mother in the joke, “How many Jewish mothers does it take to change a lightbulb?”: “Never mind, I’ll just sit in the dark.”) I need to see them, greet them, then banish them, like a sculptor banishing unneeded stone.

What’s next? The formulation of the brand, which, for me, is an act of language. Here is my best analogy for it. I once had a chance to pitch a screenplay in Los Angeles on the third day of a three-day conference. My hotel was a mile from the convention center, and for the first two days during the fifteen minutes it took me to walk there and then back at day’s end, I practiced my pitch.

My first attempt was, as expected, terrible - overlong because over-explanatory, two pounds crammed into a one-pound bag. Even though I'd written the script, I didn't know its story. As I winnowed the chaff, I also taught myself about what I'd written - more than once I said to myself, "Oh, so that's why I put that in there." When I did my pitch on the third day, I had the script's "brand" down pat, easily delivered, easily accepted (though not taken up by any production company).

In outplacement parlance, the brand was my summary statement. If my auditors wanted to hear more, I had more to tell them, increasing the complexity of the telling until they got what they wanted or I ran out of complexities.

So now I am crafting my Michael "brand," and once crafted, I plan on pitching it into the world using those very platforms Tubular Labs track (or at least a subset of them - after all, there is only so much time in one's life). It is the natural second step to the first step of drafting the pitch, because if one has a great pitch but doesn't launch it, then the light really is hidden under the bushel. I have to learn how to use the storytelling tools available to me.

Resentment at having to do this? A little. It'd be nice to be "discovered," be the overnight sensation, and have a smoother glide path into some form of success. It'd be nice at my age not to have to exercise the kind of effort I should have exercised forty years ago (ah, that resentment creeping in - out, out, brief snarling!).

But at the same time I feel the resentment I also feel thankful for life kicking me in the ass hard enough to keep me from being the Michael version of the Jewish mother (which I am quite capable of performing). I have no right to consider myself "above" or "better than" what this outplacement process is going to take me through - "branding" is also about my discovering a useful humility, a balance of self-deprecation and self-love.

All I know about my brand at the moment is this: I write. But this is good because it's not "I have a good suite of organizational and administrative skills (blah blah blah)" with a little whisper to the side, "And I also write." Maybe a day late and a dollar short, but now I have no alternative but to find the brand and pitch it mightily.

(By the way, if any of our dear readers is in need of a good writing advisor, please see my website, [www.editorinchief.biz](http://www.editorinchief.biz))





# Flea Markets

(February 2016)

In a former life in a far distant galaxy, my second wife and I had a weekend table at a local flea market held in the parking lot of a local dance hall. We took turns manning the table (tedious work, standing there dumb while thoroughly indifferent people scrutinize the equivalent of your dirty linen), and on my off-hours I wandered around the lot taking down notes about what and who I saw.

At first glance it all looks like junk. But that is deceiving, for there are subtle species here, delicate yet distinct gradations among the inhabitants, like Darwin's finches. One species is not really a flea marketer at all, if one understands by that tag a person who cleans out his basement to make a little extra money. He will offer new sets of tools, for instance, that will rival what the local hardware store has to offer in quality and price. Or stereo equipment. Or handmade furniture and gee-gaws. Or plaster statues. Or antiques. These people are out for business, to make a living off the crowds. They have the same spot week to week (usually with the choicest shade, having made a deal with the owner), they arrive at the same time, and their wares are inevitably set out in the same pattern on the tables: sockets on one end, wrenches in the middle, the leaping panther towards the back, the ancient cog-wheeled hand mixer among the flat-irons and tarnished baby spoons.

These people aren't any fun. They're no different than going to a store or a shop at the mall, and they see the activity as a business, as something which, either by itself or in tandem with something else, will support their living habits. In this sense they violate what a true flea marketer really is. They want profit, not just a little extra money. It's that "little extra" that provides the motivation for the true flea marketer, that and a desire to carve out some more room in a crowded house or attic.

Flea marketers are not profiteers, or if they are, it is only in the merest sense of the word. They are more like rag-and-bone men who shuffle and trade amongst themselves the cast-offs of an industrial society. And in doing so they expose to the scrutiny of the world the vigorous foolishness that characterizes American manufacturing power. One can cry out in dismay at the tremendous waste on display here, the flotsam of a society that has more than it knows what to do with. Yet, if one is going to be honest, one also has to admire, while laughing at, the raw vitality laid out in gaudy array on these tables, the outward

signs of the American society's inner decision to be the biggest, best, fastest, and first when it comes to producing economic wealth.

And a gaudy array it is. Here is a partial listing: Howdy Doody rag dolls, tools (from exotic staple-pullers for fence posts to rust-pitted dredged-up-from-the-basement chisels), paperback books with the covers surgically removed, Michael Jackson pins, chains, gloves, and even a plaster bust. Dolls (babies, Barbies, frogs), muskets, lamps out of bottles and chains and plaster Virgin Marys, knives (pen, Bowie, hunting, butcher's), old *Playboys* looking virginal, R2D2 piggy bank, string sculptures of ships, salt & pepper shakers of a thousand complexions, a checkerboard hassock, cherubim bird baths, pictures of Jesus among the lambs, flowerpot spinning wheels, plastic placemats with covered bridges, old glasses with no one's prescription, enough knick-knackery to be used for fill (Granite State ashtrays, Pekingese statuettes, an ashtray with a dog pissing on a hydrant, Liberty Bell saucers, swan-necked gravy boats), stickers (Love Is..., unicorns, pigs, hearts, rainbows, zodiac signs), National Geographics, ancient appliances with zebra-striped electrical cords, beer signs, platitude plaques (*Today is the first day...*), figures carved from coal, elongated poodles containing liquor.

*Und so weiter*, as the Germans would say.

I know people who would get angry at this, seeing in it a sign of corporate frivolousness and the endemic bad taste of the American people: "Children are going hungry and the corporations are producing...." They have a point. One could wish that corporations would act with more social conscience and not produce such a tremendous sludge of useless articles. One could wish that people would "know better" and practice a little Yankee restraint and common sense.

But the risk, of course, in wishing for these things is that in one's effort to be moral and upright, one may end up simply being snobbishly undemocratic. For if a flea market is anything, it's a sign that American democracy still exists. First, these people, from different sections of the city, freely assemble on a Sunday to sell their goods (and bads). True, they must pay \$6 to the owner of the parking lot for the right to have a space, but if they were to have it in their backyards, they would've had to pay \$4 to the city for a permit anyways. There is no restraint on what they can sell (as long as it's not outright salacious, I suppose), and they can display it in any manner they choose.

Second, these people aren't out to make a profit, they're out to make a few bucks. They aren't entrepreneurs, they're ordinary people scraping together

a little extra money for a meal out here and there. Some of them engage in it more deliberately, buying up old stuff, fixing it up, and selling it again at a small profit, but even this shows an enterprising spirit that is missing from many of the stuffy bugbears of our American corporations. These are people who, for the most part, live along the margins. A small financial disaster, an illness, a car that needs fixing can often mean a severe strain. A few extra dollars rattling around in the pockets, while it doesn't provide that little boost up into security, makes life just that much easier.

And probably one of the most remarkable things is the easy camaraderie that exists between these people. Tocqueville mentioned this, and it still holds true. To be sure, the friendliness is easily won. These are people who do not spend their lives together, do not owe one another anything, who really are just glancing bits of light in one another's lives.

Yet it is a fact that after eight hours of standing next to someone else, one talks of this and that, and while the exchange is never deathless and the person is pretty easily forgotten once everything is packed up, there is a congregational ease that comes about because there are no class barriers here, no sludge of caste that clogs the arteries of conversation.

And there is even something more here, something ultimately precious to democracy, which makes democracy, American-style, what it is. As you walk around the tables, if you're open to the experience, you'll go through several phases of thought. The first one might be that dislike I mentioned above of the industrial excess, especially in light of what needs to be done to make life better in this country.

Yet, if you can put that to one side, you can also marvel at the extreme, nay, chaotic, inventiveness of capitalist industry: thousands of people and millions of dollars out there somewhere engaged in producing ice cubes with naked ladies in them and coffee mugs shaped like pregnant mothers. The marvel you may feel is not approval; it's merely a pairing with that earlier distaste you have, saving your indignation from becoming snobbish self-righteousness.

The next level is seeing, really seeing, the ordinariness of these people, and this is what is most precious. As I walked around, looking, chatting, taking notes, I began to get a queer sensation of intimacy that went beyond simply exchanging a few halloos with people, discussing the weather, remarking on the sparseness of the crowd. Excepting the people there who I would call merchants, everyone, to some degree, had their lives spread out on their tables. True, a distorted

picture, much as one might get looking through a keyhole or catching a glimpse through a window.

Yet, if you look closely enough, you begin to make up stories, make connections between that fleur-de-lis trivet and the picture of the bleeding-heart Jesus that probably hung in the kitchen. Or the straw hat nailed by a plastic strawberry and the stiff-woven reed basket that might have accompanied a young woman on a walk through a field. Lives lived through whatever conjunctions of pain and pleasure get carelessly strewn under a hot afternoon sun, sold off for a few cents. Yet to eyes that are looking just right, the lives come back and offer an unutterably precious gift of insight, of being able to go beyond the plainly visible, the parsimony of time and place.

At bottom, this love of fictive experiences is the heart of democracy. “The love of the common people” can take on many meanings, and be liable to many distortions, but in the end it has to be some Whitmanian desire to *know* the very vibrancy that runs through peoples’ lives, to incarnate into oneself all the ties that bind, all the broken and unbroken circles; in short, almost a cannibalistic desire to ingest all experience life has to offer in order to better participate in that life, (if we mean by “life” living done along the margins, without much cushion, open equally to both destruction and happiness, yet not bereft of hope or humor).

And life runs most clearly, if most painfully, through the common people. They produce the wealth in the factories, yet have to sell off bits and parts of their lives to enjoy that wealth. They spend the money that keeps the economy going, yet they are at the mercy of the whims of bankers and bureaucrats. They are the ballast that keeps the country stable (and provide the reason for keeping the country going at all), yet they are boiled down to such non-entities through polls, public opinion surveys, and advertising. To know them, then, is to know a good chunk about the life of the nation, and, more importantly, it saves them from an undeserved and dangerous reduction to pawns and masses.

Any hope for democracy’s success, that is, any hope that the people who produce the wealth, spend it, and make the society stable will have a strong and loud voice in the running of the country, begins with flea markets and a sensitive listening to what they are saying about the qualities these people bring to our common life. A “love of the common people” should not be a deification. All their common sense is balanced, and sometimes overrun by venal behavior, bigotry,

and plain stupidity. And their common sense is sometimes indistinguishable from pure stubbornness.

Yet if they are abandoned, then democracy is abandoned. Only insofar as their lives are bettered by the political policies of this country, and only insofar as they have a strong direct voice in the making of those policies, will this country have a democracy worth the name. If democracy comes to reside in the corporate boardrooms and legislative halls, then it is no longer a democracy, or it is at least a democracy that no self-respecting person would want.

Such are the lessons of flea markets.



# It's Off To Work I Go

(March 2016)

**L**ast January, I wrote a piece about “branding” myself as part of a job search that I had to undertake.

Well, my job search is over - I have found a new position. I guess I'm pleased with the result. But, to be honest, only, say, a third of me is pleased, the part that will find the additional income and the security of the benefits helpful.

But I discovered a lot of useful information about myself in the branding process — more specifically, about how I have “constructed” myself professionally over the years and how much of that construction was governed by fear, failure of nerve, and a too-thin imagination. The degree to which I have not been bold, progressive, and inventive in piecing my life together is both sobering and saddening.

Of course, life is not over and, barring being knocked off my pins by the newly discovered gravitational waves, I still have time to make a decent walkabout of my life. That is another insight of my self-branding: regret has no nutritional content and should be flushed out of the system.

Looking for work has made me think, of course, about working and the nature of work itself. I have always admired John Maynard Keynes' 1930 essay “Economic Possibilities for Our Grandchildren,” where he proposes the notion that work itself may be obsolete, given the incredible productivity of the capitalist system. This notion has been raised several times recently — *The Atlantic*, in July/August 2015, had “A World Without Work” by Derek Thompson, and the February issue of *PC Magazine* had a piece titled “Will Robots Make Humans Unnecessary?”, dealing, in part, with the shape of a world in which much human labor could be done by non-human labor.

At the risk of sounding thin-brained, I am all for a transformation like this, all for anything that could relieve human beings of the drudgery of work. I know, I know - but this is not about not working at all but about doing a different kind of work. Humans as a species do seem to thrive when shaping the world around them - Marx, in *Capital*, is so very good at describing these transformative energies. We need to continue to do that - we just need to do it under a whole new set of rules, expectations, vocabularies, technologies.



In other words, since all politics is local and the universe does revolve around me, the species needs to do what I did not sufficiently do in my own life: be more bold, progressive, and inventive in piecing together its living.

And the species needs to do it soon. Paul Mason's new book, *PostCapitalism: A Guide to Our Future*, explains why, and we owe it to those who have been sacrificed to the capitalist regime to move forward. It won't happen, but if Bernie Sanders ever solicited my opinion for his campaign, I'd urge him to go all-in/all-out on stretching his vision of democratic socialism (which right now is pretty tepid, not much more than what Harry Truman proposed) to these outer limits. Ignore Hillary, ignore the limited-vision politicking of the campaign, and instead use the megaphone he now has to ignite the revolution he says he wants.

Let's actually do this. Let's actually do this now. That's work I wouldn't mind doing.

## Passing Stones, Passing Thoughts

(April 2016)

**P**assing a kidney is a tale of how the small can conquer the large, the mouse frighten the lion, the David whack the Goliath (appropriately enough, with a stone).

I suffer from this malady which, despite my best efforts to flush my system and watch my diet, ambushes me regularly. For those who have never passed a stone, I can only say, as many men have said, and which has been confirmed by women who also have the affliction, that it is the closest thing to having a child that a man will ever experience. Some women with whom I've spoken have said that they would prefer the birth.

What causes the pain is a mismatch between stone and tube as the jagged-edged "calculus" of about a half-a-millimeter in size (think of a grain of pearl rice) scrapes its way down the ureter to the bladder - if one is lucky. The unlucky ones have the calculi stay in the kidney and block off its functioning, requiring either lithotripsy (breaking up the stones by ultrasound - I have had that done) or surgery (haven't had that yet).

Once the stone arrives at the bladder, it wends its way, causing sensations similar to a urinary tract infection, until one day out it pops. (Enough said.)

My recent close encounter (two in one week) played out its usual script: intense left-side pain beginning in the lower back and moving toward the spine, complete upset of the gastro-intestinal system (enough said again), water-drinking, and an hour or so of pacing back and forth trying to outlast the pain (sitting or lying down makes it worse - walking is a good distraction). Eventually, the body comes back to balance and I feel that warm relief that comes after pain has stopped as well as the grateful fatigue of having fought a fight and not lost.

Bodies - I muse upon bodies after something like this. I muse about how, despite all the brilliant abstractive capacities of the brain, the brain's prime purpose is to direct the body that houses it to find pleasure and avoid pain. I think about how all the words sprouted by the presidential wanna-bes are really about how much suffering to human bodies they either want to inflict, defer, or prevent. Every moment of our historical place and time plays itself out against human bodies - the body is the "local habitation" of every ideology, philosophy, and faith. There is not anything in human life which is not incarnate.

Yet as modernized human beings we don't base our living in our bodies. We ignore them, abuse them, overpay to repair them, virtualize them, waste them. But the body is the only thing that matters - without it, nothing else happens, and without it in good form, nothing good will happen. And the suffering of the body, the pain broadcast by the body - this is the one thing we know for sure that is shared by every person on the planet. It is the one unimpeachable basis for solidarity - all other options will melt into air.

By "body" here, I mean not just the body that stops at the skin's edge but also the whole material matrix that radiates out from the body, which to me should be arranged to reduce cruelties wherever it can be arranged to do so. We should feel the pains of others - it's the only thing that will ever keep us honest.

# Writing for a Living

(May 2016)

I am now working full-time in a communications department for a major university in New York City. What this means is that I write every day, which, for me, is just great.

When I interviewed for the position, the vice president for development (one of my “clients”), asked me why I would want the job - after all, he said, it’s not very challenging. My answer was straightforward: it’s a job writing. Not arranging someone’s schedule or ordering food for events or arranging travel for a cranky executive, but just writing. At this point in my life, why wouldn’t I want to do the thing I like to do, even if it isn’t high-level and influential?

He was right to ask, though. Much of the writing I do disappears almost as soon as I produce it: the press release, the alumni profile, an account of the graduating seniors’ dinner, the thank-you letter for the president, the email follow-up message for the annual fund appeal letter, the grant proposal (or the report to the granting agency). This is the nature of the job: each day requires a fresh dose of Facebook postings and Twitter feeds and Flickr uploads and blog postings, all of which disappear into the digital heavens and are replaced with new material the following day.

I can understand if someone told me that they would consider this a kind of writing hell, being part of an industrial process churning out content, the AP style guide being the only aesthetic benchmark. And at times it feels exactly industrial - how could it not?

But I have found that turning out good industrial content is not a species of automatic writing. Even though I am writing a press release for a graduation dinner, I still have to struggle to make the narrative flow, to work in the quotes without showing the seams, to find verbs that evoke images, to give the event the aura of importance it has for the people organizing it. In short, I try to tell a story rather than do stenography.

Where I do even more struggling is in solicitation language - the email blast for a donation, the appeal letter, the grant proposal. After all, every Oliver-Twistian plaint for begging for money has been voiced, but every linguistic effort to beg for money has to be fresh and unminted. It has to hew a line between fawning and informative, it has to have a human voice (even though it’s a mass-produced article), it has to tell a full story in one hundred words or fewer, and it can’t be

filled with what Steve Krug calls, in *Don't Make Me Think* (an indispensable book about web design), “happy talk,” inconsequential self-congratulatory nattering. (Think of the “About Us” pages on websites.)

The same challenge comes with writing the gracious thank-you letter for the president, the cover letter for the report, the blog post about some boring lecture. I look first to the verbs - I constantly try to de-Latinate my verbs, going for one- to two-syllable Anglo-Saxon choices, and find verbs that aren't used often, staying away from “provide” and “offer” and “ensure” and “enable” - these are happy talk verbs. I ban adverbs and only sparingly - sparingly - use adjectives, and then only when the adjective adds something worth noticing about the noun. I try for a spare line but not a dry line, more than “just the facts, ma'am” but less than fulsome kowtowing.

So far, I have liked this challenge of working within constraints to produce instrumental prose that is useful if not deathless. I have read discussions about content vs. art that have tried to liken content to the plastic resins injected into molds and extruded as interchangeable products and art as something not-that. But I tend to take a catholic view of what I do. People read what I write (even if they don't know I wrote it - we don't get the byline), it serves a purpose greater (or at least bigger) than myself, the people who like it find me out to tell me, and at the end of the day I have been practicing the thing in life I love to do most (except for perhaps cooking dinner together with the Marvelous María Beatriz).

## Inbox Zero

(June 2016)

**A**t some point in my internet travels, I came across Merlin Mann's "Inbox Zero," a protocol for keeping one's email inbox at, or close to, zero messages. I won't go through the protocol - just search for either "inbox zero" or Merlin Mann to learn it.

I have been practicing it for some time now and recommend it. Before learning about inbox zero, I would occasionally delete everything in my inbox without first going through it, figuring that if anything in the collection were super-crucial, it would surface at some point and I'd deal with it then. That rarely happened, which made me question why I had been holding onto my trove for so long and what the cost to me had been of chaperoning all that useless material.

With inbox zero, I no longer use that scorched earth approach, or at least I scorch the earth in a more systematic manner. When I tell my colleagues what I do, some are jealous that they can't (that is, won't) do it, and others become suspicious of my motives, as if not having 39,000 emails in my inbox (as my cubicle-mate does) indicates a lack of virtue and makes me an email libertine.

Of the many advantages of inbox zero, what I like most is not having the whispers of 39,000 inbox emails in the background all the time. I also appreciate that I can see my inbox more spaciouly when I know that "below the fold" at the bottom of the screen are not hanging years' worth of words and events. Mann suggests that if one must save emails, then have a single folder called "Important" and put them in there and then search through them if needed. Don't make a folder tree and parcel out emails into named depositories - it's a waste of time and effort.

What would it be like to apply inbox zero rules not just to the email inbox but the inbox of one's own memories? In the April 2016 issue of *Wired* is an article by Erica Hayasaki called "In a Perpetual Present." She describes a condition called "severely deficient autobiographical memory." Susie McKinnon, the subject of the article, has no ability to recollect memories from her past or to anticipate anything in the future. It isn't that she's lost the memories of her experience; apparently, she never had them to begin with. For instance, in talking about a trip she and her husband took to the Cayman Islands, she imagines that it must have been hot and that she and her husband did a lot of walking. But it's a guess

on her part - she has no memory of the event and can't generate any feelings about it.

She lacks the ability to create "episodic memory." Episodic memory, as the author writes, "integrates time and sensory details in a cinematic, visceral way," and this is what McKinnon cannot do. Yet she doesn't feel like she's missing out on anything, and her condition does not prevent her from living a full social life. Hayasaki concludes that "while most of us experience life as a story of gain and loss, McKinnon exists always and only in her own denouement. There is no inciting incident. No conflict. And no anxious sense of momentum toward the finale. She achieves effortlessly what some people spend years striving for: She lives entirely in the present."

Or, another way to say it, she lives with inbox zero.

To gain a bit more room in our apartment, the Marvelous María Beatriz and I have been winnowing our belongings, another version of inbox zero. In doing so, I have come across old photos, bills, tax forms, and so on that I have to shred before I can discard. Going through these materials has brought back the episodic memories attached to them, usually accompanied by barbed feelings of regret and shame and, less often, of satisfaction and pleasure. I have to say that I don't really like these intrusions of memory - I don't find them comforting, and they only make me want to get through the shredding faster. How much more pleasant, at least for me, it would be to have a deficient autobiographical memory so that I could look upon this past evidence of a life as if it were something I found in a flea market about which I could be both indifferent and amused.

Inbox zero would not be a bad way to go. Obviously, Susie McKinnon has a life that she enjoys, and as one of the researchers who examined her said, "It raises fairly large questions, [one of which is] 'What exactly does recollection do for us?'" Good question, I say. Good question.

# Genie Out of the Bottle

(July 2016)

**T**he “genie” in the phrase “you can’t put the genie back into the bottle” usually points to something we don’t want to happen but feel powerless to stop once history has freed the genie from the walls of its bottle. Loosed upon the world, the genie puts peace, sanity, and health at risk.

The genie gets rapped as bad because its coming-out usually threatens the power of the makers and keepers of the conventional wisdom to make and keep the conventional wisdom that gives them their power to make...and so on and so on. A loose genie smashes that roundelay, and while the makers/keepers don’t like that outcome, for the rest of us, this is to the good, because a genie out of the bottle is the only way we can start getting the liberation we deserve and crave.

I imagine the genie chanting Silicon Valley’s mantra of “move fast and break things” as it goes about its business. Or being “disruptive” in the way that information now melts the ligaments of the old order so that it must slink to its grave. The genie as solvent to conformist nostalgia and, at the same time, the sharp point of it, if nostalgia taken in its original meaning as the pain caused by wanting a home. Wanting a home is what the genie can cure us of, the achy-breaky hankering for a final vocabulary to tie off all our dreads, the lullaby rung on our bones by our aging, the pathetic hope that art will comfort, that ethics will light our path, that we are anything grander than the nervous, over-eating, self-inflicting animals that we are. Thanks to the genie, we can depend on nothing being dependable and that we will be one of the things broken by life moving fast.

I like this genie. I like this genie very much.

But I also think about the bottle. I think of Jimmy Tingle’s “Beer Poem” and his lush ode to alcohol. I think about the bottle and how we no longer have an untrashed language to speak about drugs and ecstasy and liberation and how the body has been turned into a bottle to bottle the imagination and how we curate this body so that we can live longer lives but in curated fashions, devaluing decadence, trading dissolution for the graded and leveled path, measured breathing the puritan split ends of the bell curve of suffocation.

No wonder the genie wants out.



We should all live as if we are genies released from bottles. We should move fast and break things, then move slow and patch things so that we can break things again. Some might argue that there is quite enough breakage, thank you very much, and that many in the world could do with some of that Jewish tikkun olam, the repairing of the world, so that they could cop a rest from the fuckery practiced against the powerless and de-voiced. Agreed – to a point.

And what if the genie is Trump? Well, so what?

Trump (not the person, because who knows that creature, but the actor playing the role) moves fast and breaks things, and it is amusing to watch the dudgeon, low and high, that people froth themselves into as he skins their sacred cows and dries them out for jerky. He is rightly deemed a maniac, but that's never disqualified anyone for success in America, so "maniac" can't be the slur that will trip him up (was that not the full intention of Hillary's "foreign policy" rantricide?) Like circular breathing, such attacks just give Trump more oxygen.

Some media machers dub him our Id so that they can look like the rational adults in the room, but they do that only to deflect attention away from their own Id, called the conventional wisdom, their sedative words steeped in a slurry of genteel violence (is that not what income inequality is?) and a brutish fear of the Other and then maquillaged with respectability and delivered on the news networks.

Sanders' genie tries to do the same thing, but Sanders has not Trump's gene for craziness. He is afflicted with earnestness, and while his breakage is the kind that calls for collective repairs after the bull has left the china shop, it won't have enough traction to put him in power. Most Americans may say they want the good Christian boy who graduates cum laude, but they really want the bad boy (and it usually is a boy).

If the genies on the loose now can crack up our American sclerosis, I am all for it. I don't want to defang them with calls for non-violence and tolerance for differing ideas and etiquette before truth. Liberation is not clean-edged, and creative destruction does not respect reason. This is the time of our shock therapy, to use Naomi Klein's phrase, that will strip away our masks and produce the fright that may (may) make it possible to see straight.

And if it doesn't? I think the grand noble experiment that is the United States is over. We will have experimented ourselves into oligarchy and

repression, warmongering and penury, into a gated community for the haves and a reservation for the never-will-haves, with a murky in-the-middle class with enough money for some consumption as they sing Jim Morrison's "Cancel my subscription to the Resurrection."

We will have what Lewis Lapham called a "participatory fascism." For the most part, a mix of Aldous Huxley and George Orwell will suffice to keep the existing order unbroken. For those that actively resist, the state will smash them, as usual, whether with the police (Occupy Wall Street) or with debt (Greece). That state will also keep all of its surveillance apparatus intact (*sub rosa*, of course) and build out the public surveillance apparatus known as social media and the internet, both as a way to gather more information and to blunt resistive thinking (what is this structure but Huxley's feelies spread global?). At the lower levels, the state will allow much to happen that give people a false sense of safety and community: Little League, parades, and so on. Elections will be even more stage-managed than they are now and may even dispense with things like primaries, with the parties going back to naming the candidates themselves - cleaner, leaner, and less crazy-making for all of us.

Put the genie back into the bottle? The genie is our only way out of this coming mess.



## Watson Heston

(August 2016)

**W**atson Heston was a renowned editorial cartoonist who peaked in popularity in the late 19th century, during the Populist political movement and what Susan Jacoby, in her book *Freethinkers: A History of American Secularism* called “the Golden Age of freethought.” Born in 1846 in Ohio, he lived most of his adult life in Carthage, Missouri, where he died in 1905, survived by his wife Lottie.

He published most of his work in D.M. Bennett’s *The Truth Seeker* as well as in many regional freethought papers, such as Etta Semple’s *Free-Thought Ideal* in Kansas.

Not much is known about him. Along with cartooning he also did painting and photography, but no samples of either seem to exist (at least according to the diligent archivists at the Powers Museum in Carthage). He died in ill health, having to solicit money because of his poverty (readers of *The Truth Seeker* also took up a collection for him).

He seems also to have been a bit irascible in his temperament. In the obituary published in *The Truth Seeker*, the writer states that he was “a genial and companionable man, an able writer as well as artist, and a poet of considerable merit” but also noted that he was not open to criticism about his drawing style, it being “his misfortune not to be docile under instruction.” The editor even went so far as to take him to New York for art instruction, “but the venture was not a gratifying success, and the ‘coarseness’ of his work, of which many readers complained, was not modified.” (More on his style in a moment.)

But despite these “shortcomings” (apparently, Heston did not see them as such - as the obit writer said, “he was satisfied with the degree of skill he possessed, and seemed to regard attempt at improvement a waste of strength and time”), the writer couldn’t help but acknowledge that “his work was unique [and that] what he did was never so successfully attempted by any other man.” Unfortunately, swimming against the current of the country’s obsessions with religion, empire, and capitalism may have brought him some fame, but it did not bring him fortune.

He published three books in his life, *The Old Testament Comically Illustrated* (1892) and *The New Testament Comically Illustrated* (1898) as well as *The freethinkers’ pictorial text-book: showing the absurdity and untruthfulness of*

*the Church's claim to be a divine and beneficent institution and revealing the abuses of a union of church and state* (1896), a critique of the involvement of religious clergy in politics, calling for strict separation of church and state. None of these had great sales, though it was estimated that *The Bible Comically Illustrated* published in 1900 by Truth Seeker Company sold 10,000 copies (some of which pop-up occasionally on eBay and similar sites).

Watson did try to promote his work through advertisements in publications. In one, “the well known cartoonist and artist makes fine portraits,” and in another, an advert for the *Text-book* states that the book “contains two-hundred full-page illustrations, any one of which would throw an orthodox clergyman or a Catholic priest into spasms...” But it seems that he never did have much luck in these ventures. Even *The Truth Seeker*, after working with him for a dozen years, discontinued the cartoons “on account of the expense of producing them, and because, though praised, they brought no returns corresponding with their cost.”

To be sure, he has a “rough” style, though, as with any of these aesthetic terms, the adjective says more about the speaker than the object. He crams a lot into his frame, and it takes some time to parse what he lampoons (most of which will not be readily familiar since nothing dates quite as quickly as political squabbles).

But it's not hard to get his overall attitude to his subject matter, especially when it came to religion. He was a Thomas Paine man through and through, and he not only detested what he saw as the superstitions at the heart of every religion but also the way these religions, especially the Catholic Church, wanted to impose their belief systems on others and get government subsidies as well. (Many of his illustrations concern the fight over Catholic parochial schools.) He bombarded what he saw as hypocrisy and venality.

He also seemed to get a kick out of punching holes in the Bible's claims of authority, primarily by doing nothing more illustrating the literalness of the text. If 2 Kings 2:23, 24 says that Elisha sat and watched two female bears rip apart 42 children, then that's what he drew. The absurdity of the tales requires no more commentary than showing it fully drawn out.

I think it is time to bring Watson back. We could use his editorial irritability, his impatience with all forms of theological thought (be they religious or political), his belief that reason has curative powers. This is why I'm working on a project

to gather his work together and get it up on web. If any reader has any leads on him and his work, please get in touch with me. [1]

In the meantime, as a starter, look up his too-short entry in Wikipedia and you'll see what I mean.

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[1] <https://watsonheston.com>



# Why I Love My Wife

(September 2016)

In many of my Scene4 essays, I mention the beneficial influence of the Marvelous María Beatriz, my lovely wife. She's the one who reminds me to be a human being, to focus on the light rather than the murk, and who retains the gift of wonder when, as a social work director at a major children's hospital, it comes to dealing illness and grief and suffering. She is a truly remarkable person.

For eleven years, she lived and worked in her native Argentina as a nun in the Catholic Church. She did this during the time of El Proceso, the Dirty War, and while the Church afforded some protection against the depredations of the junta, it was still a dangerous time for anyone who, like her, believed in liberation theology and who worked among the poor in the wastes of Patagonia or in the mountains of Córdoba. She worked with sheep herders to form economic cooperatives and with disaffected young men and women who saw little future for themselves in the generals' paradise. Even before her stint as a bride of Christ, she had entered the shanty towns in metropolitan Buenos Aires (which are still there today) to do what work she could to save people from immiseration and hopelessness.

What I have half-jokingly called her "nunness" is threaded throughout her being - wearing the veil is not truly necessary to declare the workings of her spirit. For the MMB, the veil is also her corporate closed-toes shoes in the hospital or, as in her latest work, the dress she wore for her naming ceremony in a small village in The Gambia (more on that in a moment). It is the outward sign of the inward grace.

She eventually left the church (I wish I could say it was her love for me that flipped her, but that wasn't the case). She left in part because the Church and her Catholic values parted company, the former's sclerotic conservatism in direct opposition to her values of mercy and forgiveness. She also left because, as a 31-year-old woman (she had entered the order at the age of 20), she had a strong self-knowledge of her spiritual identity but less self-knowledge about herself as a woman living in the modern world subject to the draws of the flesh and the lures of modernity.

She managed to come to the United States on a religious visa, and for several years did odd jobs to keep body and soul together. Eventually, she



graduated with an MSW from Boston University, figuring that social work was the vocation closest to what she had been doing before, and since 1997 has steadily worked her way north in terms of increasing her scope of responsibilities and knowledge, currently working as a director of social work and patient care coordination at the Morgan Stanley Children's Hospital of New York, which is part of the omnivorously expansive New York Presbyterian/Columbia University Medical Center.

We met in 1998 in a situation where, if there had been a 15-second delay, our paths would never have crossed. Two years later we married in the United States, with another marriage in Argentina a year later for the South American crowd. I can say without irony or false modesty that marrying her is the best choice I have made in my life. The journey with her up to the day this is being written has been chock-full of love and adventure and satisfaction.

Her latest enterprise is working with a non-profit organization located in The Gambia, West Africa, called Starfish International. Founded by Mam-Yassin Sarr in 2006, Starfish works to give Gambian girls the chance to grow up to be women capable of economic independence and imbued with an ethic of giving back. María Beatriz met Yassin through connections at the hospital, and for ten days this August, she and several fellow employees along with two theater professionals have been using Augusto Boal's Theater of the Oppressed to help the girls create portable theater performances about domestic abuse that they will perform in other locations in the country.

This is what I love about what she is doing. One of the things she found in the Church, at least for a time, was community, people engaged in a common endeavor to make life better for people whose lives needed improvement and, in the process, refine one's own spiritual nature towards more compassion and action. She has missed this for years, not being able to find a community that feeds her soul in the right way.

Starfish has become the community she has sought. Gambian culture is a culture of hospitality and sharing, of celebration and ceremony, and she feels that the work she can do there, even if limited in time and scope, is work worth doing, something that she not does always feel when she tells me the daily stories of the infighting and politicking going on in the hospital.

This is what I love about her and why I will continue to love her forever. She has a wide heart and a sharp mind, an expansive compassion allied with well-thought-through strategies. She can feel, but she can also do. I've seen this in

action as I've watched her solve problems brought to her by her staff, the ability to deploy this while telling them to do that and how to follow-up properly when "that" and "this" are done, all rolled out with the confidence that comes from long-practiced expertise.

I love the spirit of her spirit, I love that she still believes in spirit, in soul, in powers that guide us if we open ourselves to them, that she believes that things happen for a (good) reason and moves forward as if that were the true case of things. I love that she loves her wine and her food (being of strong Italian background, how could she not?), that she launches herself into hobbies that square with her spirit (weaving, jewelry-making, cake decorating), even if that means finding more storage space for supplies and machines, that she loves to dance even with her quirky sense of rhythm and sing with her deep tango voice. She has presence, she is present, she can be prescient - who could not love a person like this?

We live on the second floor of a house, and a short while ago, she took a tumble down the stairs to the front door - a result of work stress, over-hurrying, and a heel catching on the step runner. Luckily, nothing more than a scrape on her right shin and a moment of fright. Dust her off, and away she went.

But the incident shook me. I could not stop thinking about what could have happened - after all, she's not a trained stuntman, and there are any number of bones that could've been snapped and gruesome injuries sustained. I could not stop thinking about what it would have been like to lose her. The thought was terrifying, the imagined loss was horrible. The barbed feeling eventually dulled, but it has not gone away, and it keeps me attentive to her so that I don't lose sight of her in the midst of my own moodiness and scrabbling.

I know at some point that the loss will come (for both of us), and when it comes, I want a better curation of the event so that the going-away is gentle and sad and sufferable. But in the meantime, I have the gift of her in my life, a gift that really does keep on giving, a gift that I will keep receiving with great thankfulness, like water to a thirsty man.



## “An Earnest Christian” By Watson Heston

(October 2016)

Over the past few months, I’ve been making progress on compiling the work of the late-19th-century political cartoonist Watson Heston, about whom I’ve written in Scene4.

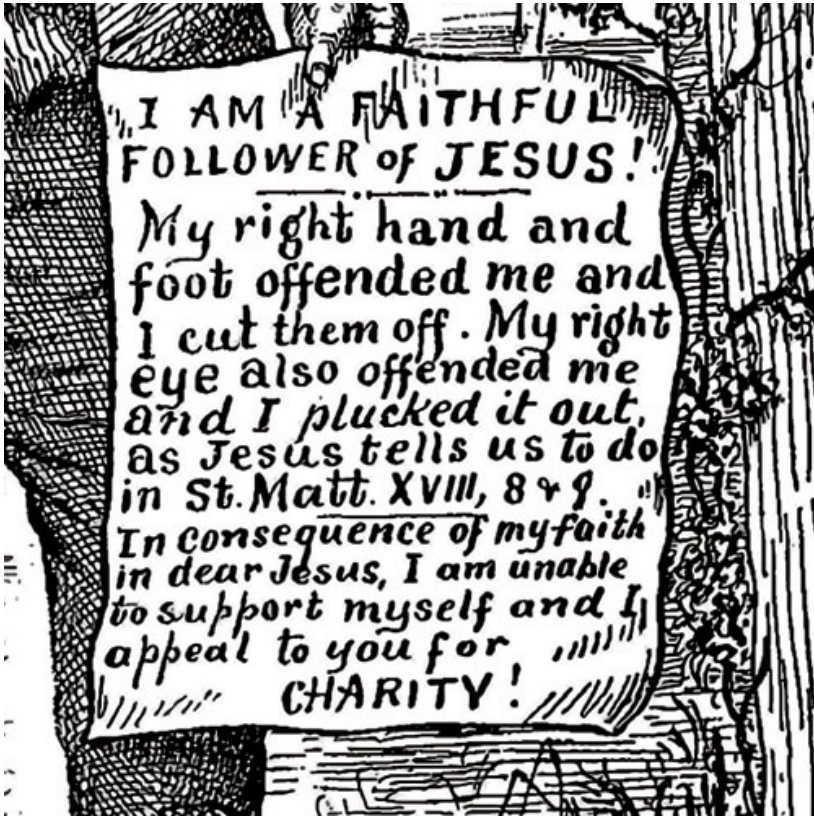
I want to show just one example of how he skewered the religious orthodoxy of his day, a theme that makes up a great deal of his output. The picture is “An Earnest Christian,” which appeared in the January 15, 1887, issue of *The Truth Seeker*.

Many of Heston’s cartoons lampooning religion used a very simple tactic: he took the words of the Bible literally.



AN EARNEST CHRISTIAN.

Let's take a look at what Heston is doing in this rather dense piece of art. First, there's the Bible verse he's referencing, a true manifesto of self-mutilation.

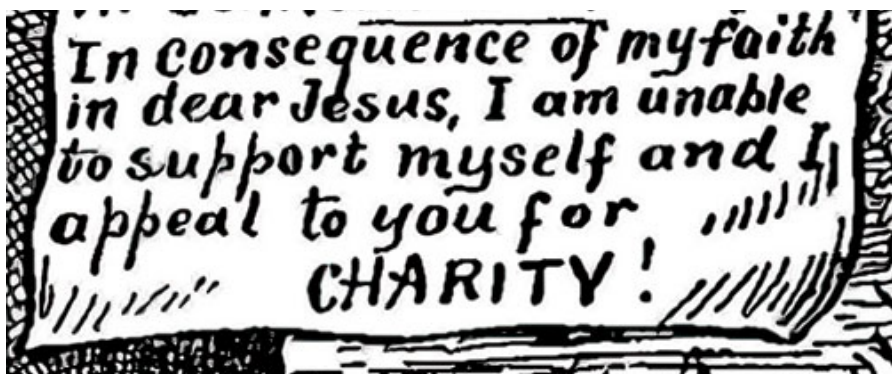


Then he shows us the result of the believer's handiwork:



And the irony of following his faith - poverty and begging:





Just to nail the message home, in case the viewer didn't get it the first time around, the two road signs undercut the message by overstating the irony.



The reference to Talmage and Jones carries another level of sarcasm. Thomas DeWitt Talmage, a popular preacher, was also called a “pulpit clown.” Samuel Porter Jones was known for preaching “Just quit your meanness and follow along in the footsteps of Jesus Christ.” Not the most trustworthy of guides along the spiritual path.

It is a densely built cartoon but easy to understand: Believe in the Bible literally, as many people do, and it can lead you into all manner of folly.

Come to [www.watsonheston.com](http://www.watsonheston.com) for more. I’ve got a Flickr page going for him, and I’m resurrecting his publication, *The Freethinkers’ Pictorial Text-Book*, a compendium of over 200 pictures with associated quotes about the follies and dangers of thought that is not free.

## The Death of a Fish

(November 2016)

On the one hand, he was just a betta fish – *Betta splendens*, to be exact – something that caught the eye of the Marvelous María Beatriz as she was out buying food for the cats at Petsmart. She came in with all the trappings – tank, pump, light, heater, bloodworms, and the fish (which she named Inigo Montoya) – and she set him up in the living room where he entertained us with his teal-colored flow through the water.

A few days in, he was attacked by a fungus that swaddled his body and sucked the life out of him. He lay on the bottom of the tank, the pulse of his gill flaps the only indication that he was alive. We tried various remedies, but nothing helped.

We decided to put him out of his misery – and this is where the story shifts to “on the other hand.”

The method we chose was one suggested as the most humane. We put him in a container of water and placed that container in a bowl of crushed ice. His water would eventually get colder, dropping his body temperature until he passed away.

We kept vigil. It didn’t take long. As the water chilled, the undulations of his gills became slower and slower until they just stopped.

We were both a little stunned by what we had witnessed. Not to say humbled and a touch frightened. We had just watched life pass out of a living creature. Whatever “life” is, it was now gone. It had ebbed away. As it would be for us at some unknown point in the future. As it would be for everything around us, right down to the decay of quarks. This made us very quiet inside.

But because living goes on, and we had to get to bed because we had work the next day, we put Inigo’s body in a baggie and into the freezer so that we could dispose of it in a dignified way when we had time on the weekend (life gets so busy during the week!) and not just dump it into the trash. Even if it was for just a short time, we living creatures had been in commune with each other, and it feeds the health of our spirits to treat that time with respect and compassion, and pay it due homage.

The pump is still burbling. We will get a new resident – on the weekend, when there is time – and make sure that the tank is clean clean clean and the



water well-prepared and pH-balanced and a vial of anti-fungal medicine on hand just in case.

His gift to us, if it can be called that, was to get us to stop and pay attention – to him and his suffering, to the passing of time as it passes us by, to the need to stop bulling our way through life with scarcely a glance to the right or to the left. For that, he deserves a proper farewell – which we will get to just as soon as time permits. But we will get to it.

# What Is It That They Think They're Rebelling Against?

(December 2016)

I've been reading through post-election musings about why Trump voters voted for Trump (like Chris Bodenner's profile of a Trump voter in the *Atlantic*, "I Voted for the Middle Finger, for the Wrecking Ball," or "Revenge of the Forgotten Class" on *Pro Publica*), and much of it focuses on how a rank of forgotten Americans (often abbreviated as "white, male, working class") banded together to topple the Washington élites in service to a mission: bringing back an America that existed for about a decade after the end of World War II, an America that was male- and white-ascendant and industrial, dominant in the global marketplace and militarily superior – the "exceptional America" when people refer to American exceptionalism.

What I've taken away from my reading is that these "explanations," as earnest as they are, can't explain the motivations of the Trump voter because those motivations seem to be a yarn-tangle of real facts and faux facts, intestinal feelings, peeves verging into angers, confusions and misdirections, and deep visceral worries (justified or not). The writers clearly believe that if "we" (meaning those outside this cohort) can understand their aggrievements, then "we" can craft solutions for their vexations. If their vexations can be soothed, America will have taken a big step toward getting back on the right path.

But two things are clear from these analyses. First, there are no solutions to their vexations, or at least most of them. The middle-class-making industrial jobs of the 1950s are gone forever and will not be coming back. The country will not be majority white for much longer, and the United States, the nation of immigrants, will continue to be a nation of immigrants. Gender will continue becoming more fluid, abortions will still be performed, black and brown people will not stop protesting against racism, income inequality will make class mobility even more impossible than it is today, and millions of workers may simply become superfluous in the future economy.

Both political parties have no clue about how to craft a policy response to the changing world in which they find themselves. Or, to be more accurate, there are plenty of solutions on the shelf to address the tectonic shifts taking place, but neither political party's structure is designed to incorporate these ideas and

champion them as policy, and neither party is prepared to lead the effort of re-designing American society to meet the historical changes it faces.

Second, Trump's rise should not have been a surprise because we've seen this story before, the "story" being the way American citizens have been bamboozled into voting against their own economic and social interests. Thomas Frank documented it well in *What's the Matter with Kansas?* and *The Wrecking Crew*, but he's far from the only writer who has picked apart how the Republican Party has used culture wars, voter suppression, nostalgia, gerrymandering, and pure obstinance to maintain its power.

The conservative agenda that the Trump voters will get from Trump will not be the one for which they voted, if only because Trump can't do much of what he said he would do (deport 11 million people, build a wall for which Mexico will pay, repeal trade deals and impose tariffs, take away health insurance from millions of people) and because of the internal bickering within his own party: it is not settled as to what constitutes "genuine" conservatism, and governance will grind to a halt as the fiscal hawks, culture warriors and moderates (yes, they do exist in the party) battle this out.

But if a consolidated conservative agenda does emerge, it will not be premised on curing the ills that the Trump voters believe afflict them. It will be premised on elimination, abandonment, and punishment.

Think about what that conservative agenda will include, based on what its advocates have said:

- public assistance at all levels is swapped out for block grants and vouchers (or even just eliminated)
- public insurance (Social Security et. al.) is handed over to the tender mercies of the financial markets
- paying for health care becomes a purely personal matter (HSAs, Medicare/Medicaid privatized/voucherized or eliminated)
- military power is extended and the "war on terror" made endless
- the tax code is reduced to a flat tax
- infrastructure reform is either delayed or privatized (e.g., toll roads built by Bechtel, Chicago's 75-year lease of its parking meter revenues to Morgan Stanley)
- protective regulations are repealed (EPA, consumer protection)

- net neutrality is overturned
- Dodd-Frank is rescinded
- deportations go back up to Obama levels and higher
- the media are neutralized (libel laws, continued economic decline of the industry)
- public (or collective) space is reduced toward zero
- the courts become places where most people will not have their day (public defenders defunded, arbitration agreements imposed in contracts, and so on)
- corporations will be accorded even more people-like rights

I'm exhausted, and there's still so much more!!

The Trump voters bought themselves a pig in a poke, just as the silent majority bought one with Nixon and the "morning in America"-hoppers bought one with Reagan and the evangelicals bought one with Bush II. They will soon find out the value of what they have purchased – the 2018 elections will tell that tale.

Enough.

I hope this breast-beating about the white working class stops soon because it is an analytical dead-end in the light of the emancipatory politics America needs.

This is the speech I wish Hillary had given after her gaffe(?) in September about Trump voters and "deplorables." What she should have said to the white working class is this:

I'm sorry I called some of you deplorables – things can get out of hand during a hard-fought election like this, and I shouldn't have said it. Here is what I should have said: It's the system that's deplorable. I'll go one step further: it's deplorable for a lot of people, not just you. It's deplorable for a lot of people who you think you don't have a connection to but you do: poor single working mothers, immigrants workers paying taxes but having to hide in the shadows, people who somehow don't fit into the definition of "normal" but who are good, decent people nonetheless. If you want to make America great, then you should link up with these people so that everyone who is getting screwed by this system

an work arm-in-arm to turn the deplorable situation into a situation where ordinary people can be on the winning side.

I'm not crazy for saying this. It's part of your own history. One hundred and twenty years ago, people like you banded together to change the system. Urban workers, rural farmers, women, black people, immigrants – they formed the People's Party, also known as the Populist Party, and it shook things up. The labor movement that many Republicans so hate fought and died for things like you not having to work seven days a week and being killed on the job. The civil rights movement fought for justice, not just for black people but for poor people – and that includes you. And so much more history I could tell that would show you that when ordinary people work together and don't believe the élites scare-mongering them about race and migration and religion and "the death of Western civilization," they can accomplish great things.

And I have to be honest with you, and you know what I'm saying is true, even if you're shouting something else: we can't get the great days of post-World War II America back again. The factories aren't coming back. Coal mining isn't coming back again. Climate change is not going to stop. Black people and gay people and women are not going to give up the gains they've made, at a cost of life and limb. America is not going to be the sole leader of the world again. Change is going to continue, and it's going to be strange and confusing because change is always going to be strange and confusing. We live in troubled times, but we have to be adult enough to accept that and smart enough to apply the collective intelligence we have as Americans to make sure the changes bring prosperity and safety to everyone.

I can understand your pain. But yours isn't the only pain. You want people to listen to you? You should be listened to. But you have to listen to the other people as well. It has to go both ways. Like Benjamin Franklin said when facing the might of the British empire: "We must, indeed, all hang together or, most assuredly, we shall all hang separately."

I prefer that we all hang together and share with each other what Abraham Lincoln called "the better angels of our nature." To Police

**2015**



## To Police

(January 2015)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



of the police to support that right and allow people to march and speak or is it their duty to break up the protest in the name of “security” (often a proxy term for protecting property)?

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

And so on and so on.

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

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

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

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

When the people march in protest of this or that, the police’s job is to channel the protests in a prescribed manner and anyone who strays outside the lines will be restrained and arrested. This can be done much less brutally and

cynically than the way the NYPD does it, but it would be a difference of degree, not kind. It is not their job to make sure constitutional rights are protected but to enforce public order, and this would be broadcast far and wide so that the people protesting know that the police officers will not be their friends.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

# Our Tolerated Addicts

(February 2015)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

smoking. In other words, smokers may spend \$14.50 in New York for that pack, but the society pays \$18.05 to take care of them as they destroy, and when they've destroyed, their bodies.

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

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

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

## Je Suis Charlie: Why?

(March 2015)

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

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

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

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

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

To me, the writers at *Charlie Hebdo* were poseurs, if not hypocrites (just as with *Jyllands-Posten* in 2005 with their defamatory cartoons of Mohammed). They wanted the glory and profit of being provocateurs but did not want to take responsibility for any blowback.

But isn’t provoking blowback the whole point of the insult? If you don’t get blowback, then why perform the insult? And while in a liberal regime the blowback is supposed to be choreographed by the “remedy of more speech” so that no one dies, who says anyone gets to define what constitutes the “right” blowback?

In a skewed way, the massacre honored the insulters and their right to blaspheme: something they did triggered an actual effect in the actual world and was not just mouth-music and posing done on a periodic basis for a paying audience. The exercise of the right had consequence: what more can any artist hope for?

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

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

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

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

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

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

# Torture

(April 2015)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



# Viral

(May 2015)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

# To Clothe Their Nakedness

(June 2015)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



# The Seasonal Art of the Thunderstorm

(August 2015)

I've never been in a hurricane or a tsunami or a typhoon or a tornado, nothing so violent and grand as that. Thunderstorms are the closest I've been to the unrestraint of nature, but it was a safe seat for the most part.

One night in late June 2015 (actually it was 2 a.m.) I heard the unmistakable grumbings of thunder. I got up and went outside. No one else was up that I could see, except for the occasional car. The air was still, yet not dead, not dead like the humid corpse that had lain across our nostrils all day. More tensile, like the diaphragm of an ear. Haze hung in the air, not-quite fog, a scrim; shadows from the streetlights fuzzed off into darkness instead of being sharply etched areas. The sulfur glow of the mercury lamps, the tenseness in the air, the dim uncertainty made the air thick yet vibrant.

The sky to the east was smooth onyx, with a gravity all its own, as if by its mass and grandness it would pull everything into itself, destroying and erasing.

The thunder was still far off, the lightning diffuse. The evening before we drove home from a long day trip into the embrace of a thunderstorm. As we sped down the highway, imperceptibly inching forward in the darkness, we watched the dendritic rips of the lightning in the clouds. At one moment there was unmarked blackness, thunderhead on thunderhead piling up for 40,000 feet. Then in a time quicker than it takes to say "Look at that!" a savage rend in the darkness, a coronal glow surrounding the sharp rational conclusion of a lightning stroke as it tied earth to sky with electric blood. Then darkness again. We watched this for fifty miles, watching a nature thoroughly indifferent to our watching.

Now, standing just outside the safety of the door, the wind full of the tang of ozone, I watched the storm gather to its omega point. The leaves, like a chorus, susurrated. The branches swung in idle semaphore; the electric wires and telephone lines whined in aeolian dissonance. Thunder followed on lightning overlapping. And then the storm, spreading its vast wings like Mahler, took possession.

And then the rain. The rain of a thunderstorm has an urgency no other rain has. Driven, jousting, it erases as it also scores, erases by etching, changing the complexion of its winnowing floor, washing chaff and wheat indiscriminately into the grave.

Standing, letting the water stream down my face and body, pierced by its sudden unsummers coldness, my body drinking down the clarity of its single-mindedness like corn anxious to grow in the night, I suddenly, for a moment, meld into this storm. I become nothing more than rain or wind or the sullen darkness unraveled by the lightning's logic. I am a conduit for this storm's energy, a storm rod conducting a lost vitality to withered roots and socialized deadness. For a moment my mind no longer is an inquisitive burrowing animal; for a moment my helplessness in the face of death is denied; for a moment I am placed and succulent; for a moment I am what poetry cannot describe.

And then I feel the chill of wet clothes: practicality catapults me out of what I had been drawn into it. What I would wish permanently, what peace I would want without the strain of work or ignorance, is suddenly denied me by the passing of time, by nerves reacting to cold, by a thousand mundane details that again take up their stations after having been, momentarily, forced to resign the field.

But for a moment. Such peace is rare - there is a certain forgetting we must learn to do to achieve it. It is not an easy forgetting because it means erasing the self we have been taught to construct, that house of cards we call our ego. It means risking quietness, suing for peace, letting go in order to hold on even more strongly. The truths of life are usually contradictory, two dictions speaking against each other, each equally right, each equally incompatible with the other. (I am a Pisces, after all.) Peace comes with the unity of the contradictions, with seeing the unity that binds the separateness yet does not violate the separateness and keeps each thing distinct and integral. For a moment I was a creature unified, and it is a moment that keeps me looking at the horizon, waiting for the dark grey annunciation of another storm.

# The Thing About Vacations

(September 2015)

Over Christmas and New Year's in 2014 I was in Argentina with the Marvelous María Beatriz visiting family. As always, traveling is a mixed effort for me, since I enjoy the comforts of being planted yet also like disrupting the usual. Once I'm out, I'm okay – getting me out can take a bit of effort.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The question slid to the side for a little while, but then María Celia brought it up again, and she said that for her it's all about creating a world of love, and I added in that I agreed, which leads us to the strange questions of what would a politics of love look like, an economics of love look like. A little more conversation about this, then some lightness with more champagne, and the group photo, and the afternoon was done.

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

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





# On Skin Lesions, Geezers, and Hummingbird Wings

(October 2015)

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

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

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

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

I am sure he will find others at other sessions.

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

Then there is the body in the backless paper gown offered to me by the sympathetic/efficient nurse. This body, as Spanish would say, has 62 years,

and the architecture begins to slide. I am certainly in better shape (both as in fitness and as an actual shape) than many of my same-aged colleagues, and if “62 years” has the timbre of agedness to it, I don’t hear it since my self-awareness does not sound aged to myself. So this disjunct between the body in the backless gown with skin lesions – in other words, finite and friable – and the present-tenseness of a life living itself out as if the living out could and should go on forever.

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

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

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

Quite the opposite.

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

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

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

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



## Hannah and Bill

(November 2015)

**T**his is a sad story of a married couple laid low by disease.

Bill, a former Air Force veteran, came down with (proper term?) Parkinson's. (From what Hannah says, it took up residence 20 years ago but accelerated during the last five years.) The affliction has deleted his ability to command his body. He can walk, and Pavel, his nurse (this Russian man about whom I know very little), takes him out each day, weather permitting. But he drools (he cannot time his swallowing with his saliva build-up, something we "normals" take for-granted), is incontinent, and cannot speak at a normal conversational speed. (When he does speak, he can be vocally clear, but he can't project — I've been at the house when Hannah has had people over, and the conversation is going in multiple directions, and all he can do is try to follow along since to participate would mean for everyone to stop and wait while he forced out his words.) I don't know what has been done for him medically — there is so much research going on these days about conditions like this, I've wondered if there is some experimental protocol in which he could be involved. How could it hurt?

His condition has worn Hannah down. I can only imagine the mix of love and hate that must be in her as she is linked to this condition in her life until the day he dies. (His iteration of the disease is debilitating but apparently not deadly.) She presents a very American bourgeois persona, steeped in modesty about behavior and language, hanging out the flag on July 4, historically nostalgic (her family name is well-known), principled (from her religious faith) and believing that principles form character, capitalist champion (she always chides me about being Karl Marx). Her politics are pretty conservative vanilla, not surprisingly. She is, or wants to be, in a word, genteel.

Hannah's situation is one of those situations in life where reality will not give way to optimism or "goodness" (i.e., why do bad things happen to good people?) or magical thinking — it is a burden to be carried until Bill dies. (After he dies is another burden but easier — grieving can be done at one's own speed.) I suppose one can extract positives out of this hard case — to look on the bright side, enjoy the person to whom you pledged love for as long as you have him around, feel virtuous for continuing take the hard rather than the easier road (e.g., nursing home). But the make-believe takes its toll: I have often seen Hannah distraught

and weepy, resigned, resentful, angry. She has told me that Bill has said to her things that indicate that he knows he's a burden and that it might be better for all concerned if he weren't around. Of course she can't accept that — but I'd be surprised if the thought hadn't crossed her mind.

And for him, what's the great prize of staying alive with no possibility of being paroled from his condition? The habit of staying alive is built strong, but it can be overcome. And, to me at least, it is a humane and compassionate thing to acknowledge that the choice to opt out is a live option. It honors his integrity and desire for dignity and should not be ruled out of bounds. (An unyielding respect for life that does not allow for humane choices to leave it is a kind of cruelty, condemning a person to live in order to make a sure a principle is not violated — as if a principle were more important and substantial than the suffering body of a human being.) Suffering is never ennobling or admirable.

What would I do if I had a similar situation with the Marvelous María Beatriz? I would do the same as Hannah — committed to her for life, I would be committed to her for her life, for whatever it would take to make her comfortable and well-served. If one were ruthless, there could be other choices (if one is ruthless, there are always other choices); but if one is “ruth” (or ruthless), then one has pity and compassion and so must make the right choice. If the situation were reversed, and I were Bill, I'd go for the assisted suicide. Life is not so precious to me that it warrants enduring such suffering and embarrassment. At that point, my body having failed me, it's time to move on to the next round, whatever it is.

I wrote a play in which a doctor helps people end their lives. His name for what he does: not “assisted suicide” but “dignicide.” The going-out from life should always be a dignicide, as graceful an exit as our frailty allows - chosen, smooth, simple, sans pain and fear. That is what I wish for Bill, and for all of us.

# Stints

(December 2015)

I just finished a stint with the Episcopalians. It didn't work out, but for the time I was there, I had a front-pew seat on "high church" practices - the big show, as one of my colleagues called it, and indeed it was, with incense and choirs and a pile-driving organ and a veritable corps de ballet in the chancel moving this way and that according to patterns I couldn't really suss out but which got everyone where they needed to go without collision or confusion.

I know I could have gotten explanations of the movements and structures, but I'm sure they would not have given me the Episcopalian feel. It reminded me of when I tried to explain baseball's rules to the Marvelous María Beatriz. As I waded in deeper, and her look of confusion grew confused, I realized I was just spouting nonsense. To an outsider, a sport's rules, like a religion's rules, come across as both arbitrary and dreamlike, sequences that appear sensical but, when laid out end to end, turn out to be compositions of made-up stuff lumped together, more entertainment than enlightenment.

And then I hear a radio program on the subject of "quiet" (I know, ironic - but it was a Sunday morning as I sat in my kitchen drinking coffee and listening, so the time and place had a tint of quiet to it, so not completely ironic). One story featured a man who chose not to speak for 17 years. Which made me think of the liturgical choreography: what if everyone just shut up for a year and stopped trying to make the made-up stuff seem more important and more mega than it really was? How many lives might be saved, not only from violence but also from the boredom that comes from listening to it all? How many of us might become low-church Quakers speaking up only when something really needed to be said, and even then perhaps hesitating because how is one to know that the something to be said is really needed and maybe it shows a better respect to just shut up and listen to the silence of each other's presence?

The Episcopalians use so many words - readings for this and that at all the services, all gatherings started with prayers, booklets for every ceremony, institutes and "conversations" and meetings meetings meetings. After a while, it becomes a Tower of Babel made up of babble, syllables reaching skyward mortared together by the anxious hope that all this talk, driven by such good intentions, will - must - change the world for the better.



I made a statement at a meeting that the Episcopalians reminded me of the Unitarians, who would rather talk about heaven than actually get there. I was assured that the Es were not at all like the UUs. Could've fooled me. They seem equally ineffectual in changing the world and proud of all their trying.

What's my point in all of this? We seem to be able to talk ourselves into rage and violence but can't talk ourselves into peace and compassion. And those games whose rules require the players to speak of peace and compassion can't seem to turn the tide. Maybe the whole species should just take a vow of silence for a year, go into hibernation, and let the world catch a rest from all our games, our rules, and our Babel-building. Who knows? Like the man who didn't talk for 17 years, maybe we'll regain our voice by being voiceless, letting the silence dissolve our insolence and leavening our blood with humility.

Except that we can't really be silent all the time - asking a human to shut up is like asking an acorn not to become an oak. So my compromise - a half-silence - has been what I call "just part of my day" - recording snippets of the human life around me as I take the subway or walk the streets or go on my daily run, small events extracted from the flow that relink me to my prime mates on this planet by delinking me from the chatter in my head, using the eyes as a way of letting silence narrate. A few of my findings:

A woman holding a manila folder with DIVORCE written in Sharpie across the tab.

A cat goes prancing by with a bird in its mouth (I assumed the bird was dead). It (she, most likely) was joined by a kitten, and the two went off to feast.

A young girl with this tee-shirt: "Kiss me like you miss me."

#### Contrasting families:

I came across a black woman and young daughter standing at the corner of Maiden and Nassau obviously looking for directions. She was pulling a blue suitcase, small enough to fit in an overhead bin. She was dressed in wildly patterned tights and a sleeveless black sweater. She was about six months pregnant. I asked her if she needed help, and she showed me a piece of crumpled paper on which someone had printed "Coalition for the Homeless" and the address, 129 Fulton Avenue (it's actually Fulton Street). I directed her where she needed to go, and off she went.

When on the train going up to have lunch with the Marvelous María Beatriz, a white mother and her two children (5-year-old girl, 2-year-old boy) came on, all Teutonic in their blond hair and blue eyes. They huddled together on

the seat, she opened a bag of chips for the son, who dug in his hand while the sister rolled her eyes. Intact and on an outing for the day.

Sitting on the train to the right of the exit door. On the other side of the door is a mom and her child, both blond and blue-eyed. The child, a boy, is in a stroller facing his mom. Next to her, to her left, is a kindly looking old black man. The boy has a hold on the index finger of his right hand, and the two of them are smile-playing with each other. The mom seems perfectly okay with this. The sight of his small uncreased hand around the creased finger of the black man and everybody cool with this felt right.

I have more of these, but you get the point: paying attention to something other than ourselves and not doing it through the sounding brass or clanging cymbal of rules but through the half-silence of biting the tongue and sourcing ourselves in what passes right in front of us every day.

If we can't do that even once a day, well... (and here is where I let your silence complete the thought).



**2014**



# Theatrical Politics

(January 2014)

Over the years I have written often about politics and theatre. For me, this has been an analysis of whether theatre, as an art form, can be used to spark political change. I have also written about the politics of theatre itself as well as politics being its own genre of theatre. What follows is more of compendium than a nicely laid-out argument, but I hope you will find some of it nourishing and useful.

\* \* \*

*Written with unabashed optimism*

First, a self-definition: to me, “political theatre” is theatre that advances progressive/leftist politics, a politics in opposition to a conservative status quo (being fully aware that the meanings of “progressive/leftist” and “conservative” vary from country to country and historical period). Second, political theatre aims to convince its audience, both inside and outside the theatre, that the values of the status quo should be changed into the progressive/leftist values in order to achieve some version of social justice and a redistribution of power. In short, “political theatre” is theatre aimed at righting a wrong and creating the conditions for liberation. The methods can range from the cool anatomizing of Brecht to fervid street theatre, but the aim, more or less, is the same: use theatre to move society toward an exercise of power associated with peace, justice, and equality.

(To be sure, political theatre can also come from the right, but its purpose would be to reinstate some supposedly lost set of values and practices, revolutionary, to be sure, but in a retrograde fashion. This essay doesn’t take up that branch of the political theatre family.)

A good example of this is the essay written in the last issue by Arthur Meiselman about Lester Cole and his autobiography, *Hollywood Red* (a book I have read as well). Cole quite clearly wanted his art (both as a screenwriter and playwright) to forward his Marxist politics. While he had to twist and turn a lot to do this, he never veered from his principled belief that art could generate positive political change.

Given these definitions, and speaking from the perspective of the United States (which is the only one I know), political theatre does not “work,” if by

“work” we mean that theatre, or a theatrical piece, moves an American audience towards the left. We do have the anecdote about Odets’ *Waiting for Lefty* galvanizing people to leave the theatre in a revolutionary fever, but that was hedged by a lot of irony (the taxi drivers’ strike at the heart of the play had already been settled) and also took place at a politically heightened time in our history. But in general, American audiences do not go to theatre to seek political understanding or motivation – they go to escape political considerations, to be entertained; or they go to be moved, but only internally, in a kind of gastro-intestinal practice of art.

And this is because American citizens do not look to their artists for guidance in the debates about power because they know that American artists by and large do not work from a strong, interwoven connection with the causes of their historical place and time. They have been cordoned off (often by their own choice) into aesthetic camps where their work as artists and their work as citizens have only the most tenuous relationship, if any at all, and this estrangement does not make them trustworthy guides.

Furthermore, American theatre artists are not very good at political theatre. They lack the gene for artistico-political sophistication one finds in Europe or Latin America, and too often they mistake the stage for the pulpit or the lectern (not to mention date themselves – can *Waiting for Lefty* be done as anything but a museum piece? – or sound simply foolish, like that much-gasped at monologue in Rebecca Gilman’s *Spinning into Butter* about American race relations). Plays “ripped from the headlines” end up becoming past tense as soon as the headlines turn. And too often they become indictments not of the audience but of the non-audience, who are not there to defend themselves (or be executed, depending upon one’s level of rage), or they appeal to an amorphous “humanitarian sentiment,” exhorting us to better ourselves.

But I’m not willing yet to give up on theatre being used for political purposes, that is, as a contributor to the debates about power that govern our lives – but it has to be done more subtly, more in keeping with the transformative power that live theatre can have on an audience rather than trying to adapt for the stage the borrowed techniques of the sermon and the lecture.

A more fertile approach to political theatre must begin with the desire of the playwright to use his or her theatre to raise questions about current beliefs and, most importantly, to present possibilities for existential liberation. When the playwright writes from this foundation, then the theatre can “work” politically,

even though not tied to agenda politics, because it is about the effect a particular political/historical situation has on the flesh and blood of human beings.

It is one kind of action to do an agit-prop presentation on the loss of jobs because of globalization. It is another to do a play about the “lived reality” of the effects the job loss has on a family’s ability to care for itself and live out its dreams, where perhaps the breadwinners, suddenly seeing a broader horizon than themselves, go off to protest in a move that, for them, proves liberating and refreshing.

The theatre is a wonderful way to present these kinds of liberating “lived realities.” They cannot only honor the present but also convey possibilities/alternatives to that present (even if that consists of seeing no possibilities for change, which can be just as eye-opening and igniting). Plays like these can have just as strong a political message as a piece overtly constructed to bring a message or argue a point or anatomize a hypocrisy because they present alternate possibilities in the exercise of power in a way that feels lived and earned.

There are many things in American theatre that stand in the way of creating works like this. One is the American penchant for wanting psychological explanations and “back story,” which is an essentially conservative desire and very limiting in terms of characters and stories. Another is a mistaken (and conservative) belief that only the “dark side” of things can hold elemental human truths and things must therefore be “edgy” and caustic to be true.

But there are antidotes to these strait-jackets. American history is a deep lode for liberating storytelling. By sifting our past with a fine comb we can examine how we got here and re-remember that our American history, as skullduggery as it is, also boasts of large spirits and broad humanities that we can salvage and enlist as we try to restore “America” to that version that had dedicated itself, rhetorically as well as through action, to unalienable rights and inclusive liberties. (Remember a time when religion, through the Social Gospel, actually preached a righteous crusade against corruption, poverty, and capitalistic greed?) Americans know so little of their own history, and their ignorance puts them at the mercy of the ideologue revisionists and political raptors.

But I don’t just want to create historical dramatizations, a higher level of the costumed interpreters at Colonial Williamsburg. I also want audiences to understand their own part in their own bamboozlement, their complicity in their own amnesia. Unless they feel some sense that they have made choices that



they can also unmake (another way to think of “redemption”), then they cannot participate in recovering their own history.

And there is communal theatre, where companies involve their communities deeply in creation and performance and give everyone a sense of ownership that is not proprietary but custodial and healing. (And let us not forget Augusto Boal’s Forum Theatre.)

Real emancipatory theatre (which is what I mean by “political”) will happen when audience, creators, time and place, and history all interlace not only to review what has happened but to look beyond our given moment to see what is possible, what can be changed, how the better angels of our nature can gain the upper hand as we try to figure out what is to be done, how power can be used to forward the human condition, not destroy it.

Of course, this would be a very different kind of theatre than what we have today – Boal’s Forum Theatre is never going to be presented at mid-town Manhattan because somebody out there still needs a diet of dysfunctional family dramas, one-person coming-out confessionals, and “buddy” plays that trace the inevitable declines of growing up after college.

But that does not stop us from rehearsing our own new political possibilities and re-imagining a theatre less industrial in its model and more embroidered into the everyday lives of people. Theatre that people actually depended upon to help them sort out their thoughts and potentialities would be a political theatre unlike anything we see today in the United States – a useful art.

Now that is a sweet thought.

\* \* \*

*Written upon further reflection*

The more theatre I see these days, the more I see that theatre, at least in our era, is not built to make political change happen.

In 2006 in this journal, Bill Ballantyne wrote a deft summary of a play’s gestation [“Writing A Play”]. In his concept of what drives a play’s writing, Ballantyne foregrounds the power of imagination over rationality so that the play “[reminds us] of our humanity. We are all frail. We are all weak. We all have faults. Let us unbottle them, heart to heart, and celebrate our common lot.” Humanistic in its celebration of shared imperfections, but also a prescription for political quiescence. The audience leaves the theatre musing on its collective

frailties, reminded of mortality and, in that reminder, finding some measure of individualized solace for life's inevitable entropy.

If Ballantyne's analysis is right (and I think it is), then the theatre is no place for politics because the theatre's frail humanitarian box cannot really contain the explosive polarities of politics, which is really about how the holders of power want to keep holding onto it. Documentaries and novels and histories and biographies can dissect this better than theatre.

Theatre may be able to examine the effects of politics' explosions, but it is always an examination of the heart's precincts, the inner courtyards of human experience. The horizon is constricted, the words' audibility falling off after a few dozen meters, the audience's attention inevitably linked to how much these characters reflect back to them about themselves, how much "identity" knits up the space between stage and seat. "Tell the truth but tell it slant" as Emily Dickinson says. Theatre as Rorschach.

This makes theatre closer to poetry than anything else since poetry's ambit is always closer to the inner organs than to the outer storms of the political world. But theatre is always lesser than poetry because audiences can tolerate less strangeness, less disjunction in form and delivery.

Distance in other art forms, like poetry or sculpture or (post)modernist painting, can actually work to make us feel closer to the art because it makes us re-work ourselves, the effort to make the strange less strange building an affinity to the work. Not so in theatre, which is why theatre remains the lighter-weight art form that it is, the hydrogen or helium of the artistic periodic table.

\* \* \*

*So, is there any form of theatre that can have political effect?*

The answer is "yes" – but not one that is immediately obvious since it does not take place in a theatre.

As I wrote in an essay several years ago for Scene4, the most influential theatre artist of the 20th century was Edward L. Bernays, often called "The Father of Public Relations," who died at the age of 103 in 1995 and who began his work in the "engineering of consent" (as he called it) during and just after World War I. (He worked on Woodrow Wilson's Creel Commission, otherwise known as the "Committee on Public Information," to foster public support for America's entry into the Great War.)

Bernays, who was a nephew of Sigmund Freud (his father was Ely Bernays, brother of Freud's wife Martha Bernays, and his mother was Freud's sister, Anna), combined Freud's ideas with the study of crowd psychology by Gustave LeBon in France and Wilfred Trotter in Britain to create methods to control and direct public behavior. As he asked in his 1928 book *Propaganda*, "If we understand the mechanism and motives of the group mind, is it not possible to control and regiment the masses according to our will without their knowing about it?" And he answered his own question in the affirmative by a career dedicated to, as the title of first book in 1923 declared, *Crystallizing Public Opinion*.

Bernays did not see his work as negating democracy but actually making democracy possible by getting disparate and disunited people to work together in ways that would quell their instincts toward aggression by uniting them in common acts:

The conscious and intelligent manipulation of the organized habits and opinions of the masses is an important element in democratic society. Those who manipulate this unseen mechanism of society constitute an invisible government which is the true ruling power of our country....We are governed, our minds are molded, our tastes formed, our ideas suggested, largely by men we have never heard of. This is a logical result of the way in which our democratic society is organized. Vast numbers of human beings must cooperate in this manner if they are to live together as a smoothly functioning society....In almost every act of our daily lives, whether in the sphere of politics or business, in our social conduct or our ethical thinking, we are dominated by the relatively small number of persons... who understand the mental processes and social patterns of the masses. It is they who pull the wires which control the public mind.

His work as a "public relations counsel" (the title he preferred) has been well-documented, and the documentation shows how well mass-marketing in a mass culture works to herd people's desires in one direction or another, whether it's to buy soap or to "engineer consent" for the war in Iraq.

It's not the point to defend or criticize what Bernays did and started. It's to show that the effects of Bernays' form of theatrical manipulation far outstrip the influence of any other artist or artistic production, both in breadth (the millions of people) and depth (how we are all, in America, to one degree or another, a mass citizen of a mass culture). The twentieth century (as well as our own twenty-first century) had the shape and tenor it did in large measure because of the ideas and practices started by Bernays.

And then there is what I call “necro-political theatre,” the manipulation of death and tragedy for political gain, such as happens in New York on every September 11, an event now dramaturged and honed to a razor-sharp timing, producing a long and successful run promoting a managed message of doom and uplift.

And power performs its own theatre as well. I recall attending a rally years ago in Central Park against the World Economic Forum (WEF). Hundreds of police officers employed what I can only call a round of fascist theatrics as bold a lesson in the power of spectacle as any overblown Broadway chandelier-crasher. They had crammed 59th Street from 4th Avenue to 6th Avenue (the southern edge of Central Park) with dozens of police vans, NYC Corrections buses (with their cyclone-fenced interiors ripe for rowdies), patrol cars, unmarked cars and vans – an impressive display of automotive tax dollars at work.

Even more fearsome, though, was the squad of perfectly aligned, stomping-at-the-bit cavalry from the NYPD stables, these centaurs groomed and rampant. In front of them stood, at a perfect symmetrical lean, forty or so motorcycles, all faithfully attended by their drivers, the metallic version of the equines behind them. At some signal, the riders got on their bikes, and in formation peeled off like some road-bound version of the Blue Angels, revving their motors to drown out the speakers.

Then, as the time got closer for the march, those hundreds of officers, in riot helmets, flanked by people on the rooftops and not very well-concealed plainclothesmen in the crowd, and scouted by police helicopters circling vulture-like overhead, began inching in, inching in, their ranks getting more and dense until a long blue channel appeared that blocked the marchers from the view of the pedestrians, isolating them, squeezing them along, keeping everything ordered and buttoned.

No, it was not Nuremberg or Leni Riefensthal or the Cossacks in 1905, but they made no secret of the power of state power not only to project its power through spectacle, choreography, and scripting for ritual but also to define what images would be publicly available for memory and as the truth. (For instance, in the next day's *New York Times*, the front page sported the photograph of a long-haired young man being arrested. The caption read that out of 7,000 estimated marchers, police had arrested 36. But despite the overwhelming peaceful nature of the march, the *Times* did not say that 6,964 marchers had

marched without incident, and it did not show a picture of marchers with signs or babies in carriages or anything humanizing. The fables had to be upheld.)

Aristotle may have ranked spectacle as the least important of the six elements of tragedy, with plot and character being most important, but Authority reverses the ranking. Spectacle is most important for its project, plot and characters (with their attendant nuances) the least useful.

And on that day, for those that cared to watch, Authority served and protected the established order with its own forms of pageantry, steeped in blue and dressed in visored Plexiglas, inching, inching, inching us along until we, branded as “protestors,” marched in our proper files down the memory hole.

\* \* \*

### *What is to be done?*

A title of an essay of mine sort of sums up these thoughts: “Politics is an egg that theatre cannot hatch.” Which puts me in the same place as John L. Sullivan, the director in Preston Sturges’ *Sullivan’s Travels*, who longs to make a socially relevant movies but ends up finding out that laughter is a better contribution to social betterment than a movie about the downtrodden titled *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*

I think the best thing, politically speaking, that a writer can do is simply try to tell the truth and reveal the obvious – not hector, not lecture, not judge, not despair. This is not such an easy mandate, since Authority wants to bury the obvious under ideology and Consumerism wants compulsiveness to overawe rational thought.

Peeling back the onion, taking off the seven veils, exposing the Emperor’s new clothes – whatever metaphor proves useful in setting out the course of a life’s work.

Staying true to telling the truth may be the most political action we can expect artists to take, at least in this country at this time. As they say in the New York City subways, “If you see something, say something.”

# Touching A Nerve

(February 2014)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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





# Contra Dictions

(March 2014)

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

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

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

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

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

Probably something about a lack of serious purpose, about writing to formula (the HEA, or "happily ever after," must always appear in the romance novel), about privileging content over style, a reliance on the pedestrian rather than the rarefied — Sontag would probably go on in that sort of vein.

But that critique would miss the point because what the romance novel does, outside of its techniques and formulae, is create in its readers sensation through spectacle rather than cogitation through argument, which places it squarely in the artistic mainstream these days (at least as how we live it here in New York). Sensation through spectacle (which Sontag authenticates, in her essay on camp, as a legitimate artistic approach) is pretty much the reigning aesthetic in the Broadway houses these days, where people can exit the lobby moved in multiple ways but not necessarily motivated.

And even in the side-venues as well. A *Freakonomics* radio podcast from September 2012 features commentary from people attending a production of *Sleep No More*, a multi-sensory mashup of Shakespeare and noir staged in an old warehouse in the Chelsea section of New York. The audience put on masks and wandered through elaborately rigged actor-populated environments over six floors, told nothing more than they have to wear the mask, don't talk and don't use a cellphone, and that "fortune favors the bold."

The people interviewed about the show talked about how the masks freed them to do things they might not normally ever do in a theatrical setting, allowing them to be transgressive, and in being so, experiencing the amalgam of fear and thrill that comes with transgressing.

But — let us not forget — fear and thrill in measured circumstances, sensation without real risk and alarm. Felix Barrett, the artistic director of Punchdrunk and co-creator of *Sleep No More*, said it well: "It's completely safe, it just feels almost fictionalized. We fictionalize a state of tension that feels slightly unsettling and threatening when actually it's not."

Really, there's nothing wrong with any of this — really. A woman interviewed for the piece said, "It just felt good. It was right, in the moment," and that's exactly what it was — what it was and nothing more than what it was, feeling good in the moment. So, not wrong — but also probably not useful.

But it's not just the feeling but the context of the feeling that's important as well. And that context, looked at wholly and full-faced, is terrifying in a real, and not an aesthetic, way.

Enter an extensive piece by Richard Smith in *Truthout*, dated January 9, 2014, and titled "Green Capitalism: The God That Failed." His thesis is pretty simple: "The results are in: No amount of 'green capitalism' will be able to

ensure the profound changes we must urgently make to prevent the collapse of civilization from the catastrophic impacts of global warming.”

Page after page of argumentation follows, and while there may be disagreements along the margins of this or that piece of evidence, it’s pretty hard to deny that unless we change how we do human business on this planet, we are screwed.

A vital part of Smith’s argument is that capitalism cannot be the savior of itself because it is not built to do that sort of work — salvation goes against capitalism’s grain because the salvation would require an ethic of abstinence and restraint that directly contradicts the system’s imperative to grow and expand.

He also offers suggestions for the changes that need to happen, but those specificities are not the important point here. What undergirds the piece is the call for a new regime of sensation to meet the challenge of our species’ imminent demise, one composed of an austerity shaped by a love of content and evidence, prompted by anger and logic, and focused beyond the gratification of the ego.

And so back to the start of this essay: artists and their work but now in the shadow of possible/probable collapse — what is it that they could do? Or should we accept Oscar Wilde’s dictum in *The Picture of Dorian Grey* that “All art is quite useless,” and just allow artists to do whatever they want to do without expecting them to do anything of any instrumental value or consequence, except entertain us as the place goes up in flames?

(Wilde, in a letter to a correspondent, explained that “art is useless because its aim is simply to create a mood. It is not meant to instruct, or to influence action in any way. It is superbly sterile, and the note of its pleasure is sterility.”)

I want to end this essay with some sort of quippy conclusion that creates the sensation of profound pronouncement, but I can’t come up with it because this course of thought seems to end only in questions without easy or actionable (or any) answers. I am very curious to know how others might come at these ideas — please write a response and share your thoughts about art and the end-times.



## The Midwife's Magic Towel

(April 2014)

Recently I watched a program on a major network into recent research into biological differences between the genders. Of course, the show played up the “Women Are From Venus/Men Are From Mars” angle, ratifying (as all mainstream media must do) the current gender identities, and in this respect it simply turned into a higher-toned afternoon talk show, Oprah with footnotes. I found myself constantly saying back to my non-interactive television “Yeah, but — ” and “It all depends on how you define — ” and “Who’s interests are being served — ” The Marvelous Maria-Beatriz, bless her heart, only told me to quiet down once, and I lowered the running commentary to a mutter.

What bugged me about the show? What bugs me about almost all commercial television’s offerings: the way the broadcasts function as a kind of doctrinal clearinghouse for the reigning ideologies of our less-than-benign capitalist order. And not just commercial television. I think back to Bill Moyers’ *A Gathering of Men* on PBS many many years ago and the “men’s movement” that it helped spawn, and I feel just as bugged. In this case, the particular status-quo ideology that irritates me and which each of these shows reinforced (and I don’t mean to make them specially emblematic, just mildly so) is the belief that gender differences represent real immutable differences in the essential natures of men and women rather than specific, historically induced (and therefore socially changeable) behaviors. Or another way to say this: If people believe that gender differences have an immutable character, they can then say that the unequal distribution of power and benefits between men and women is a natural outgrowth of biology and can’t be changed by political or social action. In either case, as long as this ideology colors our conversation about relationships, those of us interested in the search for equality and social justice for everyone will be too busy cleaning cobwebs out of people’s eyes to make much progress in a forward direction.

For me, aside from the fact that women can bear children and men can’t, the differences assigned to men and women all have a cultural origin. While biology clearly determines our sex, our gender, the cultural uniform we wear because of our sex, comes socially tailored. And for Americans, this means that gender and all its associated behavioral duties come tailored by a capitalist regime interested in profit.

How does the capitalist regime profit by maintaining the myth of irremediable contrarities between men and women? As it does with any challenge to its authority, by the time-honored stratagem of “divide and conquer.” From a purely market point-of-view, dividing the genders helps conquer purses and wallets; a society in which the genders might move toward androgyny would cut profits by half, which is why the mainstream media must be enlisted to shore up the verities that make target marketing possible.

But the powers-that-be do not just use a “divide and conquer” strategy for the mostly benign purposes of market segmentation. David Montgomery, in his excellent *Citizen Worker*, details how the rising industrial order re-shaped institutions and definitions of proper behavior in order to discipline workers to accept the primacy of wage employment. Sometimes the effort was brutally blatant, as in strike-breaking, and sometimes more subtle, as in making unemployment a crime through vagrancy laws. But in all cases the effort was deliberate, calculated, and, in the end, highly effective because the regime had the means to divide their opponents and conquer their resistances.

What happened then happens now, and one has to see gender differences in this light, as aspects of a strategy for controlling the vagaries of human temperament for the greater glory of the dividend.

Would it ever be possible to have a genderless world? In other words, would it be possible to create a social and economic regime in which people are taught to be people and not necessarily men and women? I don't know, since very few people have conducted experiments along this line, mostly in utopian or religious communities whose dynamics can't be readily transferred to an urban industrialized society. But I did get a glimpse of how such a society might begin in an article I read about the men's movement. One of the interviewees tells an extremely interesting story about friends of his expecting a child. When it came time for the delivery, friends and family joined the husband and wife in the birthing room. When the child came sliding into the world, the midwife, after cutting the cord, immediately covered up its genitals with a towel so that no one in the room, including the parents, knew if she cradled a male or female.

What a deliciously ironic moment! I wish I could have witnessed their reactions. Keeping the biology muted forced people to see the child as an entire person. Because they didn't know its sex (and they would have had to call it an “it” because we have no pronoun for a generic person), they couldn't begin building expectations and prejudices. Finding their cultural definitions useless

to describe what had happened, they had to, if only for a moment, create some new way to see that child. In that momentarily new philosophical soil cultural regeneration could take root.

If this society of ours ever is ever going to find its way past this insane phase of profit and translate its best intentions into actual historical construction, it will need to use that midwife's magical towel to delete any bogus divisions between people, whether they be rich/poor, black/white, or male/female. And that will happen only when we discard the capitalist regime under which we live, enamored as it is of divide and conquer.





# Neuroself

(May 2014)

Since November 2013 I have taken, each day, 25 milligrams of what I call my “chemical balancer.” I started the regimen because all “natural” approaches to lightening the dysthymia, melancholy, “blues,” and their cognates that have always afflicted me would not work. I never reached full-blown William-Styron-style depression, though I had my days where I “swam through asphalt” — the moment-to-moment slog to remain vertical and unsuicidal, muscle habits pushing the body through one day and into the next.

Now post-chemical, with the weight lifted and the question “What is the point?” no longer pinging me, like a lost dying black box from a drowned airplane, I have come to an even greater appreciation of the beauty of our undivine material existence and the mystery of the random nature of a self.

Once the medication did its work (by the second day, the weight had evaporated almost completely without leaving any side effects behind), I had the mental and emotional space to re-view myself, or, rather, my “self.” We choose to think of our “self” as an essence, the “I” as the hard nugget that denotes and anchors one’s being. Some locate the self in spirit, others do not, but all feel that the self exists in some independent fashion, that there goes along a body and a self, connected but not cognate.

Not so. Even the most cursory reading about neuroscience will show you that “mind” or “self” embeds in the brain (or, really, the brainbody, since we should consider the system as one entity). Our essential “kernel” of self stems from a delicate electro-chemical balancing act, and the “I” issues from the way the brain monitors itself — in other words, consciousness coined by neurons and synapses.

Neuroscience, and the affiliated study of neurophilosophy, have only just arrived on the scene, so to speak, provoking both extravagant claims and debunkings, celebrations and anguishes. The former: we will map psychology to brain and thus predict and control behavior. The latter: the same thing. The truth lies in between because the brainbody, like the weather, defies easy modeling and predictability, and brain science really stands at the beginning of whatever paths it will take.

I can only say, based only on my own experience, that I like the self I have today better than the self I had in October 2013, a self created by the way the

medication has moved things around. I also know that this self does not result solely from the medication, that a self comes out of the interaction between the environment and the brainbody — or, rather, the environment and the brainbody make one system. But in the end the word “I” stands in as a shorthand, a thumbnail, for the intricate and buzzing electro-chemical linkages moving through the world.

This means that I reject, have to reject, enjoy rejecting, any super-natural or sentimentalized origin for the “I.” Not only do such claims coarsen the beauty of what happens within and without the confines of my skin, they reduce rather than broaden our ability to explain what goes on within and without.

Of course, language plays a definitive role here, not only because our lexicons define both the reach and limits of our thoughts but also because we need to create a new lexicon to express the sometimes literally (as yet) unsayable things neuroscience uncovers. These new languages will also create new selves, the new selves will create new metaphors, which in turn will publish new understandings for people to share and digest.

On a more local level, so to speak, within this being that bears my name, the chemical additive has reduced the heaviness of some things, which has allowed other things (i.e., previously muted congresses of synaptic networks, imprinted in flesh) to carbonate and inspire. The same being but not, the same self but not, despite appearances. I don't yet have the language to speak about this clearly enough, to translate the subdermal intuitions into usable prose. But, like the neuroscience that underscores me, I enjoy living as a work in progress, with still available possibilities for shifting and cycling. I just find that employing the words and imagery of a self, of the “I,” as a choreographed physics rather than as a stolid pip liberates rather than frightens me. Much like the for-better-or-worse digital shifting in our lives, which has melted away institutions while, at the same time, loosening the grip of the gatekeepers, the neuroscience of the self, this neurophilosophy, has re-established the miraculousness of our meat, lending us new ways to move our gatekeepers aside and stand open to what the shifts will teach us.

One last thing. Some have asked me if I feel like a cheat for taking the drug, often saying in the same breath that they don't like to put things into their bodies that affect them like this and will only, they say, take an aspirin if the headache gets really bad. (Endurers of pain always think they have more virtue than others.)

I reply by asking them if they eat food when hungry, drink water when thirsty. Yes, of course. Do they feel better because of it? Yes, of course. Because you have changed the chemical balances, right? Yes, but, well, that's natural. That's chemistry, I give back, regardless of the delivery system. So why not a pill that alters a different kind of hunger? That pill only cheats in the way that food and water cheat death. Argument done and won.

It will take us humans a while to figure out how to erase the ersatz borders our language has drawn around our physical and mental parts and feel comfortable with the indeterminacy of our essences. It will take us a while to see everything about our beings as nodes in a complex weave of shifting physics, from quantum to cosmos (much like the Internet but without all the corporate sludge in the system). But it can begin, as it has for me, with something as small as 25 milligrams, the size of a seed or a parable, and by giving thanks for finding a way to win the losing battle against my demons.



# War and Peace: The Solutions of William James

(June 2014)

**R**emember the peace movement? Yeah. My last recollection is New York in 2003 just before the Iraq invasion, part of a string of protests around the world. After that, not much.

We do have a Virgil to help guide us back to a movement for peace: the philosopher William James. In “The Moral Equivalent of War,” written in 1910, he staked out the territory any promoter of peace has to cover.

The essay sprang from James’ faith that American democracy, the “civic genius” of the American people, worked best when each individual felt personally answerable for the social welfare of the country. This social consciousness called for a moral self-governance fed by reasoned debate and clear information, and it was most at risk of being smashed to bits when politicians (“schemers” in James’ words) and the media dialed up a war for the national good, blighting the society with a “diseased sensationalism and insincerity.”

“The Moral Equivalent of War,” then, is James’ reasoned argument in favor of world peace. He noted “we are all ready to be savage in some cause” but added that “the difference between a good man and a bad one is the choice of the cause.” If peace was the cause, then it would be a peace made through reasoned analysis and proportioned argument, not through (or only through) carbonated emotions. How one gained the peace was as key as the peace one gained.

He starts with what gives war its hook: “War is the strong life; it is life in extremis,” making men feel greater than what their mundane lives offered. James goes on to muse: is it possible to enlist these martial virtues in some task other than war, to find a “substitute for war’s disciplinary function” and spice up a utopianism that “tastes mawkish and dishwatery to people who still keep a sense for life’s bitter flavors”? To James, peace would not “be permanent on this globe” unless nations “pacifically organized [to] preserve some of the elements of the old army-discipline.”

What James proposed was to press-gang the country’s youth for a term of service in an “army enlisted against Nature,” where the “energies and hardihoods” of military service would now be colored by “the morals of civic honor.” This army’s mission would be to smooth out the inequities in a social order where too many people were at the mercy of chance and poverty. In the

process “our gilded youths [would] get the childishness knocked out of them, and come back into society with healthier sympathies and soberer ideas.” He was very clear that the martial values would be the “enduring cement” of this army and believed that we would get “toughness without callousness, authority with as little criminal cruelty as possible, and painful work done cheerily because the duty is temporary.”

In this way he tried to reconcile the war-regime and the peace-regime by grafting the intentions of the latter onto the values of the former.

But his “moral equivalent” did not stop there. The only reason to find a peaceful application of martial values was to disarm the world of the original reasons for having arms in the first place: chaos, indifference, social inequity, starvation, and the challenges of survival. Only then could we disarm ourselves of the arms that make the wars possible.

James was a self-proclaimed liberal, a member of a group he believed always to be in the minority because it was the temporizing intelligence of society. Even though he saw the fault of liberalism to be “its lack of speed and passion,” and rued the fact that often a liberal’s only audience was posterity, he unequivocally endorsed the “judicial and neutral attitude” of the liberal as a necessary counterbalance and antidote to the “red-blood” party, the party of “animal instinct, jingoism, fun, excitement, bigness.”

The lesson of “The Moral Equivalent of War” was offered from this liberal platform and was fired by an intense love of America, “for her youth, her greenness, her plasticity, innocence, good intentions, friends, everything.” It is a bracing and generous offer, much like James himself. Would it work in the United States? Who knows? But in the end, as he said, the success or failure of establishing a peaceful world comes down to whether each individual chooses to take up the task. As he said in “The Moral Philosopher and The Moral Life”:

When this challenge comes to us, it is simply our total character and personal genius that are on trial; and if we invoke any so-called philosophy, our choice and use of that also are but revelations of our personal aptitude or incapacity for moral life....The solving word...is not in heaven, neither is it beyond the sea; but the word is very nigh unto thee, in thy mouth and in thy heart, that thou mayest do it.

The peace movement is won or lost in the individual hearts of those who profess their beliefs and actions. It will be won if each person keeps his heart full of a love mixed with a gritty savvy about the imperfections of the world. James

provides pencil, paper, and impulse for us to sketch out who we are and what compass point we follow in our perilous times.





# In a Healthy Society, We Wouldn't Need Artists

(July 2014)

Justice, as Supreme Court Justice Stewart Potter defined it, is fairness: “Fairness is what justice really is.”

Justice can only come through institutions built to deliver it — it does not “droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven” or roll down from Olympus on its own.

Justice can also only arrive if powered by an ethics rooted in a vision of the good life (not “a” good life but “the” good life).

Our American society is not built for justice for two reasons: 1) we have chosen not to design our institutions to deliver it (see Matt Taibbi’s new book, *The Divide*), and 2) we have no vision of the good life to guide us.

What has caused #1? Taibbi’s book offers possibly the clearest rendition of why we have created a sliding scale of rights where those on the lower end have legal punishments pounded into them every day while those on the upper end are able to slip-slide away. Unfairness is now policy, driven by money, demonizing, and cowardice.

Why don’t we have #2? The good life is built around “enough,” which rejects accumulation for its own sake and is willing to say no. But a society like ours, based on market theology, can never allow people to believe they have “enough,” since the system is driven by the doctrine that wants are endless in number and can never be satisfied. To “satisfy” these “wants,” market theology builds unfairness into its operations – its notion of a “good life” is based on the exploitation and appropriation of labor and the unequal allocation of rewards.

To the extent that we can talk about a “society” making “decisions” about how it wants its members to live, the terror caused by 1 and 2 has a common root in the societal decision to honor the successes of the market with protections and allowances and punish the rest of the people with a sliding scale of (de) privations, mostly mild among the middle reaches but which get worse and worse among the lower depths.

Does “art” (that perennially squishy term) have any constructive part to play in this era of ruination?

I began my first answer to this question at too high an altitude in an attempt to speak with Olympian wisdom about the topic. I ran out of air pretty quickly.

So I moved towards the valley and decided to begin with G.K. Chesterton's observation about reading: "There is a great deal of difference between an eager man who wants to read a book and a tired man who wants a book to read."

The bulk of the "art content" our culture produces today is books for the tired man while occasionally crafting things for the eager man.

Given the means of production available to those who call themselves artists, the situation couldn't be different than it is.

Thus, "art" can really do nothing to create a more fair society, though it may, through its workings, create more fair-minded people, operating at the intestinal rather than the institutional level (so to speak).

"Art content" is also good for the water cooler, that is, for giving people something common to share – latest TV series, YouTube videos, and so on. It doesn't matter if the content is nonsense – at least it gives people a chance to synch up, unlike our politics.

For "art" to do more than this, though, it would have to change how it understands what it does. It may have to become more prescriptive and propagandistic, promoting a vision of the good life and not necessarily being tolerant of ideas and visions that oppose the good life. It may have to adopt an anti-Oscar Wilde notion of "usefulness" for itself. It may have to become more communal and collective in its operations.

Or it may simply choose to do art as art and go off to work on movement-building elsewhere.

But at this moment, the way art is made in our society has little or nothing to support the effort to create a just society.

An ending thought. In a selection from Tennessee Williams' *Notebooks in Harper's*, Williams quotes a friend as saying that in a healthy society, perhaps we wouldn't need artists. That is an interesting equation: we only need art when our lives are unhealthy. So, rather than expending energy trying to find a justification for art in a time of great injustice, much better to found a just society and let art go wander where it wants to without a worry about usefulness or purpose.

# Boiling Off The Lard

(August 2014)

**F**or my current project, I am stitching my better essays on theatre into a book that I will self-publish and then send to each artistic director in New York City. I don't expect anything to come of it (i.e., an offer to read my work), but I have no reason to let these essays go on gathering digital dust on my website and at Scene4. "No-expectation" frees me up to do this because the satisfaction comes from spending time with my own work, not (or not only) from the audience's response. The thing-done-for-itself is a rare thing for a human being to do.

I set up a guide for each piece: the words had to fit on a single sheet with one-inch margins and double-spaced. This would force me to speak straight and not use a word more than needed - keep the tracking lean and tight. (With the essays boiled down like this, I could also use them for podcasts, where two minutes of my voice runs about one page.)

Honestly, I thought the edits would be small because, well, hadn't I written them so well the first time? I found out how wrong I was.

The lard in them, especially in the older bits: shocking and shameful. And the sage-like and round-tone style I deployed now sounds slack and know-it-all. I don't chide myself for this - I was who I was then, and now I am not, and the work needs to voice new needs and new goals. But, man, still what a shock!

So, cut, prune, rinse, scale, scrape, buff, hone - stunned at how much bulge I could get these works to shed - but every syllable peeled off brought the writing closer to making real sense rather than just making a show of making sense.

I won't bore you with any demo - but I want to understand this link between my getting older and a more plain style. Adjectives and adverbs once hung out as a sign of art now fall to the side so that the line can unfurl with more ease and less crease. The younger man would have gone for a pearlescent moon, but now such a trope is just too much cologne in a small space. "Moon" will do just fine and clear the air. And I am fine with that.

Lean feels honest. Lush feels jaded. Lean leads. Lush distracts.

Perhaps "the great slimming" has to do with having less time to live (though every day can be our last day, no matter what our age). Or maybe it's just an analogue of losing my hair, which has actually helped me look better (the comb-

over never fooled a soul). Or part of the urge to divert most of my clothes to Salvation Army (thinking of Thoreau's cabin with its bed, desk, and chair). Or that I no longer feel polite enough to sit through bad second acts or finish inept books or grin and bear nonsense, especially my own bad second acts and inept books and nonsense.

Or it is finally unraveling the Buddhist conundrum of non-attachment to the world – not that I am detached or indifferent but that the attachment to anything does not govern me by desire. I can split the link between the desire and the desired, look upon them both as jeweled and glorious animals that do not need to be owned in order to be enjoyed. At peace if not necessarily at rest.

From wherever hails this lean towards leanness, I greet it and show it because it helps me be serious without taking myself too seriously, helps me be sober without sobriety, helps me remember that the root of any useful wisdom is planted in clumsiness, folly, and bad judgments (of which I have much and many) as well as not being suckered by the canard that style equals substance and a gesture is enough.

Thoreau (again) says it well: "...to cut a broad swath and shave close, to drive life into a corner, and reduce it to its lowest terms..." I am liking those terms.

# Promised Land

(September 2014)

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

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

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

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

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

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

of the Israeli origin story, which will continue to ooze and destroy until the proper antidote is applied.

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

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

## A Benedictine Theater

(October 2014)

**Y**ears ago I went to the Brooklyn Academy of Music to see *The Song of the Wanderers*, a dance piece by an Okinawan group based on Herman Hesse's Siddhartha. In the dance they rained down four tons of golden rice; by the end, the stage was ankle-deep in the stuff.

During the usual post-show coat-gathering and watch-checking, a young man entered carrying a long-handled wooden rake. From the center he carved out a slow, deliberate spiral, every step distinct and planted. This one man doing this one meaningless act held the attention of these frenetic New Yorkers for 10 full minutes.

Why? The act had no "drama," but it had something - a state of being that was also a state of nothing, a place of rest or unmolested wholeness. A reminder of redemption. Of origins.

Later I read *The Cloister Walk* by Kathleen Norris, about being an oblate in a Benedictine monastery. "Ora et labora, pray and work, is a Benedictine motto," she states, "and a well-swept floor can be a prayer." Or a spiral etched in rice. Or an audience watching the man.

Prayer, rest, harmony, breath - what does any of this have to do with theatre, especially when we declare that art should disturb us for our own good? But for what end is all this disturbance? Do we leave better equipped because of it to make life bend toward - well, toward the rice, the praying and the work, the refreshment of the waters? I just don't know.

I find myself less and less convinced that darkness is the proper light in which to see human life, even if darkness dwells within. I am trying to find where the rice can join the risk, where rise and fall is as much about breathing as about ambition and pride, where Jeremiah and Buddha can converse.

A Benedictine theatre - how possible is that?





# Museum of Air

(November 2014)

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

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

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

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

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

He recommends that museums be built on the wildest schemes possible — “the crazier the architecture, the better” — with only one requirement: that they be fireproof. Dispense with collections, curators, guards, gift shops and cafés, parking, and all the other irritations of running a place of culture. Have a truly open admissions policy and encourage people to bring in...whatever. Whatever

they find (in)consequential, memorable (whether of the moment or forever), delightful — with no credentialed gatekeepers around to guard the gates, the sky's the limit (or at least the roof of the building).

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

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

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

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

# (Almost) No Government Support for the Arts

(December 2014)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The lessons here for artists are these. The best art is created in private, and the artist should not ask the state for assistance to do this. If the artist,

however, wants to do something more open and collaborative, on the public's dime, then the art produced should calm and delight, not poke and prod. Give money to the Roundabout Theatre in New York so that it can do revivals of old plays and musicals. Give money to the Metropolitan Museum of Art so that it can bring in an exhibit of Impressionists. Give money to The National Endowment for Humanities to chart endangered languages. Give money to a local studio in Harlem so that it can present art created by people in the neighborhood. All of this is edifying, and no taxpayer or legislator should find this kind of support offensive or unmerited.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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