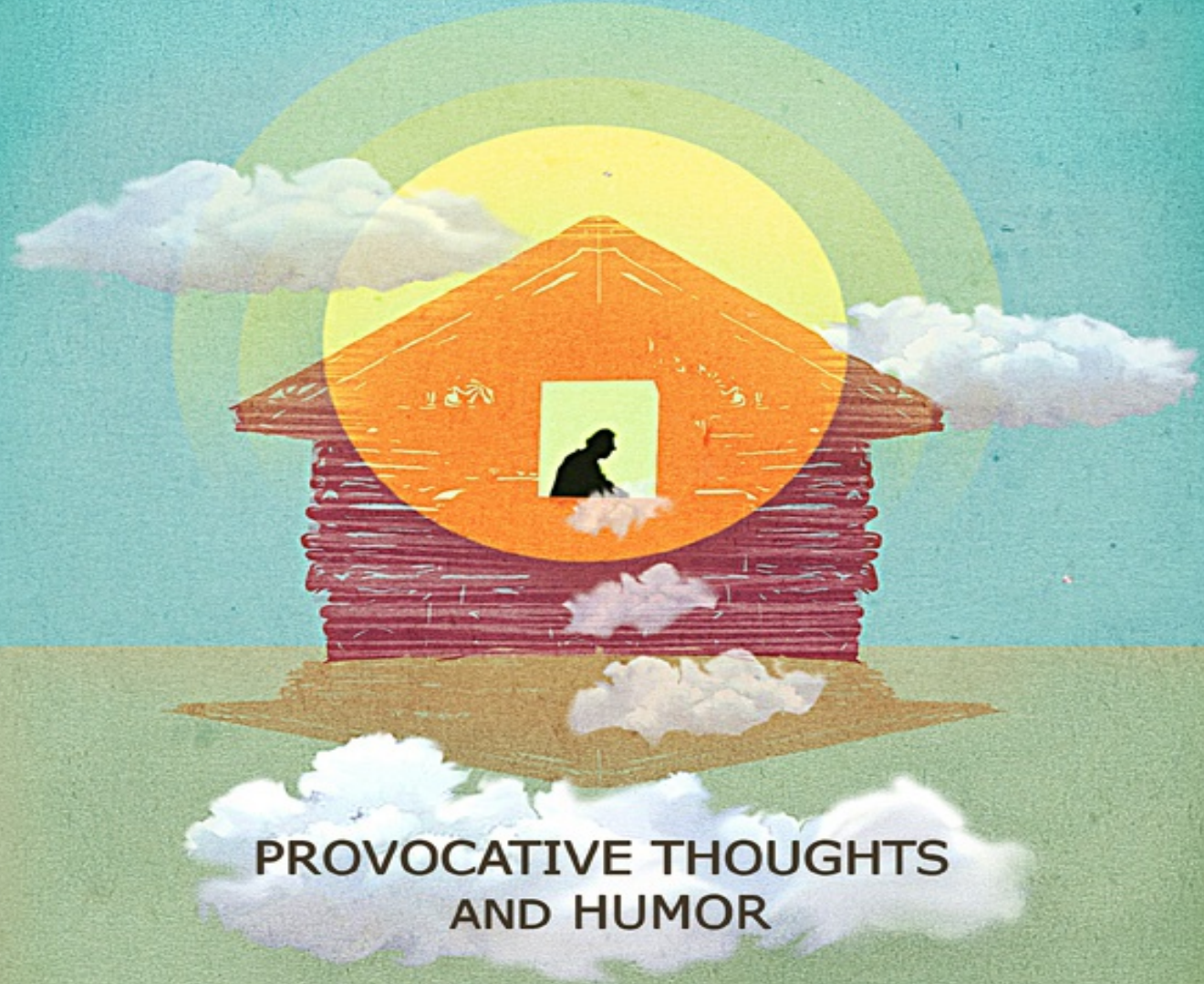
A BUNGALOW OF SURPRISES

TALES OF WONDER AND WEIRDNESS



PROVOCATIVE THOUGHTS AND HUMOR

BARCLAY HENDERSON

A Bungalow of Surprises

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TALES OF WONDER AND WEIRDNESS

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Barclay Henderson

A Bungalow of Surprises: Tales of Wonder and Weirdness

Editor: Dave Fox

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Introduction

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THE YEAR I GRADUATED FROM high school, General Motors produced the iconic 1959 Cadillac Eldorado. With 345 horsepower and 4,949 pounds of chrome and steel, the car had tail fins that resembled the entrance to the Golden Gate Bridge. It was a monument to American automotive exuberance. The Eldorado made a statement of unapologetic material excess. It mesmerized schoolboys like me. Material possessions felt important to me then. Today, less so.

After I finished school, I built, financed, and owned a collection of more than twenty fine-dining and fast-food restaurants. For five decades I ran them profitably, eventually selling out for millions.

Along the way there were sports cars, fine clothes, and material comforts. We used to say, "You are what you drive," but that's not true. What really matters is our collection of experiences. Stories and memories are what make us what we are. The surprises that shake you up are the most memorable or inspiring.

In his book *The Re-Enchantment of Everyday Life*, Thomas Moore writes that enchantment "…is the willingness to live in a bungalow of stories rather than a warehouse of facts." I have always made factual assessments about people, places, and concepts. Often, I have been egregiously wrong. Those moments when I've discovered reality was not what I thought it was have been some of my most enchanting experiences. There is magic in surprise. When we discover the "facts" in our warehouse are not what we assumed, that is when our bungalow of stories fills with wonder.

This book contains my treasury of colorful personalities—old and young, rich and poor—who have taught me lessons about life. We'll encounter an eccentric cast of characters who have shown me the importance of audacity and how to live life on your own terms. We will enter the desert

tent of a nomadic Bedouin woman, spend a year with a retired geisha, and learn the power of risks from a black belt martial arts instructor whose secret teaching weapon is strudel. I will also share lessons I learned from culture clashes, having married outside my native land. We will venture back in time—to the Renaissance, the Viking era, and the heyday of the Silk Road. And we will peek into the future—to a day when time travel might be possible. The lessons I have learned have not always come from humans. On our journey together, we will also encounter animals and microorganisms, sperm cells and sphincters that taught me to see the world in enchanting ways.

There is no dress rehearsal in life. Everything we experience is new to us, and life is nothing if not an experience in irony and surprise. The secret to a well-conceived life journey is to expect and embrace those surprises. They are our most powerful teachers.

So buckle up—or not—and expect the unexpected as you careen into these pages. They contain the surprises that have filled my own bungalow of stories and the life lessons they have taught me.

Bunny and the Black Hole

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We begin with a talk about diversity. Not classroom, employment, or social diversity, but diversity of nature—Mother Nature and her freakish assortment of creations.

The subject never crossed my mind until recently. Then one August morning, I witnessed two contradictory events in rapid succession that I couldn't reconcile. It was as if Mother Nature had jumped out of the bushes and shouted, *"Boo!"* The incident convinced me that woman is insane.

I don't mean to judge. I don't say this as praise or criticism. I'm just an uninvolved passerby, reporting my strange observations. But I'm not the one who's nuts in this picture. Mother Nature is the crazy one.

Our encounter began quietly one morning. The late-summer sun had risen two hours earlier. I had hardly finished my cereal when these two visions came at me like a one-two punch. The first was a cute ball of fluffiness that popped onto my garden lawn. The other appeared an hour later as I read my newspaper. The *Boston Globe* presented a contradictory and violently contrasting concept. Somehow the two were related…but wow! It seemed an almost impossible stretch.

Vision One: 7:45 a.m.—Sitting in My Living Room

I glanced out my French doors into the garden. A newborn robin was hopping over the grass, hunting for worms. No red breast, not even full-size yet, it was an incompetent young bird just out of the nest, trying to find a wriggling breakfast. She was an adorable and vulnerable little creature, the

personification of fragility in all young, living things.

Miss Robin had attention deficit issues as she hopped aimlessly about. She just couldn't get the hang of worm hunting. Then suddenly, creeping up behind the newborn Miss Robin, totally oblivious of her, was an even more adorable creature—a newborn bunny. Baby Bunnykins was preoccupied with his blades-of-grass breakfast. He never saw the baby bird.

Suddenly Miss Robin hopped forward a few steps, startling the rabbit, who scampered the full length of the lawn to safety in the far corner of the garden. Moments later, Bunnykins realized there had never been any threat. Having made a blatant miscalculation and overreaction, he should have frozen with shame. But not this guy! With complete insouciance, he scampered back to his clover patch, fast as he had left.

Little robin, impatient with the lack of worms and now noticing the bunny quickly approaching, flew off as fast as her baby wings could take her airborne. This explosion of flapping was all it took for Bunny to see a second existential threat. Again he dashed back to the far corner of the lawn.

I tried to fathom the mind of a rabbit who had just humiliated himself for all the world to see. He had no regard for the public spectacle he was making, no regard at all for his reputation or his standing in the area.

Nevertheless, I thought, "If such cuddly but fragile young creatures can survive on this planet, it bodes well for human life. If those two adorables can survive, Mother Nature must be a beneficent force. We shall all be able to endure in comfort."

Vision Two: 8:45 a.m.—At My Breakfast Table

One hour later, a less cuddly view came from the *Boston Globe* science editor. Based on studies, he speculated that a universe parallel to our own might exist inside countless black holes. After ripping away all the neighboring space debris, the planets and suns, after a cataclysmic crushing of all of this material down to the size of a tiny speck, a black-hole singularity could be formed. Gravity on that crushed speck at the center of the hole would be so incalculably intense that light could not escape and

nothing could move.

Nobody would want to hang out in a crunched-down, dark place like that. If nothing moves in a black hole, then time stops. No more ticking of the clock means you'd never get old. Your bills would never come due. The milk in your fridge would never turn bad. But what good would that do you if you were squeezed down to the size of a speck of dust? If time were to come to a standstill, you'd have other worries.

The *Globe* editor went on to speculate that a new reality could then be created. When the black hole "farted out" an entirely new existence through a white exit into a wormhole, a new dimension of reality would be created. This, in turn, the editor suggested, could create new universes similar and parallel to our own.

Wow, talk about humongous creative destruction! The picture of black-hole demolition painted Mother Nature in a more angry, sinister mood. It contradicted the sweet Bunnykins universe I had been viewing out my window one hour before.

Yes, we are all for diversity. But this was more contrast than I could take with my morning Cheerios. Mother now seemed less cuddly and more vicious. Apocalyptic, even.

"Could the same Mother Nature create both?" I wondered.

How could she do this to us? The comfortable versus the Armageddon, both at the same time? Stars torn apart, crushed, destroyed, then possibly recreated? This second astronomical vision felt worse than hostile. It was an anathema not only to Mr. Bunnykins but to all living things. If parallel universes can be randomly spawned, it leads us to an uncomfortable thought: Is there no beginning to our universe? Is it all just a continuous loop of new dimensions, repeating over and over? How much fun could that be?

If I reflect on such crazy thoughts, I lose sleep. Miss Robin and Mr. Bunnykins, on the other hand, are blissfully oblivious to such ideas. And so, after too much reflection, I decided the solution to all of this was to stop reflecting, and embrace the joy of living in the moment, like the creatures on my lawn. I put away my newspaper and resigned myself to the idea that we will cross that black hole when we come to it.

And You Thought You Were Lazy

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DEEP IN AN INDIAN OCEAN trench, west of Australia, scientists recently pulled up a remarkable discovery. It was evidence of a very old life-form—a one-cell, microbe-like material. They claimed it had survived in its current, unchanged state for billions of years. That would make it one of the earliest examples of life on our planet.

Scientifically speaking, that might seem really big. It's a window into the period way back before the Cambrian explosion of lifeforms, 542 million years ago. But should this really be a big deal? Say what you like about this biological news, but personally, I don't look up to these microbes. They're an insult to all of us fellow lifeforms on earth.

You and I live in the post-Darwin era. We were taught the laws of natural selection and survival of the fittest. Indolence, and even long vacations, are looked down upon. What the hell have these bugs been doing all these millions of years? Nothing! They've been sitting on their one-cell butts, letting others do their evolution thing, expecting the rest of us to advance the planet.

I can just hear a conversation between two of these guys…

Microbe One: "Hey, man, you wanna do something today?"
Microbe Two: "No. I don't even want to think about that."
Microbe One: "Hey, dude, good call."

If you ask me, it's wishy-washy to repeat the same languorous lifestyle generation after unchanging generation. I mean, come on! A billion years with no advancement to show for it? Everyone else has been evolving. Why should these bugs get any respect? If they wanted esteem, they should have

spent their time getting fit and making something of themselves. Doing nothing but metabolizing and reproducing millennia after millennia might have worked in the old days, but it doesn't cut it anymore.

Oh sure, bleeding-heart egalitarians can make arguments for the endurance and patience of these microbes, but I don't buy it. If you ask me, they should be shaping up. In the gym we muscle builders intone, "Use it or lose it." Among my automobile racing fraternity, we say, "A happy tire is a screaming tire," as it accelerates and corners to the limit of its performance ability. We are fond of not just high performance but of the *very fittest* performance. How else are we going to get "selected"? Do you want to evolve, or are you going to just sit there? Progress, progress, progress! That's what I believe. Get out there and compete! Chilling out at the bottom of an ocean trench for a billion years? That's an obscenity that offends my work ethic. Who needs indolence like that?

So what can be done to make these little buggers get with the program? For starters, we must get them to realize the error of their inert ways. How about some remedial microbial intervention before they waste another few millennia? Put them on a program. In the next ten thousand years, become seaweed. Another ten thousand after that, sea slugs. Without goals, those little microbes deserve nothing but our condescending disdain. It's time for them to start making something of themselves—and clearly, they're not going to do that without something to motivate them. And so, I conclude, we must give them a kick in the posterior—if they even have one.

Petauristini: The Master Race

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"Flyers" (scientific name Petauristini) is the name country folk use for flying squirrels. Whatever those rodents are called, I don't like them.

Recently a large family of flyers took up residence in my home—uninvited, of course. They used my attic as a toilet, consumed my food, and partied all night while my wife, Minako, and I were trying to sleep. Were I to engage in such behavior, I'd be arrested and prosecuted to the fullest measure of the law. I am unquestionably the legitimate victim here. But what could I do? Call the cops?

"Yes, sir, I'm calling to report late, noisy parties and theft of property… No, sir, I don't recognize any of the perpetrators. They are arrogant, hairy intruders…No, they are not people. They are little squirrels with wings. They keep peeing in my storage closet."

After the laughter and the questions regarding my sanity subsided, the dispatcher wouldn't pass me on to an officer. He would instead refer me to Animal Control, who would give me a list of expensive exterminators. Mr. Exterminator would come out to study and meditate on the situation and plug a few access points. He would charge me hundreds of dollars to install one-way exits on those access points all around the roof. He would collect his payment, and then he would wash his hands of the matter.

I knew this was how it would go down, so I skipped the cops and Animal Control and went directly to Mr. Exterminator. I paid the money. He did his thing. But the peeing and partying didn't stop. I can sleep through one night of rodent orgy, but after a week of perverse scurrying, thwacking, and bumping sounds, I couldn't take it anymore. I summoned the varmint elimination guy back to my house to complain that nothing had changed.

"Why don't we just shoot the little bastards?" I complained. "Or trap them or poison them? Just get them out of here!"

The expression on his face dropped to the floor. He acted like I was advocating the extinction of life on the planet. I was just implying that I wanted these squatters out of my home—by any and all means possible. But traps and poison were not options open to this exterminator. Any such remedies would require an application to the Department of Wildlife, a Cruelty to Animals Act of Congress, and a presidential pardon. So I was stuck. It looked like peaceful coexistence might be the best option. I cleaned up the attic and purchased some earplugs. I hoped that might be the end of my misery.

But little George, a flyer, set me off again. He flagrantly violated all the rules of coexistence. I woke up one morning to discover he and his orgy pals had destroyed my crystal glasses and defecated all over the living room sofa.

"George!" I bellowed. "We are *finished* coexisting!"

You might be thinking George sounds adorable. You might be thinking he should be welcomed and protected. But please understand, this wasn't just a careless houseguest having a mishap. No, it was more than that. George showed no regard for our property rights. He wouldn't even recognize we were defending our home.

George developed an insufferable attitude. He lived by a "your home is my home" philosophy. All attempts to disabuse him of his arrogance were met with contempt. Along with his bad attitude, George enjoyed the advantages of lightning-quick speed and the ability to hide under every kitchen cabinet and appliance. He also learned how to squeeze into our closet, seeking refuge among Minako's dresses. His manners and behavior grew worse each day.

With condescension, he inspected the dishes in our sink. He tasted them and found them wanting. When it came to our open wine bottle, his standards were not so discriminating. He licked and licked the cork hole with a fast and eager tongue. Here he lost some points with us because we knew our wines. This bottle was from an unknown vineyard of recent vintage. It had only a mediocre aroma and body. It was our basic cooking wine. Mr. Fast Tongue would never measure up as a sommelier in any place we would be associated with.

But I digress. We were in the heat of *mano-a-mano* combat. Or *mano-a-Petauristini* combat. Call it what you will. Either way, this was no time for discussing vineyards.

Every time we cornered George and tried to pin him down with a stiff-bristled broom, he would run around us and be in the next room before we even discovered his absence. For a rodent that weighed less than one of my hands, he put up a spirited defense. His attacks were pathetic, but he still seemed to have control of the battlefield. After an hour or so, he and I both became tired of the thrust and repose of the broom. Minako and I moved on to new tactics.

We would beat on the floor to frighten George out the front door. He would have none of it. He seemed to suggest that *we* use the door and vacate.

One evening George rolled out his ultimate weapon: three-dimensional air warfare maneuvers. He left the carpet to climb up the curtains. As we approached, he launched into a glide over our heads, on into the next room, where we regrouped and began again. As the evening wore on, we all became fatigued. I feared the battle would end in a stalemate. We seemed to be heading toward an ugly truce, in which we once again considered we might have to coexist in our home with this arrogant, defecating thug. George appeared agreeable to such an agreement, content to abide with us in the house as a supervisor, watching our comings and goings.

Minako informed me she would have none of it. “There will be no secession of hostilities! I will not sleep with a weak-bladdered squirrel!”

Desperation is the mother of invention. We tried one final tactic. We pulled all of the door and window screens out of the basement. We lined them up in two rows, end to end, to form a channel. With George holed up in our bedroom, we created a corridor path of screens that left the bedroom and led straight out the front door. But would it work? Everything was riding on that flimsy screen corridor. It was late at night. We had no other options left. If this tactic were not successful, we would have to question our ability to protect our domain and all of humankind’s standing as the master race.

More tedious chasing around the bedroom followed. George, for the first time, sensed doubt in the outcome of this conflict. Now he looked worried.

A worried rodent without diapers becomes a messy rodent. This only made our situation more desperate as we flailed about with sticks and brooms. Finally, in a moment of confusion, George took off, out the bedroom door, into the screen channel. Before he realized what was happening, he had run out the door and into the garden. Once out, there was no turning back.

“Not so smart, Little Red Flyer,” we thought. “Don’t mess with us humans.”

And with that, we thought we were done chasing winged beasts from our home. Little did we know, another creature was eyeing our abode. But next time, I would come up with a new plan. A new strategy for cooperation, bilateral respect, and productive coexistence. We were about to meet Boris.

A Winged Victory for My Male Readers

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GENTLEMEN! DO YOU FEEL YOU are no longer master of your domain? Has much of your valuable family time been occupied with discussions about the upright position of your toilet seat? Has your wife become more focused on how you are driving than where you are going? Have you replaced your children as the naughtiest individual in your house? If you have been encountering such problems, you will be pleased to know I have a solution.

Shortly after my incident with George, the Little Red Flyer, I managed to go, in one giant step, from the basement of my domain to the attic. I did it with the assistance of my new business partner, Boris.

Before I made the acquaintance of Boris, I used to endure judgmental personal observations from Minako.

"Your wardrobe is terrible," she once announced. "Throw the whole closet out."

"Who left the wet towel on the bed?" she often demanded to know.

"You made too much silly conversation with that waitress," she would inform me as we drove home from dinner.

Minako's criticisms would cast doubt on my patriarchal views and leave me feeling underappreciated. Boris came to my rescue.

Boris is a bat. A medium-size, gray bat who instantly restored my standing in the household. Once again I am king.

After our battles with George, our house was airtight. All access holes had been plugged. We kept all windows, doors, and chimney openings tightly closed. Damned if old Boris didn't slip into the house unobserved.

Minako discovered him one evening while walking down the corridor into our bedroom. Along the way, she encountered Boris, who was flapping

by in the opposite direction.

I had already lost any affection I might once have had for mouse like creatures bouncing off my bedroom walls. But Minako's opinion of rabid flying rodents with teeth silently zipping past her neatly coiffed hair? It was a much higher level of raw, visceral hatred.

When Minako first arrived in America from Japan, she was startled one night by her screaming roommate.

"There's a bat in my room!" her roommate shrieked. "Call the police!"

Two anxiety-ridden cops arrived with revolvers drawn.

Since that time, Minako has attempted to mentally will bats out of existence. This time, in her own home, that didn't work. The nonexistence became a flopping, potentially bloodsucking nightmare.

Minako isn't a shrieker herself, but she is more than capable of freaking out and making her apprehensions known. It was late at night. We were both tired. I suggested we close all the doors and go to sleep. Tomorrow, when it would be brighter, we could figure out what to do about it.

Minako gasped at my suggestion. I'd made a mistake. Worse than the wet towel on the bed.

"I can't sleep in the house with a vampire flopping around!" she cried. "He might crawl under the door! He might work his way through the keyhole, or get to us through the HVAC vent ducts!"

I didn't get it. Anyone looking at Boris could tell he was not Count Dracula. He was a mosquito-eater, not a bloodsucker. But the situation had rocketed well beyond the discussion stage. Sleep wasn't in the cards. What was called for was manly action. Coexistence was not an option.

I sought protective gear. On with the leather gloves and the red ski jacket. In the bottom of our closet, I found my old fencing mask from my college days. I don't normally wear down-filled ski parkas on sweaty August evenings. It was uncomfortably hot and not much of a fashion statement, but I had no choice.

Grabbing backup protection in the form of a tennis racket, I trundled into the room where Boris had taken up quarters. He and I spent a good ten minutes sizing each other up. We each held our ground, eyeing the other in a Mexican standoff. (Well, actually, blind Boris didn't do much eyeing; he just sat there folded up like a shapeless turd hanging on the curtain. But I could feel his sonar waves reflecting off my body.)

Then suddenly, *flop, flop, flop!* Boris grew tired of his resting place on the drape. In a mad frenzy of almost silent fluttering, he sprung into the center of the room where I was standing. He started circling.

Instinctively, each time he approached, I would dodge, jerking up the tennis racket to further protect my already fencing-mask-protected face. If you think this was redundant protection, you have never had a bat baring his fangs diving down on you as though he were coming in for the kill.

This dive-and-dodge dance lasted another ten minutes before I got tired of the routine. I lurched toward the window, threw it open, and pointed the way for Boris to exit.

"Get the hell out of here, Boris! You've overstayed your welcome!"

Boris ignored my instructions.

Out in the hallway, Minako heard my desperate words.

"What's going on in there?" she demanded through the closed door. "Is the bat still in the house?"

There was nothing new to report. Just an endless *flop, flop, flop* around and around the bedroom.

"Everything is under control," I replied. "Boris decided he wants to do a sleepover with us tonight."

"*Who* wants to spend the night?"

"Boris. The bat."

"You *named* him? He's not our pet, Barclay! Get him out of here!"

What else could I say? Boris wouldn't leave. Besides, any animal that can fly into a locked-up house or catch a ton of mosquitoes on the wing and then find his way home—all with his eyes closed—deserves some admiration. Alas, poor Boris was not the sharpest member of the bat fraternity. He ranked low on their IQ index. It appeared he wanted to leave, rather than engage in further battle, but in the twenty passes he made by the open window, he missed every opportunity. We were going to have to get comfortable with the fact that this guy couldn't even find his way out a barn door. Fat chance he was going to navigate through any ducts or keyholes.

But then, floppy turn number twenty-one was a charm. I practically had to escort him out by the wing and send him on his way, but finally, Boris exited. I dashed to close the window.

Minako heard the crash as I pulled it shut. "What's happening?" she yelled. "Are you all right?"

“It’s all okay now,” I said in a voice more calm than I felt. “He’s gone. No problem.”

As if by magic, the curse was lifted. In an instant I was released from my prior role as downtrodden, bumbling husband. I reemerged as Saint Barclay—Bat-Dragon Slayer.

I was fearless now. I became defender of women. Protector of home and virtue. All those wet towels, all the lawn grass tracked onto the carpet? Blissfully erased from living memory! I reassumed my proper place as heroic master of my domain.

I tell you this story only because recently Boris and I have started a new business: Bats out of Heaven, Inc. I am the boss. Boris is now chief recruitment officer, here to serve all of you domain master wannabes.

If you are struggling with an anxious or uptight spouse, someone you live with who scrutinizes and criticizes your every sneeze, then give me a call, and I’ll have Boris send one of our partner bats over. For a small, additional fee, you can also rent my fencing mask. Please try not to hurt your rent-a-bat. (A deposit will be collected to ensure he is returned in good condition.) But don’t worry. Your bat will know the drill. A couple of dozen laps around your home before he flops on his way, and you too will be restored to your respected status as master of your domain.

My Dirty Little Secrets

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DO YOU EVER WONDER WHAT your cleaning lady thinks of you? Do you worry whether or not you measure up in her eyes?

"Who cares?" you might say. "She's an employee—just like the air-conditioning repair guy or the garage mechanic. I pay her to clean. Why should I give a damn what she thinks?"

Until recently, I felt the same way. But then one evening, I caught myself straightening out my desktop, putting away dishes, and picking up my clothes off the floor. Juanita was coming to clean in the morning, and here I was, preparing for her arrival.

"What am I doing?" I wondered, but I couldn't restrain my urges. Within a few weeks, this pre-maid cleaning ritual was becoming a habit. One morning I noticed a speck of encrusted food on my counter—a tiny morsel of filth—staring back at me, taunting me.

"Ignore it!" I told myself. But I couldn't. Juanita would be here soon. I couldn't let her see this trace of squalor. I started to scrub.

Why was I doing this? Did I think Juanita was some kind of princess? Hardly. She was just a hardworking, undocumented immigrant. I was paying her good money to clean the counter. I was not, on the other hand, paying her to judge me.

"She needs to just do the cleaning and not think about us," I thought. I tried to convince myself Juanita would agree. And yet, lurking in the dark, insecure recesses of my mind was a question mark. What did she think of me? I didn't want her to see me as a slovenly old fool, slopping breakfast cereal on the carpet. I worried about the fact that Juanita also worked in the much larger houses of our respectable neighbors. Their homes conformed to the latest redecorating magazines. I couldn't imagine those owners ever left underclothes on their polished floors or had less-than-immaculate kitchen

counters.

My mind started racing with a horrific thought: cleaning ladies probably make the same sloppiness comparisons my wife and I do. We always inspect and evaluate other people's homes when we visit. Juanita had plenty of time to access everything in our house. She was a reservoir of big data about all the intimacies of our home and personal life.

Suddenly I was gripped with a fear that she knew everything about me. My wardrobe, for example. Were my garments in the closet stylish or dowdy? Was my underwear new and pristine, or was it threadbare? She wasn't going to say anything, but Juanita was probably as harsh a critic of my fashion sense as my wife was.

She also knew whether my wine closet contained *Grand Cru* or lowly *schnapps*. And what about all those times I hid in the closet, smoking cigars or eating chocolates? She probably knew I did that too.

"Oh my God!" I thought. In the bathroom, there was more evidence. She could tell when I shot straight in the hopper and when I missed my target. She knew what meds and illegal substances we were on. Was my Viagra bottle still full after all these years or constantly being refilled? Were we practicing safe sex?

Call me touchy, but these are things I don't want other people looking into. I tell the world—I even tell myself—"I'm an open book. I'm a boring guy. Nothing to hide!" But that's not true. Once you rip off the covers, once I stand before you naked, there are things I don't want broadcast on television.

But my real problem is, I don't know what Juanita notices about me. Does she perform a perfunctory cleaning, or does she have an inquiring mind? And what happens with her observations after she leaves? Does what happens in Barclay's house stay in Barclay's house? I have no idea. But I don't want her sharing any of this stuff, making judgments or comparisons.

What if she keeps a diary of her clients, writing up her unmentionable discoveries? What if she ranks us in categories such as Acceptably Tidy or Deplorably Squalorous? If our neighbors learned of our position on her "Tidy versus Squalor" list, we'd have to pack up and leave town.

For all I know, Juanita attends the annual convention of Cleaning Ladies International. Maybe that's where they find solace, comforting one another from cleaning nightmares. Do they evaluate and establish what minimum standards they will accept before taking on clients? Do illicit

photographs of my domicile show up in her PowerPoint presentation of home hygiene horror stories?

I imagine celebrities must get a pass, a special dispensation, when their housekeepers do their rankings. Certainly the hoi polloi are not evaluated by the same standards as the privileged. But how do I measure up?

If celebrities get upgrades, is there anything we mere mortals can do to boost our standing among the cleaning fraternity? Would it help if we dropped empty champagne bottles in the trash along with occasional Tiffany and Gucci boxes?

Juanita is an honest lady. She has always spoken to me with deference. But still, I want to be on her good side. I wish to avoid the possibility of extortion. And so, I shall continue to scrape that speck of food filth off the kitchen counter.

Free Will and the Renaissance

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FUNNY GUY GARRISON KEILLOR ONCE suggested on his *A Prairie Home Companion* radio program that the Renaissance, the Enlightenment and free will were a mistake. The whole the Age of Discovery—all bad for Western civilization.

The Dark Ages, on the other hand, were one party after another, according to Keillor. In the Renaissance, which followed, we might have scored the right to free will, but we replaced a perfect, medieval world of divine order with a life of chaos and perplexity.

This idea gave me a jolt. When I was in high school, my history teacher, Mr. Sawyer, taught me, "The Dark Ages: they were the pits. Not even a little fun. Rusty armor, plagues, and boiling oil dropped down on you every time you attacked the castle."

We dutifully wrote down everything Professor Sawyer said. We took it as the gospel. But now, Mr. Keillor was suggesting the Dark Ages, not the Renaissance, were the good old days. If we've truly been given free will, Keillor said, then we should exercise that right and return to the sunny uplands of feudal determinism. When the Renaissance took over, he argued, we were left with nothing but disorder.

This disorder thing has been bugging me lately, thanks to my hyper-complicated garage door opener. The thing is so technologically sophisticated, I can't figure out how to use it. It has programmed itself to open and close at random times. I was wrestling with the buttons last week when Keillor's idea made me wonder: Have we really advanced since the Dark Ages? Life was simpler then. People were not tortured by technology, nor did they have to worry about making decisions. They simply thought what the Church told them to think.

Are we truly better off today with so many religious options? Is all of

this free will really good for us? The hundreds of years of holy wars throughout Europe—how much fun were they? If you were a true believer, just one encounter with the Grand Inquisitor could spoil your day. Take that poor feudal farmer plowing his grain field, for example. What did he gain, learning his field was a patch on a round earth ball? And what has this round ball thing done for me sitting in traffic? I've gained a GPS but lost an infallible God who cared for my eternal soul. It doesn't seem like a very good deal.

In the Dark Ages, we were united under one single philosophical tradition, singing "Kumbaya" in Latin. Who wants the current Tower of Babble when we had the *lingua franca* of Latin spoken throughout the Christian world?

And what about all the bad actors who came with the chaos of free will? The black widow Lucretius Borgia, the devious Machiavelli, and Torquemada, the inquisitor. Or Galileo. Sure, he gets a sympathetic press these days, but what did he really give us? The astronomer humiliated and degraded both you and me. He said we were no longer the center of the universe. Thanks to Galileo, we must now live with the sad reality that we occupy an insignificant speck in a secondary location in the universe. Was that the news you were itching to hear? Hell no! It's damn depressing. A big *"Whoopee!"* for Mr. Galileo? I think not.

Back in the Dark Ages, God, the Pope, and the kings never would have allowed us to be relegated to an ignominious state in some obscure location in the cosmos. You want obscurity? Try Siberia.

And so, I have concluded, Keillor is right. Free will hasn't made us any happier. You want proof? Take a look at less sophisticated creatures. Fish are content and unquestioning in their water habitat. Birds accept the sky as it is given to them. Why so much discontent and disruption among us humans? I blame free will.

Sure, the Renaissance was a period of mind-expanding creativity. It spawned artistic masterpieces, architectural wonders, and the belief that humankind is in control of its own destiny. Out of all this turmoil, we got airplanes, telephones, television, and the Internet. But we also gave up a more certain, simpler life.

Divine medieval determinism couldn't have been all bad. Think about life in that old castle. I could be passing my evenings by a roaring fireplace

instead of wasting my night trying to fathom the meaning of the three hundred buttons on my TV remote. I'd much rather hear the ringing clash of jousting knights in shining armor—perhaps with a choir in the background singing heavenly Gregorian chants. And I'm thinking about those lovely ladies in long puffy skirts and chastity belts. They sound so much more exciting than attempting to reprogram my Internet router.

Traumatic Sperm Disorder

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SO WE WENT FROM THINKING what we were told to think in the Dark Ages to thinking what we wanted to think in the Renaissance. By the late nineteenth century, psychologists such as Sigmund Freud were busy trying to figure out what the hell we were actually thinking and why the hell we were thinking it.

Back in college, I was taught Freud was a great man. Here in the West, we believed whatever he told us. Today, he's not so well accepted. My wife has taught me this is a good thing. The Japanese, it turns out, were never that into him.

"He told you *what?*" Minako gasped one day as I shared Freud's idea that all of our behaviors, hang-ups, and neuroses can be traced back to our early childhood experiences. "To us Japanese," she said, "that just sounds so *sick!*"

The Japanese prefer to think of their own human behavior in terms of the samurai code. That code did not try to explain why we suck our thumbs or wet our beds. No! A samurai stood tall. When he did spill his guts, he was not spilling out neuroses. He was literally popping out intestines and chopping them up in the dirt with his sword. The samurai were about righteousness, not anxiety.

So, poor Sigmund: always rejected in the Far East, and now even his own Western culture has dumped him.

In college, we didn't think to question psychology. We accepted that Freud was big. His theory was as valid as Newton's thing about gravity. It had to be right. Even in those days I had a revisionist thought: If Freud traced most of his behavioral explanations back to the formative years, why would he begin there? How about starting at conception? And hey, why not go further back and explore the idea that there was life before conception? The sperm cell in the testicle and the egg in the ovary show signs of life. Maybe

that’s where psychology begins.

Using this holistic view, we should consider what transpires in the truly formative years. What’s going on with the young sperm and egg cells? How do these little cells feel about themselves? They must have their own ordeals and experiences. Freud made inferences about what infant children feel, but did he ever bother to consider the sperm and egg cells that precede the child?

Science should reach out to these long neglected cells and feel their pain. Researchers should not be dismissive about such matters. Each of those poor sperm cells may have suffered extreme trauma in their formative days. When that tiny sperm cell sees millions of his comrade cells dying in a condom or drying out on the bed sheets, that could ruin his whole day. How would you like to live in a world where only one in a million of your peers is destined to survive, while the rest suffer a ghastly death? That’s more distress than one lonely cell should ever have to endure.

That one in a million who wins the game will carry survivor’s guilt the rest of his life. And all that guilt, after suffering hopelessness in an extremely competitive environment? You better believe that has implications for his fragile, nascent psyche. He can’t help but develop hang-ups later in life.

Even the lucky few who survive spermicidal jelly, diaphragms, and IUDs and make it up the fallopian tube—what is their future? All but one or two will die of exhaustion after swimming their little selves to death. And the rest? Flushed down the toilet. If you have even the slightest compassion, you should feel for the survivors.

Then there are the egg cells. Their numerical odds are better, but only marginally so. Only a very few of the dozens and dozens of sister eggs survive into a new generation. Consider that lonely trip down the fallopian tube—all claustrophobic and dark, not knowing what’s coming next. With some luck, that egg might finally, like the Bachelorette, become the object of charming attention from countless sperm cells. But maybe not. Is all that attention welcome? Or is it more like the worst bad date you’ve ever had? There’s no free choice in this life-shaking event. And make no mistake: this is life and death we are talking about. If these two cells are compelled to spend their lives joined together, you might think they would have the opportunity to express their consent. But no, it’s join or die. So maybe, in some limited situations, free will isn’t such a bad thing after all.

Regardless, my wife is right. Freud made a big mistake to speculate on

such unknowable subjects. Worse yet, he tried to present his ideas as scientific truths. Asians never bought it. I too had my doubts.

The Clash of Civilizations in a Teacup

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When tea becomes ritual, it takes its place at the heart of our ability to see greatness in small things. Where is beauty to be found? In great things that, like everything else, are doomed to die, or in small things that aspire to nothing, yet know how to set a jewel of infinity in a single moment?

—Muriel Barbery
From *The Elegance of the Hedgehog*

After fifty good years of an international marriage, you might expect that my wife and I would have worked out all the cultural diversity issues. Mostly we have. There is, however, the matter of tea.

The Japanese tea ceremony is a state of mind. As my wife was taught in her youth in Tokyo, it's a ritual to calm the spirit, to slow down the senses so you can enter into an aesthetic, enlightened moment. Minako's mind-set regarding tea is at odds with my own.

Japanese embarking on their aesthetic tea voyage are assisted by a rustic teahouse, austere in its quiet simplicity. There are artifacts: an ornate container for the powdered tea, a bamboo spoon, a well-used water ladle, a mixing whisk. Of course, there must also be an exquisite but unpretentious teacup. You must hold and contemplate the cup while you discuss its feel. You must dote over it. Then, to demonstrate your mind-set of contrition and show respect for the tea, you must get down on the floor mat, seat yourself on your knees, and bow a deep bow.

Without belaboring all the rituals, I will just say you can easily pass an hour or more fussing over the teakettle, the right water temperature, and even the right charcoal for the heat source. Once the tea is ready to drink, there are more rituals. You must raise the cup with two hands, rotate it three times to the right, sip, rotate the cup back again, and wipe the rim before replacing the cup on the tatami mat. It's all very Zen, and with luck, you will become one with the universe.

As for myself, I do not pass hours raising and rotating teacups. I live in the world of fast food. I place my order for a bag of Lipton at the speaker, drive forward to the payment window, then on to the pickup window. The Styrofoam cup goes in the plastic cup holder, and I'm out of there.

Am I one with the universe? No. But in forty-five seconds, I'm back on the highway. No bowing or even getting out of the car. Am I surrounded with artifacts or aesthetics? Sure, if you count the radio blaring and the dazzling neon that surrounds me as art forms.

Minako and I have an industrial-strength clash of values associated with tea. Our respective cultures have their own ways of seeing the same drink, and there is no working out a compromise. The Japanese tea masters will never switch to Styrofoam and tea bags. And if the fast-food drive-through took an hour to serve you tea, they'd be history.

I imagine some refined and elegant ladies might get all squishy and judgmental about my philistine world. We business guys say time is money. It's a legitimate choice millions of us make at the pickup window. We aren't seeking calm aesthetics. We go to fill up. There is nothing faster or less expensive when it comes to the food and beverage business. Time and money are prime values in our lives and culture.

Chanoyu, or tea ceremony, is out of touch with our reality. It has no connection to time or money. It concentrates on ritual—living in a refined, artistic moment and restoring the soul. Time-and-money business is a mind-set. It cannot be reconciled with the tea master restoring the soul.

Nevertheless, Minako and I have come to an accommodation. Every evening, we sip tea in our own way. We have devised our own tea ritual. The cups and tea leaves are the finest we can afford, but they are not the point. More importantly we remain judgmental free and try, as Muriel Barbery puts it, *"to set a jewel of infinity in a single moment."*

Grease Happens

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IN SPITE OF OUR CULTURAL differences, Minako and I have found ways to drink tea together. Car repairs are another matter.

When Minako visits the splendid new BMW dealership for routine automobile service, there is no discussion of transmissions, tires, or fuel-injection pumps. Her mind is not troubled, nor are her ears soiled by discussions of greasy, auto engineering topics. The three-story plate glass BMW building is a work of architectural sculpture. It sits on a spacious, landscaped, five-acre lot. The entire experience from arrival to departure is a testament to hygienic modernity. Minako is a driver who sees her car as nothing more than transportation. Her visit is like a Disneyland experience with free coffee and donuts. She will never even see a mechanic.

The service attendant greets her in his climate-controlled, carpeted office. His wardrobe—dark suit; white, starched shirt; and tie—is spotless. His fingernails are well trimmed and immaculate. Nobody talks about diagnostics, mechanical repair replacement parts, or oily things that smell. No, no, no. Her car is in the hands of a digital, all-knowing, celestial force. Her car's onboard diagnostic chip has transmitted all relevant information to the dealership's master file. The dirty fingernail guys know everything they need to know as soon as she drives in the door.

After pleasantries, pastries, and coffee, Minako hands the keys to Mr. Fashion Plate. Her car is silently whisked out of sight to an inner sanctum, where it is mysteriously restored to mechanical splendor. Carpets are vacuumed. Chrome is polished. Promptly, her vehicle is returned. The operation might involve human hands, or it might be done by robots. It's impossible to know. My wife doesn't care. She pays her exorbitant bill and receives a perfectly functioning car.

I feel bad about Minako's BMW experience. I begrudge such progress.

Something is lost in this sanitized process. Her vehicle repair visit is swift and efficient, but she meets nobody who cares about her car. She leaves knowing no more than when she arrived. Her entire dealership experience is a series of well-planned operations backed up by time-motion studies, customer surveys, and cost-benefit analysis. The auto industry is so efficient, it protects us from itself. My wife has endured a clean but time-consuming visit. She leaves clueless as to the engineering marvel and technical wonder that take place under her car's hood. All she gets is transportation.

Koko, on the other hand, is earthy. He is my overweight, unshaven, hands-on car guy. No starched shirts or manicured fingers. Koko is a nuts, bolts, and axle grease aficionado. He fights a life-and-death battle—dueling with well-financed, national auto dealerships. The future of one-man auto repair garages is not looking good. I am his ally in this battle.

After I wait in the empty office for a few minutes, he yells at me, "I'm back here in the shop, under the lift. Come on back."

I find him under the rear axle of a car. He doesn't spend time in the office. He is the clerk, the supervisor, the counseling technician, the mechanic, the cashier, and the owner. When I interface with the gruff Mr. Koko, I want to know *why* my motor is going *clunk clunk*.

There is no deep-pile carpeted office. Our meeting takes place under the lift, next to the exhaust pipe. Grease is everywhere. It impregnates Koko's rumpled overalls, his tools, and the parts boxes. Unless I'm wearing gloves, I don't care to shake hands with him. On cold days, because his grease-slathered cement floor has not been washed, I hear a *squish squish* sound when I walk.

But Koko gives me empowerment and enlightenment in a way the BMW clerk never thinks about. I get an understanding of technical problems, explained by a man with a lifetime of mechanical expertise and passion. I'm exposed to an inspiring, authentic, humorous human.

When I raise the subject of climate control or complain that it's unbearably hot in the summer, Koko informs me, "The building is temperature controlled by the weather. It comes in through the open windows. Hot in the summer, yes. But I make up for that by letting in the cold of winter."

"Wow!" I consider. "Why didn't the BMW dealerships think of a good idea like that?" I guess they are so busy eliminating grease, they can't think

of anything else.

I'm not averse to grease. It was once part of my daily life. I owned a bunch of fast-food hamburger restaurants. I purchased and disposed of hundreds of gallons of vegetable oil waste each week. Grease is expensive to dispose of, so I modified my twenty-six-year-old Mercedes into a grease-burning diesel. You expect repair costs with any old, high-mileage car. The engine modification to burn French fry cooking oil fuel required additional maintenance.

"What the hell have you done to screw up that beautiful engine?" Koko wanted to know when I first brought it in.

Since cooking oil congeals below eighty degrees Fahrenheit, I must tap the hot water out of the radiator and pipe it next to the fuel tank and lines to keep them hot and flowing. The specific technology is unimportant except to say my conversion means Koko and I are bonded together in a long-term, expensive relationship. I feel like I'm paying most of his kids' college tuition, his mortgage, and his retirement fund. Our relationship is a close one. Rather than my wife's annual checkups, I see Koko on a semiweekly basis. I don't receive a bill for services. I run a bar tab of sorts that gets settled up periodically.

"Why are you becoming pals with an auto mechanic?" Minako wants to know. She's afraid I'm going to bring Koko home in his overalls to sit down with us for supper. But I know she is joking. She's not a car person, so I put up with her grumbling. Nevertheless, if you prefer meeting people in spotless, carpeted, well-lit offices, people you're not afraid to shake hands with, you are missing something.

I have been empowered by every *squish squish* meeting with Koko. I know how my car works, and now I know how to repair it myself. I have learned a pile of off-color jokes, seen what it takes to run a small business, and picked up a bit of wisdom with which to navigate my life from a man whose perspective is not available at BMW. Do I enjoy the smell of gasoline and motor oil, walls piled high with dirty old parts, and furniture you would never want to sit down in? Why yes. Yes, I do. That is what auto repair is all about. You can't just wallpaper over it. Auto engines are inherently dirty. Designer decor and perfume can't alter that fact.

Koko is an opinionated, talented, entertaining guy. He's also a fun guy. Some of life's authentic experiences come with grease and mess. I choose not

to avoid them. No matter what BMW wants Minako to believe, grease happens.

Zen and the Art of Car Washing

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YOU CAN TELL WHEN SPRING arrives in New England. Daffodils pop up, snow banks are hard to find, and car freaks invade the shopping mall parking lots with their weekend car shows. These auto exhibitionists have switched their convertibles into topless mode, throwing open their hoods to expose their gleaming engines to onlookers. Some passersby will sneak a peek. Others don't get it. To them, well-polished carburetors and shiny spark plug wires are a temptation easily resisted.

It's a disturbed mind that spends an entire afternoon with Q-tips, polishing the car's dashboard instrument cluster. For anyone to dedicate his or her life to detailing greasy engines and simonizing bumpers and rear axles is sick! Auto engines are filthy. They are *meant* to be filthy! God never intended these engines to be scrubbed so clean you could eat off them. You want your scrambled eggs and bacon? Get a dinner plate. You want the grime and mud off your car? Drop a few coins in the ScrubaDub Car Wash. Leave your hood down to cover up your motor—because normal people don't need to know, don't even care, about that muck accumulating on your engine's cylinder block. There are no engine police inspectors checking to see if the valve cover has gunk on it.

On the surface, onlookers might be fooled into thinking they are seeing exquisite motorcars far superior to their own rust buckets. Little do they realize they are witnessing something much darker.

In reality, what they are looking at is the wasted lives of guys with troubled minds and far too much free time. I know this because I am one of those troubled guys.

What we do is compulsive. We've got an out-of-control obsession that is not normal. We squander countless hours fussing over our cars like a mother orangutan grooms her young.

There is no single diagnosis that explains why my fraternity of troubled individuals wastes their lives with rags in hand, polishing. According to one theory, some of us have this peculiar mind-set: our cars are material extensions of our egos. If you kick our bumpers or fenders, we feel as though you've kicked us in the kneecaps. Alternatively, when we see people gathered around our shiny, vision-of-perfection roadsters, our egos soar to euphoric highs.

For other distraught guys, a day spent scrubbing and wiping is a therapeutic thing. According to this thesis, washing all those splotches of tar, grime, and bug splats down the drain is like purging the mind of its torment. Polishing our cars provides the same self-realization fulfillment as we would get spending an hour with our psychotherapists—at a price we can afford.

For still others, this is a transformational, Zen moment. Remember the *Karate Kid* movie where Japanese Master Miyagi helps the young man realize his quest to become a martial arts champ? The kid is promised that if he waxes the master's pickup truck, the inner mysteries of karate will be revealed to him. The kid keeps scouring and polishing. After weeks of scrubbing, he not only wins his championship and the pretty girl; he also becomes one with the universe—and Miyagi's old truck. All of us car-washing guys should be so lucky. (I'm still waiting.)

Then there are guys who are more difficult to diagnose. They are called to the chamois skin and car wax by some inexplicable, higher force of nature.

This is a gender-specific disorder, afflicting mostly guys. Car Guy feels an imperative primal urge—a bit like the wildebeest migrating across the Serengeti. Car Guy gets the call. He doesn't think about it. He doesn't ask questions. He just ups and goes.

When the first sunny day of spring arrives, I pay homage to this car cleansing force. It is an imperative I must obey. It demands hours of dedication spent getting tired and stinking wet. Once the warmer weather arrives, my roadster must sparkle! That higher power calls down, "Grab the chamois, the soap, and the hose!"

Who am I to contradict a thundering voice like that? My roadster and I have spent winter in stuffy New England hibernation. We are desperate for a heliotropic moment. I need time under the sun, scrubbing and scouring.

Is that a scratch in the wheel well?

Are there pebbles stuck in the tire tread?

Is that a fingerprint on the windshield?

All must be whisked away.

By the end of the day, I've had more than enough Helios. With sunburn, sweat on my brow, and an ache in my shoulders, I stand back to admire the immaculate results of my labors. The garage is a pigsty of mud puddles, filthy paper towels, and overpriced squirt cans. My body feels crippled, and my wife's weekend chore list hasn't been touched.

But not to worry. Sitting there, gleaming like a movie star on the red carpet, is my roadster. I am proud of my Mercedes.

I am proud of myself. My mind is torment-free, and I'm at one with the universe. What could be better?

That's not crazy, is it?

Mr. B&B

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"DURING HIGH SEASON, THERE IS so much demand, we don't see any need to extend hospitality to include the guests' cars," the hotel owner's wife informed me. "Most of our customers are content with just a room, and they're lucky to get even that."

The old country inn was beautiful. Its colonial white look, with green shutters and a rose garden, was as quaint and picturesque as anything you'll find in the pastoral Berkshire Mountain range. For guests, there was nothing to dislike—except the craggy old innkeeper. Hostel managers are supposed to be hospitable, not hostile. But this couple, with their chiseled faces and granite expressions, didn't project any warmth. I didn't think they even tried.

I had come to Lenox, Massachusetts, on the way to an antique auto convention in upstate New York. Corning was more than a seven-hour drive from home, so I broke up the trip by spending a night in the rolling pastoral hills of this town, the summer home of the Boston Symphony Orchestra. For the next few days, I would be talking about engines and crankshafts with fellow gearheads, so I decided to leave Friday afternoon and balance the automotive weekend with a Beethoven concert and a night in a country inn.

When I arrived in Lenox, the front-desk lady at the inn was suspicious and somewhat put out that I would ask for a garage as well as a bed for the night. Reluctantly, however, Mrs. B&B consented to discussing the garage matter with her husband.

Mr. B&B turned out to be your typical, strong, silent New Englander. He seemed to live by the philosophy that you could rarely improve upon silence. "Never use two words when one would do" was his credo. Even before he said hello, I watched him draw in a deep breath—in anticipation he was in for some pesky complaint. I got the immediate impression that if his wife could not say no, he was well prepared by temperament and experience

to dispatch such troublesome guests.

"Yes," he admitted, "I do own the barn, but no, you cannot park your old clunker in it. If you truly have put some wax on the old jalopy, perhaps you could park it down there under the tree where the other old cars are. If rain is a possibility, my lawnmowers and tractors need to be exactly where they are: inside."

He did not need to repeat himself. There was no room for misunderstanding his meaning. There would be no room at the inn, or the barn, for old cars. I began to understand what Joseph and Mary must have felt like in Bethlehem.

"I have a priceless antique parked out there," I pleaded, "a show car that I'm taking to exhibit in a car show tomorrow. People will pay money to get in and see it. I can't let it get smudged up with rain and mud splash. Please—just come out and take a look. You will like it."

Mr. B&B's hostile glare and iron-set jaw became tempered. A look of curiosity crept over his craggy face. He seemed to be thinking, "What the hell is this guy talking about? He thinks his clunker has some value? We'll see about that."

But then, as we walked across the parking lot, a miracle happened. When Mr. B&B, the Iceman, saw my Mercedes 300SL, he instantly changed from a strong, silent Mr. Hyde into an enamored Dr. Jekyll. Suddenly he was brimming with childlike curiosity, smiles, and awe. He melted there on the gravel driveway like a hot ice cream cone. *Of course* the lawnmowers could be moved out and the Mercedes moved in.

And then, he offered more than mere garage space. Mr. Innkeeper invited me to join him on his old wraparound porch. The two of us sat there on the rockers, where he could not stop talking. I learned every detail about his loving relationship with his 1968, powder-blue Austin-Healey.

"Back in college," he recounted, "I was dating Jenny. Every Friday night, she and I took off for the Jersey Shore or the Vermont hills in the Healey. Top down, sun in her face, the wind blowing back her auburn hair… it was the joy of my youth. I will never forget it. Jenny left me a couple of years later, but that was where I found my love for old country inns. It continues to today."

His story continued for two hours. He spoke of exploration, of women, and of his weekend adventures. Sadly, he told me, a spring windstorm caused

a pine tree to fall on his car. It was destroyed.

"When all restoration attempts failed," he concluded, showing genuine sorrow on his formerly granite face, "I had to sell the car and get a job. I settled down and grew up. But I'll never forget Jenny and that blue Healey."

His story was not a story of nuts, bolts, and steel. It was more about who Mr. B&B was as a human being. I noticed the glint in his eye and could empathize with the occasional tear and many laughs. At last, with the sun setting, passion and catharsis spent, his story ended. He left to attend to newly arriving guests, and we parted good friends.

Over the five-hour drive to Corning and the seven hours back home to Boston, I reflected on this "innkeeper well met." It was a long time to ponder such a miraculous transformation. For me, a car guy who approaches life on mechanical engineering terms, my meeting with Mr. B&B seemed weird. As I drove home, an unfamiliar touchy-feely sensation seemed to intrude. It went like this:

Relationships, relationships, relationships! The women in our lives often say men never talk about relationships, that we seldom express any kind of inner feelings. They are wrong. They would have been surprised by Mr. B&B's passionate relationship with his old car and passenger many years ago.

Our beautiful antique 300SLs have strong, low-RPM torque and a great deal of horsepower at speed. But they also have another power: to transport us into an unexpected world that is otherwise closed to us. I have stayed at hundreds of hotels and never even gotten to know the desk clerks' names. But thanks to my antique SL, I feel I now know more about a country innkeeper in Lennox, Massachusetts, than his family, psychiatrist, or father confessor might ever know.

There is magic in driving an antique car. Regardless of your age, when you climb inside your restored sports car, you are transported back to your senior prom or your first date. The years may have weighed heavily on your spirit and your body's odometer, but the car is identical to when it was new.

A Tale of Two Mind-Sets

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LAURENCE TALKED NONSTOP FOR OUR entire three-hour drive. He was ruing the present and future of America.

"The economy favors the worst elements in our society," he moaned. "The legislature hasn't passed a good law in years. America's moral fiber is in the sewer."

Laurence could find nothing good with his country. All roads into the future, according to Laurence, led downhill or over a cliff. As we drove and the hours dragged on, it was clear what he really wanted was to return to the clipper-ship days, a time when the privileged class of blue bloods ran our town.

Blue bloods? I don't think I ever knew one. If we did find them, would we really want them and their Charles Dickens world back here today? Where did they go anyway? Were they hanging out in a bar somewhere in South Boston? Were they basking in the sun on some French Riviera beach?

I was tempted to pull his leg. "Laurence," I wanted to say, "our problems all go back to the American Revolution. We shouldn't have rebelled in the first place. We should give our colony back to its proper owner, the Queen of England. Otherwise things will just get worse."

But I kept quiet. He wouldn't get it.

I don't normally listen to such hangdog moaning. I walk away. But the two of us were old college classmates—and were stuck in a car together for three hours. Laurence was delivering some of his artwork to a gallery I was associated with. His car had broken down, so he had asked me to drive.

So now, there we sat, in a car full of canvases. As time ticked on, the strange Impressionist paintings only added to our surreal conversation. There was no escaping.

Never again, I promised myself, would I allow a passenger to go on

endlessly pontificating, but in this moment, I couldn't stop Laurence. I had let him go too far. He was on a tear. There was no changing the subject or settling into silence.

Long ago his Boston Brahmin ancestors ruled the city in a manner more to his liking. Shake his family tree, and you'll see enterprising sea captains who accumulated vast fortunes in the Caribbean sugar trade (some say slave trade) and China tea trade (a.k.a. opium). Alas, the fortunes have come and gone, dissipated generations ago, leaving Laurence to be a seventy-four-year-old struggling artist with the bluest of blood but only a modest bank account. If you give him the chance, he is pleased to tell you he's the eldest son of an eldest son for six generations.

During our drive, I offered only one lame rebuttal to his list of complaints.

"Larry, aren't the minorities, the destitute, and those needing medical care better off in our country today?"

"Laurence!" he said.

"Excuse me?"

"Laurence. Not Larry. Laurence. And no, I am not troubled with the non-Brahmins or less fortunate. It's not fair to press me on that subject when *nobody* cares about the downtrodden. It's the breakdown of the moral values of the leading wealthy families that troubles me. That, plus the liberation of women from their former position in the home."

According to the Laurence Doctrine, those were the two flaws culpable for our nation's current woes.

Later I got to wondering, what were his plans for all those sit-at-home, women who were not liberated? With small families, how should the days go for them? Whose socks need darning nowadays? Does the younger generation even know what darning is? Where's the demand for homespun cloth among the catwalk fashionistas?

I said nothing. By the time we arrived, I felt depressed—like a dishrag.

The next day, however, a new dawn brought a new reality as I toured the Cambridge Innovation Center, a Massachusetts entrepreneurial incubator where eight hundred young men and women were launching their start-up companies. To me they looked more like hyped-up high school students than PhDs or advanced engineers. They sat, perched in small cubicles, working on their ventures and paying almost nothing for rent. The center allowed them

access to MIT professors, venture capitalists, lawyers specializing in IPO documents, and people who could assist young innovators to create the next Apple.

The building buzzed with creativity till 2:00 a.m. Tons of snacks and too much coffee were available, as well as conference rooms where one could meet and promote hot new ideas. The atmosphere was over caffeinated, enriching, and exhilarating.

Most of the eight hundred will fail and blow away the millions their backers have invested. But that is neither relevant nor significant in view of the few billion-dollar successes like Android, Zipcar, and others.

I can't help but see the parallel between these young innovators and Larry's shipping ancestors who traveled off to unknown lands. My Brahmin classmate will continue to doubt the country's future until the day he spends time in one of the country's many incubators.

I am dazzled by these empowered young men and women. Their enthusiasm is infectious. They speak the language of a world better than anything seen in the old days. "Woe is me" and "stay-at-home women" are not found in their lexicon.

You Are What You Think

• • •

HAVE YOU EVER DREAMED OF completely transforming who you have been all your life? Stepping into a new pair of shoes? Sort of like entering a witness protection program, where you move and bring nothing of your past life with you? My college buddy Dr. Belmont did it. He altered his role in the world.

John Belmont was a curly-haired professor, 190 pounds of cantankerousness, volatile opinions, and non sequiturs. He was also a doctor of psychology with a sharp wit. Choose any subject, and he had an aggravating habit of informing you that you were wrong. Then he would lecture you on the subject. He would not only delegitimize your argument, but also proceed to trivialize the anger you would feel at being corrected.

He was frustrating as hell. Even some of his friends felt a good punch in Dr. Belmont's nose would do him a world of good. Only…you couldn't stay angry with him for long. He would always come back with some distracting humor that would pop you out of anger mode like a ping-pong air gun pops out the ping-pong ball. He could switch to funny mode so effectively, you'd forget your anger. In spite of that, I'm still pissed off at him today.

I hold set expectations about old friends. After knowing them for so many decades, I no longer question how they will behave. They become pole stars with which I navigate my life. But one morning—*puff*—the dependable Dr. Belmont got out of bed, shaved, brushed his teeth, and went berserk.

His transformation was neither violent nor foaming, but it was certainly peculiar. He retired from his prominent position at a research institution. Grants were coming in. His salary was assured. There was nothing for him to dislike. But retire he did. Goodbye status and security. *Adios* prestigious colleagues. Hello sleepless nights of "What the hell will I do now?"

A year later, his ex-wife called me. "Have you seen John recently?" the former Mrs. Belmont asked. "I'm worried about him. Please give him a call.

See if he's okay."

Most of the women I know never give a thought to their exes, let alone pick up the phone to see what could be done for them. I was concerned.

So I immediately called John. We got together a few days later and enjoyed a pleasant, very normal visit. Then, as he was leaving, he mentioned, "You should call me again sometime. Here is my card with the new number."

There it was; the evidence:

JOHN BELMONT
Address…
Phone…
E-mail…
ART PHOTOGRAPHER

"John, this is a misprint," I said. "Art photographer? That's not what you are!"

"Well, yes," he said. "I am now. I spend my days seeking out subjects, models. I compose scenes. Then I enhance and print."

"No, no, you snap pretty pictures as a hobby. You fill your idle retirement hours with snapshots. We all do that with our smart phones these days—the kids, the pets, sunsets on the beach. That doesn't make us art photographers. When you hand out a raised-letter business card, you're proclaiming your identity to the world. If you don't care what you're proclaiming to others, then what about the message you're telling yourself? That business card speaks to how you fit into the human race. John, I have known photographers, and that is not who you are!"

But one thing hadn't changed. Cantankerous John still argued with whatever I said. He smiled and warmed to the subject.

"Yes, it is. I work full-time studying, creating, and perfecting my shots. I shoot thousands of pictures a year and hold exhibitions. That is unquestionably who I have become!"

Others might see John simply as an irritable old man who quit his job, retired, and found a second act. That view doesn't work for me. I've been listening to him pontificate on the grandeur of psychology and his prominent position in it forever. I see his career and his physical presence as

synonymous. Psychology became his mind and body. This whole artist thing had to be some kind of joke.

"I hear the words, John. And yes, you talk the talk. But your self-identity isn't some snap impulse. You've spent decades studying psychology at Reed, Yale, and other institutions. You submitted your thesis and received a doctorate. Then, after four decades working your way up the ladder—publishing papers, lecturing, and sucking up to department heads—your efforts paid off. You landed a position at a major institution. And now, *presto-chango*—your affiliations, your papers, your lifetime of research—all out the window? You magically reappear as a sixty-five-year-old freelance picture taker? An artist? I don't think so. Something's wrong with this photo, John. You should go back to your former wife and ask what she thinks about all this."

With this, his face reddened. He went into attack mode.

"You judge me by your own narrow standards. You've reached the wrong conclusion. No surprises there! You're wrong because you are insecure about your own career identity. You were a child of the sixties. You spent years playing judo, followed by job searching and disillusion before you finally settled in your career. I, as a psychologist, I always knew exactly what I wanted for my career. I got my degree and moved seamlessly into the university medical school. I am secure with my identity choices, Barclay. You should try to feel equally secure. If you wish to make a dramatic change, do so boldly. You're an adult, not a prisoner. Stop your clinging!"

"This is why I hate arguing with shrinks," I thought to myself. But I couldn't let it go.

"John, the point isn't about me and what I did in the sixties. The point is, who are *you*? Day one: doctor; day two: artist. What's on the menu for day three, John? You're a nut job. You need help. Perhaps an intervention."

Standing there, red-faced myself, I couldn't possibly concede this argument to John.

But with time, I have changed. John has created some remarkable photos, held well attended exhibitions in France, Canada and the USA. Begrudgingly, I must admit, each time he sells a picture, he begins to look more like an art photographer.

If this continues, I will have to conclude there is nothing wrong with John's picture or the freedom he's found in his new, enviable life.

Resurrecting a Ghost Town

• • •

THE CITY OF PUTNAM, CONNECTICUT, once stood tall among the other riverside mill towns of America's industrial revolution—Waterbury, Danbury, and Hartford, to name a few. In the era of King Cotton, the Putnam mills poured out textiles as fast as their waterwheels could spin. Bolts of cloth were shipped all over the young country. The town built a new railroad station, and steam train after steam train began bringing in immigrant laborers to work the mills. More trains would pick up and ship out the town's products. Builders were building. Banks were lending. Business was booming.

When the Civil War came in 1861, Putnam's textiles provided the blue uniforms to clothe Union soldiers. Two world wars then kept all the New England textile industries humming from 1914 to 1945.

But soon after that, the mills moved—first south, and then to the Far East. Trains came no more. The waterwheels stopped, and so did business. The proud, redbrick factory and downtown retail buildings were supposed to last forever, but they went empty. Then, pipes froze, windows broke, roofs leaked, and furnaces rusted out. Putnam was dying.

When it seemed no more hurt could come to the city, something did. In 1955, the millpond and river flooded. A torrent carried much of Putnam downriver. Bridges, rail lines, and buildings were swept away. So was the town's belief in itself.

Today, Connecticut's smart money is found in the golden southeast corner. Greenwich and Stanford are the state's most prosperous towns. Putnam remains the poorest. When Wal-Mart and Price Chopper stores arrived in Putnam, they located outside of town, sucking more life out of the city center. Who's going to rent a dingy old storefront on vacant Main Street when they can build in a green field by the exit ramp? America is full of similar towns that never recovered their early successes in textile, footwear,

or other industries. But Putnam got lucky. Paul Toussaint came to town.

Paul is another intense artist I met through Dr. John Belmont. He was born in Danielson, in northeast Connecticut, not far from the city of Putnam. Paul is an "iPhotographer." Instead of a camera, he takes pictures with an iPhone. Paul is also an urban redeveloper—and a very odd duck.

The past half century has been a disaster for downtown Putnam. Paul Toussaint came up with a solution. He doesn't see the world like others do. He has offered Putnam and similar towns an unusual solution to their economic woes: pop-up art galleries. In Putnam, he began with one of Main Street's dilapidated storefront properties. He cleaned the musty old premises, painted the building, sanded down the rotten floors, and installed new exhibition lighting. *Presto!* The town had a bright, modern gallery at practically no cost.

The gallery was how Dr. Belmont and I came to meet Paul. Belmont was looking to exhibit his own photographs in a larger gallery. Through a neighbor, I learned of Paul, his gallery, and his willingness to rent out the entire floor for private exhibitions.

People took notice of Paul's new gallery. He exhibited mostly local artists. Some paid to exhibit; some did not. Like the Pied Piper, Paul would set about creating a buzz. He charmed newspapers, radio stations, and students. He had a gift for promoting art. By force of personality, he could turn out a crowd where no crowd existed. He brought people in with poetry readings, concerts, lectures, and painting classes. He would do anything to generate gallery traffic.

Abandoned storefronts with no tenants and broken windows beget more empty storefronts in a kind of death spiral. Paul found the reverse is also true. A well-maintained, active shop will bring in more tenants and attract other businesses.

Soon after Paul opened in Putnam, the town's economy improved. People started returning to the downtown, with its restaurants, jewelry shops, and antique stores. The old Montgomery Ward block and other three-story structures installed new windows.

With a new exhibition each month, Paul attracted a surprising number of curious newcomers to the quiet street. Sales were modest to nonexistent, so his future was never secure. Compared to prosperous businesses in large towns, the gallery's income was laughable.

But here is the magic part: normal retailers won't locate where they can't make sales. Without attractive, existing retail shops, shoppers won't come. But without shoppers, the retail shops won't come. So how do you break this cycle and get a tenant that will see no profit? Art galleries change the financial calculus in abandoned mill towns. A gallery's labor cost and rent compute differently.

Paul is an artist. Making a buck was not his prime motivation. His cash compensation was meager, but his rent was also close to nonexistent because landlords prefer a clean, active storefront to a dirty, empty one. For both a building owner and a town unable to attract profit-seeking stores, Paul's gallery offered something special: cachet. An art show or poetry reading would bring few income dollars, but those dollars would come from the upscale shoppers the retail town was needing.

Even among artists, Paul is on the fringes. He doesn't paint or sculpt. He attended photography school in Providence and did commercial photo shoots. When business turned bad, he ended up as a letter carrier for the US Postal Service. He doesn't talk about it, but he incurred a disabling illness. The US government provided him with a pension and benefits. That allowed him to pursue his love: artistic picture taking.

Paul became a recognized pioneer of iPhotography. He shoots with his iPhone, then goes to work with Photoshop to "sculpt" the pictures into art.

If you live in a world of hedge funds, stock brokerages, or advertising, you might say this lean, scrappy young man is crazy. Why fritter away your day keeping the gallery open? Profits are a pipe dream. Why persist?

Come the summer street fair season, well-dressed customers crowded Paul's exhibitions, and there was much to do. The shop was cool and exciting. But there were also rainy and snowy days. No customers came. In winter months, the building wasn't just lonely. It was cold. The furnace had rusted out years earlier. Paul would sit huddled over a space heater, holding a pen in his cold fingers, planning his next show. He kept the gallery going because he dreamed dreams. He imagined his art gallery was in a town that not only repaired its windows but also had an eye for aesthetics.

Was his dream a fantasy? When you walk the gritty streets of Putnam, you would not confuse the town with Renaissance Florence or Bohemian Paris. Did Putnam even know about aesthetics? Could it support Paul?

But Paul dwelled on a different question: "Can I afford to support this

town?”

For three years, the answer was yes. His exhibitions brought in the upscale shoppers retailers needed. In addition, Paul got to exhibit his own works. For an artist, that was big.

The property owner was also happy. His building’s value increased when the gallery paid its first token rent. Soon after, the value soared when a commercial bike shop rented the remainder of the premises at market rates. Just by being there, Paul contributed to the landlord’s wealth and the town’s betterment.

Sadly, after three years of successful shows, Paul’s position with the gallery was terminated. The bike shop wanted to expand. They offered to pay higher rent if they could also have the gallery space. How could a landlord resist an income increase? Paul was out. His “baby”—the gallery he had nursed through a difficult birth—was closed. Paul was again unemployed.

But Paul’s got unbounded enthusiasm and talent for what he does. He has since found three other vacant spaces in three other northeast Connecticut towns. After helping to resurrect Putnam’s central business district, he has moved on. He has identified other spaces in other towns, where is now trying to work his magic again.

The Bastard Fired Me

• • •

I WOULD RESPECT ASSISTANT DEPARTMENT Head Brenan, but the bastard fired me. Even after forty years, I still cannot forgive him.

John Brenan was tall and imperially slim. He spoke with a patrician, British-Bostonian accent. His condescending demeanor might have befitted the bank president or one of countless vice presidents, but who was he trying to kid? He occupied a much lower rank: assistant bank department head of New England's largest bank. He and I never enjoyed each other's company nor held much mutual esteem. There was almost nothing gained from the unpleasant days we spent together.

Okay, so I was a bit cocky. The economy was booming when I joined the bank in 1968. I was fresh out of Dartmouth Business School and quite aware that MBAs were sought after during that time of tight employment. My future prospects were not just excellent but improving. In time, I expected I would supervise the snoot-talking Mr. Brenan and his whole department. How pleasant it was going to be, summoning him to my well-appointed office. I might look down my nose and inquire in a condescending voice, "Do you feel you have met my minimum expectations, Mr. Brenan? The executive committee and I are disappointed. We believe you can do much better."

It was a fun fantasy.

Humility was not on my mind in those days. I had turned down several good offers when I came to his bank. It felt unbelievable that Assistant Brenan could stand in judgment of me and make the determination as to whether or not I was suitable as an officer candidate. Yet ten months later, there I was—on the sidewalk. My fall from the lush carpet on the twelfth-floor suite had plunked me down to the basement, out the employees' entrance, and onto the street. I remember the sidewalk was covered by

Dumpster slop. The experience was unfathomable. It was frightening.

Suddenly I was standing there with no positive employment affiliation and nowhere to go. I wanted to vomit. The loss of income and disruption in my life were discomforts I could manage. But the humiliation? What would I say to my wife? Could I face the next Dartmouth reunion? How would I greet my ladder-climbing classmates? Brooding about job loss was painful and not quickly dismissed.

I blamed Brenan because he was a patronizing jerk. But it was also evident the economy had changed quickly for the worse. You could sense it in women's fashion. That autumn, the micro miniskirt hemline dropped down below the knee. It was replaced with the midi skirt, and that plunge reflected the direction of the economy. In a few months, consumer spending, the stock market, and even Vietnam War spending, all dropped. The bank was laying off, and I was one of them.

I'd worked hard during my first year. I had given the bank good value for my pay. If they didn't see me as presidential material, or even as some lesser employee, then it was time to consider other opportunities. Brenan's lesson in humility was valuable, but a larger business benefit came out of the experience.

Some people start companies and encounter nothing but mutual kindness and *bon ami*. They sleep soundly at night and quickly find their way to profitability. My first venture into my new business wasn't like that. With the experience of an eighth grader, the credibility of a street vendor, and the staying power of a hitchhiker, it was difficult to get started. Everyone expected me to fail. I'd be closed down within a year after opening. That's how it goes with new restaurants.

Working at the bank, we never discussed or considered embarrassing questions about financial credibility or staying power. We were secure in a house of money, high above all that. Now since I was a new restaurant start-up, landlords, contractors, architects, and kitchen suppliers all demanded answers. Where would money come from?

In anticipation of my imminent demise, they all wanted cash up front. The elderly members of the state liquor commission took one look at my college-boy baby face and just knew I was a front for some illicit enterprise. They delayed for months, demanding legal documentation and more hearings.

Recruiting good chefs was a lesson in hiring prima donnas. Candidates I interviewed showed nothing but contempt for my MBA degree and my stature as company president. There was Hilda, a plump bookkeeper I mistakenly hired. Her accounting skills were modest, but she devoted her time to observing my imperfections. She then went on and equated these observations with remedies. All problems required solutions, not observation. Long months and even years passed with growing expenses, mounting loans, and nothing much by way of profits or salary.

Amateur mistakes during the opening were expensive. I had to fire people I admired, people who trusted me. The temptation to abort was overwhelming. Fortitude and commitment were my most valuable assets. That was the lesson I learned from Brenan.

My abrupt departure from the Boston bank was painful. It was humiliating and frightening. But the experience transformed me. Pre-Brenan, I would have started my company as an idealistic, generous, naïve college boy, trying to please everyone. I would have waited for someone to make decisions or pass me the ball. They would have eaten me alive. After Brenan I changed. I would no longer bend over backward. Rather, I stood up for the integrity of the new business. I did what it needed. With no big daddy, no loving arms of my alma mater, and no government welfare assistance, I was ready to make it work.

When I suffered my darkest moments of frustration, I would picture Brenan's condescending British persona. That image filled me with the anger and fortitude I needed. While the start-up moments felt unendurable, nothing on earth could rival the unjust degradation of working for and being judged by Mr. Brenan.

In addition to all the accounting, marketing, and production skills they teach in business school, it was helpful for me to have had a Brenan. He allowed this young college boy to look down into the abyss. He showed me how unattractive failure can be.

The First National is gone now, merged and remerged again. Mr. Brenan retired years ago and passed on. In the interim, my Benihana-style restaurant did so well, I built ten more like it, then sold out at a profit.

All entrepreneurs should have a Mr. Brenan to play a similar role in their careers. Getting a new company going requires more than just good products, marketing, and luck. It's an ordeal that takes guts and fortitude.

Don Quixote Came to Harvard

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"THE DUKE" ARRIVED IN ULTRALIBERAL Cambridge, Massachusetts, with the commotion befitting his status as a movie star. The Harvard University Drama Club had named John Wayne "Man of the Year." He accepted.

John Wayne arrived in Harvard Square in 1974, rolling through town in an M113 personnel carrier—a big, black tank. His visit came in the later days of the Vietnam War. It was an epic clash between one of America's most liberal university communities and a spokesman from the far right. Some naïve students had hoped all Hollywood glitterati shared their progressive political orientation. Wayne did not.

Cambridge is a proud New England university town. We see ourselves today as twenty-first century, liberal, and tolerant. Some say Cantabrigians think they are better than everyone else. Others call our town "The People's Republic of Cambridge" and believe we have taken too many left turns. We think of it as "enlightenment" or "exploration" as we pursue our cutting-edge ideas. As I write this, we are fawning all over ourselves for being the first school system in Massachusetts to recognize Eid al-Adha and celebrate the Festival of Sacrifice, an Islamic holiday. There are only a few Muslims in the school system, but that's not the point. We are inclusive.

John Wayne arrives in Cambridge in a tank.

The Duke's visit was the one inclusive moment in our history when we carried the diversity thing too far. Every blasphemous, reactionary word from his mouth made the town gag.

"I don't feel we did wrong in taking this great country away from them," he once said. "There were great numbers of people who needed land, and the Indians were selfishly trying to keep it for themselves."

The Duke was not troubled by scholarly subtleties. He explained, "If everything isn't black and white, I say 'Why the hell not?'"

On other occasions, he made it clear that his views on jurisprudence were at odds with those taught in the law school: "Out here, due process is a bullet!"

The moment the Duke strutted onto the stage at Harvard, the outrage and opposition to his attitudes were palpable. The citizens of Cambridge are extremely tolerant. We accept all races and sexual persuasions—as long as they think like us. Our acceptance and tolerance does not always extend to evangelists, the military, or conservatives, however.

A letter in 1974 to the college newspaper, the *Crimson*, demonstrated

our political tolerance has clear limits:

> *To the Editors of The Crimson:*
> *(Harvard Drama Club) disgraced itself and the community by bringing to Harvard, and to little-needed national attention, John Wayne, a man who distinguished himself by portraying the extermination of the native inhabitants of this continent as a series of heroic acts. He then used his reputation as vigorously as he could to advance the prosecution of a war which Americans now see as anything from the most monstrous, costly error in our history to a deliberate genocidal campaign. To those who found this amusing, I must say I missed the funny part; to those who think Harvard gained any points against Wayne, I urge you to read the articles on his appearance in The Times, Globe, or Herald-American.*
>
> *"The old celluloid hero had his bluff called by the raucous students, and he took it like a man. Except for a few spoilsports, a good time was had by all." Undoubtedly there will be efficient means for dealing with spoilsports. Ha-ha-ha.*
>
> *Now that the spirit of Wayne has replaced the spirit of Thoreau at Harvard, now that the "disturbances" of the Sixties are finally over, now that, as the Globe says, "the silly season has returned to Harvard," whatever force it is in America that wages wars of extermination may rouse itself again and prepare to engage, without fear of its conscience on the campuses, since that conscience is safely asleep.*
>
> *—Mel Konner, PhD '73*

Dr. Konner was correct when he stated in his letter to the Crimson editor that John Wayne "had his bluff called by the raucous students, and he took it like a man." The Duke received his honors and made his acceptance speech in the crowded Harvard Drama Club Theater. The audience was infuriated. Every word Wayne spoke contradicted all that their professors, friends, and community had taught them.

A youthful feminist in the audience could stand it no more. She jumped

to her feet and bellowed out in the middle of the Duke's speech, "What do you think of women's lib?"

"It's all fine with me," Wayne replied, "so long as she is home by six o'clock to make supper."

Not the answer the feminist was looking for. At full volume she yelled back, "Well, fuck you, John Wayne!"

The Duke struck a jaunty, white-hat cowboy pose with thumbs in belt. He looked her in the eye and brought the house down by answering, "Well, fuck you, little lady."

It was an honest expression from the mouth of an honest man. It wasn't the chivalrous demeanor John Wayne had cultivated elsewhere. But elsewhere, lecturers with bygone ideas from a bygone era didn't need to arrive in tanks.

Wayne's Cambridge reception reminded me of Don Quixote's arrival in Renaissance Spain. The Lord of La Mancha also spoke to an unreceptive audience about bygone ideals of nobility and chivalry. His family, priest, and doctor quickly confined him to his bed. There he died a lunatic. A humorous lunatic, but a madman nevertheless.

The Duke's situation was not exactly the same. He was excoriated by an infuriated press. Then he and his tank were allowed to freely depart.

Five years after his Cambridge visit, like Quixote, John Wayne died at home—alone, in bed, of heart failure. Our college town, like Spain with Quixote, continues unchanged by the Duke's visit.

My Most Memorable New Age Princess

• • •

Step out of your ordinary life and contemplate transcendent matters.

—Gretchen Rubin

Like everyone else, I receive unending junk mail. You wouldn't expect to find any wisdom in that pile of paper in your mailbox, but one day, my stack of mail included an oversize, yellow postcard from a large yoga school in western Massachusetts.

By itself, this postcard wouldn't attract any attention. Like many others, it requested funds for some capital campaign. But this letter was different in that it included a personal note at the end. Written in pencil was a message from Ms. Heather, reminding me about the wonderful time she and my businessmen's group had enjoyed earlier that year when we attended a weekend yoga retreat.

We call our business group "Discovery Forum." Nine of us guys started our own businesses in our twenties and would meet to discuss marketing and finance. Today, decades later, we still meet monthly for companionship and talk about the business of life. We try to meet in a venue outside our comfort zone. We had gone to Heather's lakeside yoga campus knowing we were in for an envelope-pushing weekend of tofu, wrenching yoga exercises, and wacky new age philosophy.

The Berkshire Mountain campus setting was radiant in the crisp autumn air. The foliage alone should have made for a blissful experience. But two days of vegan stew, aromatherapy, and contortionist stretching exercises, we

had explained to Heather, was all we could stand. After the last Shaman Philosophy / Breathing Class, before we escaped back to our preferred world of doughnuts, M&Ms, and beer, we had a final postmortem with Heather in the studio to review what the two days had taught us. The weekend had finally come to an end, but she was not finished with us.

Heather had grown up in an alternative, parallel universe from us. We had all studied business administration or accounting at business schools, or at least gotten some marketing, budgeting, and financial skills before launching our own companies. Our backgrounds taught us the buttoned-down survival skills of production and marketing. Respect for regulations and compliance with rules was a big part of our day. We took those rules and obligations very seriously.

Heather was of a different school—a born princess. Whatever the dynamics of her early childhood, she was not troubled by rules. She sought out unconventional solutions to every problem she met.

According to Malcolm Gladwell, it takes ten thousand hours to master any topic. Heather was not confined by that rule. She preferred a more instant approach. In the late 1960s, when her conventional husband proved even more budget conscious than her father, she left the marriage, dropped out of college, and joined a spiritual commune near Big Sky, Montana. The commune, she told us, soon collapsed when the swami guru founder was arrested for misappropriation of funds. Heather moved on—to a monastic Zen temple in bucolic, northern Vermont. Buddhism, with its promise of instant enlightenment in a flash of satori, sounded better than spending years studying for a PhD or mastering a musical instrument. In the Vermont temple, she would dutifully sit on a tatami mat through hours of meditation. She would hear the inspired teaching of Zen Master Suzuki as he recited koans:

- *What is the sound of one hand clapping?*
- *How do you throw out everything in your mind when your mind is empty?*
- *What will sitting on this cold floor do for your hemorrhoids?*

The experience was initially exotic. It offered a refreshing change from her

middle-class, suburban thinking. But the spiritual mysticism grew befuddling. One day it occurred to her: maybe the koans didn't really hold any answers or meaning at all. As she sat there with her mind wandering and her knees cramping, she concluded one hand clapping makes no sound and no sense. Two years of tedious meditation, mountains of white snow, and dark disillusion were all she could stand. She abandoned the Green Mountains and landed as the administrator at this large yoga school.

Among the upper echelons of yoga schools, this one preached a strict, non-materialistic type of spiritualism. The yogis genuinely strove to abide by the lifestyle they preached. With a large administration staff payroll, utility bills, and facilities maintenance, however, an unforgiving budgetary component lurked just below their non-materialistic message. To be in perfect harmony with the universe, spiritual institutions must be in harmony with their creditors.

The school had a magnificent campus, where Heather had been hired as Marketing and Outreach Director. She was tasked with the assignment of attracting a more balanced clientele. The existing yoga clients were 78 percent women. They were enthusiastic, loyal customers, but they contributed only modestly to the capital campaigns. Our group of guys, who were presidents of companies, offered the gender and financial balance the school was seeking. Heather, with her bright and enthusiastic eyes and winning personality, dressed in beads and feathers and sporting big, fluffy hair, was a damn good hire for the school. From the moment we met her, she made a favorable impression on us old guys.

"I know you boys are going to feel a bit out of your element here among all these weird yoga people," she said. "You probably won't believe any of the Hindi lessons we teach. But please work with me. Promise you'll hold off your judgment and suspend your disbelief till the end of the program. Just allow me to guide you through an unfamiliar experience, okay?"

We must have been suckers for big hair and feathers because we couldn't help but like Heather. We pressed on to the end of the last day.

On that final day, I tried to explain to her, "Your school seems to think we business guys are in need of relaxation breathing, spiritual elevation, and every other one of the numerous antidotes to modern life that your program has to offer. But come over to our side, Heather. Step into our shoes."

I offered her an example. "I own ten burger restaurants. Each individual

store can only make seventy-two sandwiches per hour, but each day I have a hundred hungry customers who have thirty minutes for lunch. When my customers are hungry and steaming angry at me, there's no time for mysticism in my fast-food life. Yes, my friends and I make good incomes, but we pay for it by dealing with employee absenteeism, health inspectors, labor compliance officers, and taxmen. On any given day, there's simply no damn space in our lives for talking to the dead or chanting shaman mythology. If you aren't talking to me about food cost or reducing service times, I won't have much to say to you."

I thought I had the upper hand. Heather wasn't big on fast-food responsibilities; she was into Indian herbology, the Great Om, and the Kosha —the "sheath of bliss." She didn't concern herself with sandwich-making times. But neither did she get to where she was simply based on her outrageous wardrobe and big hair. Heather's life was a monument to the innovation of the human potential movement. At this yoga school, she had found a community of fellow searchers who shared her alternative values. She wasn't about to back down or concede anything. She defended her beliefs well.

At our wrap-up meeting, Heather reached out to us in an authentic and vulnerable way to reveal her own difficult history and her humanity. She had a heartfelt way of talking that disarmed business guys like me and my friends. And lest you think we returned home empty-handed, before we departed, Heather coaxed out of each of us the following gems of wisdom she had taught us:

1. Satisfaction equals achievement divided by expectations. To be satisfied in life, you must ultimately lower your expectations, but you must never lower your standards or vision.
2. Things don't change; people do. Things are not as they are but as *we* are. Whatever you dwell upon, you create to be true. Your thoughts can be either constructive or destructive; it all depends on which way you choose to respond. To know what you think, see what you are doing. To control your future, create it.
3. Remember the words of author and educator William W. Purkey: "You've gotta dance like there's nobody watching, love like you'll

never be hurt, sing like there's nobody listening, and live like it's heaven on earth."

4. To be mature is to know that your own fulfillment is inextricably linked to serving the needs of others. Happiness is paying the price of caring for others.

Heather was an inspiration to us guys and we probably should make the contribution to her institution's capital campaign, as she requested.

We all went back to our beer-and-doughnuts lives, making burgers or whatever. But we will long remember her words. Contrary to our initial expectations, we left with the highest respect for this new age princess in all her beads and feathers.

Audacity Works

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"How do I tell winners from losers?" Coach Kevin Henderson was saying. "I simply ask the candidate if he can play the game. If he tells me he is so good that he will blow my fucking mind, then I know I have a winner. If he mumbles or says, 'I think I can do it,' I more likely give him a pass."

Kevin is my son. He's a high school hockey coach tasked with the impossible job of recruiting the freshman team.

"It used to be a frustrating challenge for me. I knew nothing about the pool of candidates. I had no performance records to go on. Today I just ask the candidate if he can play."

Kevin discovered that a superabundance of confidence, combined with a badass attitude, is often a self-fulfilling enabler. He believed audacity creates its own reality.

This all sounded like hocus-pocus to me. Wasn't there a bedrock of reality that includes human performance? There are metrics that dictate what you can do and what you can't. What you can't do is sit on your butt and psych yourself into thinking you are National Hockey League material.

I was brought up as an understated Yankee. I'd have bouts of shyness. Boastful self-aggrandizement didn't make sense in my early life. I believed you are what you are. It seemed dishonest and smarmy to think self-congratulation could change your abilities.

Then I met Ken Newton. He quickly changed my thinking.

Ken's ancestors arrived in Boston from Ireland centuries after the *Mayflower*. He began his career as a parking lot attendant. If you merely patronize that business—drop off your car and be on your way—you may have missed the rich career opportunities it offers.

Ken spent his first few years laboring in the lower-rate lots in Dorchester. But he soon worked his way up to the finer parking facilities in

the Fenway area. From there, it was a small step to finding employment in a lot across from Fenway Park, where the Red Sox play baseball.

In no time, politicians and people of influence learned the value of a friendship with this amiable Irish youth.

"Of course, your usual space is waiting, Commissioner," Ken would say. "The lot sign says '*FULL: NO SPACE AVAILABLE*,' but give me your keys, and you can still make the first inning."

Within a few years, Ken was on a first-name basis with, and not shy about collecting favors from, every politician, including his new buddy, Senator John F. Kennedy. With influential contacts like that, Ken became too valuable to just park cars. The parking lot owner brought him into the home office to work on permitting and real estate problems.

Ken never saw a business problem that wasn't a "people problem." The solution began with friends and contacts. His first step was to pick up the phone and ask for help. Ken with a phone in his hand was the embodiment of audacity.

I was not so audacious. I found it impossible to call strangers and ask for favors, particularly from people in prominent positions. Ken, on the other hand, never suffered a moment with such timidity.

In the 1970s, my fledgling restaurant company was trying to find a site in Detroit. Ken learned of my difficulties and came down to my small, cramped office.

"Why don't you just phone up someone who can make things happen for you in Michigan?" he suggested. "How about Henry Ford II?"

"Ken, get real!" I protested. "I can't make a call like that. I might just as well ring up the Pope. Ask His Eminence for divine intervention with my site location problem."

Ken grabbed my phone and dialed the Ford Motor Company in Dearborn. The switchboard received his cold call and quickly routed him to a third-level assistant secretary.

The assistant secretary received calls like this all day. "The president of Ford doesn't do real estate site work himself," she patiently explained. "Perhaps you should look up real estate agents in the yellow pages. I'm sure *they* will help you."

But before she could hang up, Ken interjected, "And who *does* do the real estate work at Ford?"

“That would be Ford Motor Land Development’s responsibility,” she said. Then she hung up.

Immediately Ken was on his second call. “Hello! Ford Motor Land Development? Yes, I need to speak to your president. It’s an important matter!”

“You want to be connected to Mr. Wayne Doran? Yes, I will put you through.”

“Hello, Wayne? This is Ken Newton in Boston. I’ve just been speaking with headquarters. Mr. Ford’s office. They suggested you and I should talk. I’ll be in Detroit next Thursday, and I wonder if you could be available?”

I was flabbergasted. Couldn’t believe my ears. That wasn’t audacity. That was impudence. You could never accomplish anything that way, could you?

But the answer was a very clear *yes*. The next week, Ken and I got on a plane and flew to Dearborn. We were able to meet with Wayne Doran. A year and a half later, we opened a successful restaurant in the new Ford Fairlane Shopping Mall. I never was able to phone Mr. Ford or even reach his number-one secretary, but within five years, with the help of Mr. Doran and some assistance from Mr. Newton, we had built four more Michigan restaurants.

On another occasion, we had overlooked some fine print in a restaurant purchase contract in Montreal. That oversight allowed the seller, under unusual conditions, to cancel the sale and retain our deposit if we did not come up with mortgage financing and make the full purchase payment within forty-eight hours. I had been speaking to Canadian banks for more than a month. The more confidence I feigned, the more anxious and suspicious they became. Then, the worst of all possibilities transpired. The seller called to say he would cancel the sale if he did not have good funds immediately. As a foreigner in a strange city, I thought it would be impossible to get instant credit on a few hours’ notice. I called Ken.

“Gather all your papers,” he told me, “and catch the next plane for Montreal. I have some contacts there so when you arrive at the airport, call me, and I’ll tell you what mortgage bank to go to.”

Miraculously, in two days, Ken and I had a million-dollar mortgage, and we purchased the property. Audacity does work.

And to my son Kevin’s point, we must have recruited thousands of

employees over the years. I learned attitude counts in restaurant interviews as well as hockey teams. It tends to create its own truth.

The Strudel Sermons

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DOUG BONE WAS A TOUGH teenager from Moss Side in Manchester, England. What is Moss Side? A bad place to start life. Unless you need drugs or prostitutes, or you want to rub someone out, don't go to Moss Side. The educational opportunities it offered Doug included lessons in petty theft and the art of head-butting, which were leading him toward a life of crime.

Doug's father had higher aspirations for his son than a life of crime. Dad intervened, demanding that Doug seek a higher calling: welding.

"Learn a valuable trade, and you'll always end up on your feet" was Dad's message.

Early in Doug's apprenticeship, an acetylene tank fell over. It blew up in his face. Almost killed him. Following a year of reconstructive face and chest surgery and the rebuilding of Doug's scarred lungs, his doctor recommended vigorous physical therapy. Doug couldn't afford it. So with his doctor's blessing, Doug settled for a rigorous sports program instead.

He considered two options: dancing and judo. The girls in dancing class were more attractive, but as a weak-looking boy in a scrappy neighborhood, Doug decided the wiser choice would be judo. The throwing, choking, and armlock moves suited life on the mean streets better than a grand plié, a pirouette, or a mambo.

Doug quickly took a liking to judo. He showed an aptitude for throwing techniques. Soon he found success in both tournaments and dark alleys. By age twenty, he had his second-degree black belt.

That achievement forever altered his dream in life. Goodbye gangs. Goodbye welding. Doug had a new life quest: to become a third-degree black belt. That would put him among the world's elite *judoka*. It would also place him in contention for England's newly formed judo team going to the 1964 Tokyo Olympics.

When Doug's Manchester judo coach told him a third-degree belt would not be possible in England, Doug decided to move to Japan. In 1959, clinging to an unlikely quest and with less money than he needed, he set off for the Kodokan Judo School in Tokyo. First, he boarded a ship for eastern Canada. His plan was to cross that country by train, then sail onward, across the Pacific to Japan. He only made it as far as Edmonton, Alberta, however, before his money ran out.

Doug was still a master welder. He quickly found a day job in town. With his nights free, he began teaching judo at the local school. Two years would pass before he saved enough funds to continue his trip. His third-degree black belt goal was becoming a life project.

I was a college student at the time, looking for a summer job. I had flown to Edmonton and found work in a hospital. The year was 1960. I was an enthusiastic but directionless kid. But then I found Mr. Bone.

I worked days as an orderly, emptying bedpans and pushing bodies to the morgue. My evenings in that new town were much too quiet. I'd practiced judo during my first two years in college, so I signed up at Doug's judo school. The result was three inspiring months of learning throws, chokes, and grappling techniques.

Judo dojos attracted an odd collection of characters, including second-generation Japanese immigrants known as *nisei*, tough guys who liked to fight, and a few Zen freaks who were more interested in mystical balance than body-slamming techniques. Doug was odd too, but in a different way. In his late twenties, he was neither tall nor short. He was almost bony. He looked nothing like any fighter I'd seen. He was soft-spoken, with dancing, sparkling eyes. Instantly you saw an impish grin on his baby face. Then you noticed the scars where his cheeks had been sewn back on like slabs after the acetylene blast. He reminded me of a joking circus clown. Other than the lively eyes and scars, he had no noteworthy features. On the judo mat, however, Doug was noteworthy.

When he wore a judo uniform, I could see the loose skin lesions and stitch marks all over his chest. He looked as if a shoe cobbler had sewn him up after the tank blew. Whatever damage the explosion had done to his body or mind, it did not hamper his judo moves.

I'm usually intimidated if someone can toss me in the air, throttle me, or dislocate most of my joints anytime he chooses. Doug, however, was not

intimidating. He was more a magician than a terminator. To engage on the mat with this second-degree black belt was to enter another world. One moment, I would be defensively moving around the tatami mat. The next, like magic, my feet would be flying up over my head, and my back would be down on the ground. One instant: standing erect. The next: a thump, landing on the mat.

Amazing as Doug's throwing, choking, and armlock techniques were, however, they are not what I remember most. It isn't the judo that comes back to me after all these years. It's the apple strudel.

Each evening after practice, Doug would invite his class to the neighborhood pastry shop for coffee and strudel. There, we would listen to the poetry of life, in a British accent, according to Master Doug. Judo was simply the language he used to convey the philosophy behind his life's quest. Those three months of strudel can be summarized in two words: *Carpe diem* —"Seize the day."

"Don't ever become a spectator!" Doug would preach. "Be a participant. In judo and in life, you gotta take risks! Like you seize the collar of your judo partners, you must seize the opportunities each day affords you. Be audacious!"

With pain on his impish face, he would speak to us of obese people doing their workouts in exercise chairs. Today you don't hear much about those chairs, but at the time, there was a popular advertisement promising you could burn off calories just sitting down in a La-Z-Boy–type chair. "Let the chair's arm- and footrests do your exercise for you," the ads promised.

Doug, on the other hand, advised, "Get out there and fight, struggle, and sweat. Don't be confined to where you were born. There's an entire planet out there waiting, with unimaginable opportunities. You should expect setbacks. Your own gas tanks will blow up in your face. And you'll run out of money along the way. You may have to stop and bide your time, maybe for years. Let nothing stop you permanently!"

This was an uneducated welder from Manchester. I marveled at how a welder / judo teacher could give inspirational speeches night after night to our class.

Eventually the summer came to an end. I said my goodbyes to the judo class and went back to college.

Doug remained in Edmonton for two more years and arrived in Tokyo

later than he'd planned. There he settled down to a full-time judo career. He married and had a family. He never made the Olympic Team, but finally, in his late thirties, he did achieve much of what he wanted in life and earned his third-degree black belt.

When Doug and I first met in 1960, there were many young people drifting, searching, and looking for new ways. My classmates would drop out of college and take up residence on some lonely beach or mountain. There, they would resolve to "find themselves." That is what happened in the Age of Aquarius.

I was twenty, with a painfully naïve and passive view. Just like in school, I assumed that my direction in life would come, like a homework assignment. Someone would hand it to me. Mindlessly, that would be it. What I was missing was initiative, direction, and audacity. After a summer listening to Doug's strudel lectures, I knew what I wanted: to live in Japan and practice judo.

At first, moving halfway around the world and settling in Tokyo was a terrifying thought. When I finally arrived in Japan, I met Doug and his cute Japanese wife. I joined the Kodokan School. The adventure became pure excitement.

I practiced judo days. At night school, I studied the Japanese language. There I met Minako. We fell in love and never parted. Looking back today, half a century later, it doesn't seem so audacious to marry outside your own race, but at that time, it was common for our friends to meet and wed their high school sweethearts. It was expected that spouses would share the same culture, citizenship, and religious affiliation. Married couples who neither spoke the same language nor shared the same friends nor ate the same food could expect troubles. But when the time came, *Carpe diem!* We seized the day, married, and never regretted.

Sadly, after attaining his third-degree black belt in his late thirties, Doug contracted cancer and passed on at the age of forty. But his pastry shop sermons survive today. Doug held up a lantern for many of us. He taught us we could be the author, actor, director, and producer of our own life stories. His strudel sermons survive in my memory as an inspiration to live a participatory, audacious life.

My Life with a Geisha Girl

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EVERYONE MOVING TO A FOREIGN country should have a Mr. Tanaka. He was a short, chubby authoritarian in his sixties. I had always thought Japanese people were supposed to be self-effacing and polite, but this guy was gruff! He spat out his sentences like a pneumatic nail gun shoots a string of spikes into a wall.

I met Tanaka in a roundabout way through my father. At the time, Dad was founder and president of the Sheraton Hotel Corporation, as well as the Boston Chamber of Commerce. My father lived an intense, active life. Through my school years, I begrudged the time and focus he brought to his work, but when I arrived in Japan, all of my begrudging came to an end.

As part of Dad's civic duties, he entertained visiting businessmen. One of those groups included Japanese company presidents who came to our home. Dad's business hospitality was an unbelievable stroke of good fortune for me. Foreign countries can be intimidating. Navigating in a foreign language, knowing nothing of the food, culture, or how to find a place to live, was a challenge for me in 1962. Without Mr. Tanaka, the challenge would have been insurmountable.

Although Tanaka *could* smile, the only time I caught him doing it was when he was making a mock complaint about his wife.

"Oh, how I suffer! I bite my tongue every day and put up with so much from that woman."

The elderly Mrs. Tanaka would roll her eyes and laugh, as she must have many times in their marriage.

Mr. Tanaka had risen to senior vice president of one of Japan's huge construction companies. It was an exciting time because the Japanese economy was prospering. Tanaka's firm was busy building stadiums and residences for the upcoming Tokyo Olympics. He was an important leader in

his company but he could not have reached that high status through his “milk of human kindness.” Was he lovable? No. But he was hiding something below that gruff surface. Some found him likable, even endearing.

Under virtually no circumstances would Mr. Tanaka invite someone like me, a foreign judo bum, to come live in his comfortable home with his family. Japanese families don’t invite even close friends into their homes. However, through a series of coincidences, this man learned that my dad had entertained eight of the top moguls of Japanese industry. That made all the difference.

“Your father entertained Mr. Kuroda, president of Hitachi Company? The presidents of Mitsubishi Real Estate and Odakyu Railroad?” Mr. Tanaka said when we first met. “They came to your home? I know some of those guys. I will ask them about it.”

Soon after that, Mr. Tanaka, in his authoritarian way, asked me, “Would you care to teach my two sons conversational English? Come and live in my home?”

Instantly all my living-quarters problems were solved. I moved in and began one of the happiest years of my life. I slept on the tatami mat floor, ate mysterious cuisine, and taught English.

Each day began at 8:30 a.m. after Mr. Tanaka and the boys left the house. The maid prepared toast and tea for breakfast. Mrs. Tanaka and I would sit there on the tatami mat for half an hour or more, struggling with each other’s language inability. She was a fountain of jovial banter. When words failed her, she would immediately revert to hand gestures or facial mimicking expressions. I remember her sitting there drinking tea in her kimono—not the colorful, long-sleeved style of kimono that young girls wear, but something darker and more fitting for her age. Many of our morning chats concerned the experimental hair tinting she was trying. Like any guy, I barely paid attention, but she would persist. We filled in the quiet times watching Japanese soap operas. Later I’d go off to judo class and come back for the conversation lessons. While the routine was exotic at first, it quickly became perfunctory but pleasant. There seemed to be nothing inscrutable about Mrs. Tanaka. She had a great smile and a gift for making me comfortable and happy each day.

What was highly inscrutable was Mr. Tanaka’s view of Western customs. He and his family were planning a trip to the United States, so for

one night, we all moved into the Tokyo Hilton to practice "going Western-style"—to gradually acclimatize to the culture shock they would encounter getting off the plane in San Francisco.

"How the hell do you people get clean?" Mr. Tanaka yelled at me one evening. Even easing into the acclimatization at a Tokyo hotel was too much culture shock for Papa Tanaka.

"Is there a problem with the shower?" I asked.

"I can't see! I'm five-foot-three. Showerhead directs water only to my face and eyes!"

"Okay, what's wrong with the tub? When you get to San Francisco, just climb into the tub and wash."

It was the kind of question any Westerner might ask him.

"There is no place for the water to run off," he hollered. "It goes out all over the floor and into the carpet!"

"No, no, no! Keep all the water in the tub. Climb in, soap up in the tub, rinse, and get out."

It didn't seem difficult. I was sure he could master this.

I was wrong.

"Don't tell me you sit in the tub, wash dirt and soap off into the tub water, and then get out. With that diluted soap and dirt still on you?"

He was serious.

"Yes," I said. "That is how it is done. And the dirt is very diluted."

"You don't wash the dirt off first, and rinse *before* you get into the clean tub water? Is that just you because you were poorly brought up? Is it just you, or do other foreigners carry that soap and dirt scum on them all day?"

"Toto," I thought, *"we're not in Kansas anymore."*

"Okay," I told myself. "This is my boss. My job description is to teach English. This cultural acclimatization stuff is crazy. We speak different languages. They eat fish heads, and we eat *escargots*. We wear outside shoes inside, and they don't. I was prepared for some diversity, but this is too much. We can't even agree on washing. No wonder we've spent all of human history fighting wars."

I felt awkward having to relay this bad news about Western culture to Mr. Tanaka. But I did.

"Yes," I answered. "We have done it that way for hundreds of years."

Mr. Tanaka and I made it through the tub obstacle. We slept in our hotel beds, not on the floor. He came to understand that loudly slurping one's soup and burping at the dinner table were no-no's. Eventually the Tanaka family enjoyed an exotic trip to the mystifying United States.

As I visited Mr. Tanaka's office, I came to understand hardworking Japanese executives. They were incredibly loyal and worked for little pay by US standards. But their success was well rewarded. The company paid for Tanaka's international business travel, a company seaside summer mansion, limousines, and lavish entertainment. Add in some business-paid bar and restaurant visits, plus evenings at the geisha house, and life for the long-suffering business executive was pretty good.

I was invited to the geisha houses twice. I think that's about the only way for a foreigner to get in. I discovered they were not brothels. Longtime customers with fat wallets might sponsor a geisha and receive some favors, but for the rest of us, it was simply an evening sitting on the tatami mat, drinking endless cups of sake, and listening to traditional *samisen* and *koto* music. The entertainers could be very cute in their traditional makeup, hairstyle, and elaborate kimonos. For me it was good fun but hardly exciting.

My biggest surprise was what remained unseen. Like many foreigners, I didn't realize what was in front of me: Mrs. Tanaka was a geisha girl. Or at least, she had been before she married.

As a young American man living for a year with a geisha, it should have registered on my hanky-panky Richter scale, even though she was twice my age and retired. I never had a clue. Sitting there, having toast and tea with Mrs. Tanaka every morning should have tipped me off. She mentioned nothing about her former career. It was only years later that a business associate filled me in. The first Mrs. Tanaka had passed on. Mr. Tanaka had sponsored his favorite geisha, then later taken her as his second wife and had a child.

Today I am filled with questions as to how the Tanaka relationship started and how it played out. I was too focused on my own concerns to learn anything about her. But questions still come to mind. Did she encounter culture clashes when she went from geisha girl to corporate wife? Did she get along well with other moms at the PTA? Did her old friends and associates fit in well in her new circle? Was she living every geisha girl's dream, or did she miss the excitement of the entertainment world?

Thirty-five years after I lived with the Tanaka family, Arthur Golden wrote a best seller, *Memories of a Geisha*. If I had caught on earlier, how would my own writing have evolved? Looking back, it becomes obvious that I was oblivious to much. But I did learn an important lesson.

That was the year I discovered how much cultural baggage we all—or at least I—carry. I believed I was a freethinker without heavy reliance on outside influence. My attitude was, "I enjoy the freedom to think whatever makes sense to me." It never crossed my mind how much Roman law, Aristotelian logic, and Christian scripture had influenced my thinking.

The Tanaka family and I dressed similarly. Our cars were the same. We had everything in common when it came to superficial lifestyle. The Japanese had their own cultural history. I understood that the Tanaka way of thinking was not rooted in the same Western influences I grew up with. What was not obvious was that those old Greek and Roman guys heavily influenced my own daily thoughts.

This sparked a disorienting thought: *What in our thought process is original thinking, and how much is governed by historical baggage?*

I was once in a traffic incident with Mr. Tanaka—a fender bender outside of Tokyo. My assumption was that this accident called for legalistic resolution. Lawyers, insurance companies, and maybe even the police would discuss, debate, and eventually reach a solution in accordance with jurisprudence. Tanaka saw the same conflict in terms of posturing, bargaining, and dickering. Both drivers presented their self-righteous, self-serving arguments. After a few minutes, the party with the least convincing case pulled out his wallet, slammed a wad of bills on the other driver's fender, and said he was not paying anything more. With that, the incident was finished. No intervention from the law was necessary.

During political discussions with Mr. Tanaka, I would summon my finest Aristotelian logic to prove my case. Tanaka would see that as polemic trickery without reference to the underlying importance. It was a jolt to see he was coming from a place where Aristotle played only a small part.

More surprising was the fact that Japanese and Westerners had both built highly functioning, modern societies, but with radically different starting points. We were like birds and fish coming together and living superficially similar lives.

Running from the Cabbage Patch

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"YOU COULD END UP DYING in some of those crazy foreign places," a friend told me as we were packing for a trip to Africa. "There are no doctors, no hospitals, not even good bathroom tissue. There's disease, lions, terrorists, and God knows what else! Why would you bother?"

I didn't think it would be that severe. Our trip to Tanzania would be a college-sponsored tour with some professorial input and erudite companions. It would be a nice change of scenery.

"Since we'll be in that neighborhood," Minako mused, "maybe we should also go see the baobab trees and lemur monkeys in Madagascar?"

She posed the sentence as a question, but I knew there was more to it than that. It seemed like a budget-busting waste of our time and fixed income.

"Flying an extra thousand miles to see some monkeys? Where is Madagascar anyway? And what the hell is a baobab tree?"

I was against the idea from the beginning—even before I saw the fine print in the brochure Minako had swiped from a travel agent. In microscopic type at the very end, after pages splashed with color photos of adorable lemurs and sunshine beaches, the brochure offhandedly noted, "You will be required to make a seven-hour hike into Tsingy Park."

Well, *that* is something every vacationer wants! A death march! Thousands of miles from medical care! Why couldn't Disney World offer attractions like that?

My hands trembled as my eyes scanned across phrases like "climbing rope ladders…traversing rope bridges…leaning out over sharp rock ledges…"

Hanging out over jagged cliffs on swinging rope ladders? Sure. That's exactly what every couple in their mid-seventies should put their bodies through.

“People will think we’ve lost our few remaining marbles,” I thought. “‘Fruitcakes,’ they will call us.”

We needed to go spend our vacation in some place normal people go. Albany, perhaps, or Toronto. I began to sense we shouldn’t even be thinking about East Africa.

But we did. After several sleepless nights, we concluded that, yes, Albany is a fine town. I had been there. The bathroom facilities were excellent. But for adventure travel, it just wasn’t going to work.

Throughout our marriage, we’ve always visited distant lands—from Tierra del Fuego to Turkmenistan, from Nepal to Namibia. Each time we came back mostly intact, and despite the high mileage, we were still basically healthy.

At our age we had already given up too much: tennis, skiing weekends, being the center of gravity for our kids, our youthful good looks, and careers. We couldn’t afford to relinquish any more dreams without a fight. Yes, one day we would hang up our backpacks and travel boots and slide quietly into some old folks institution. There would be storms we could not weather and some pleasures no longer worth fighting for. But we weren’t there yet. Exotic travel was still worth a fight.

Minako had studied all the routes and lodging details, so the danger would be minor. Honestly, travel with a good guide company seemed safer than driving on US highways. If we didn’t make it back safely, well then, we’d be checking out during one of life’s grand adventures. Not the worst way to go.

More to the point, at this stage, our sense of security seemed to be calling us into insecurity. We chose not to increase the years in our lives by diminishing the life in our years. What was the alternative? Be afraid of even getting out of bed lest we fall down? Move into the “Cabbage Patch Ward” with other vegetables? No, we were better off being eaten by a lion on safari.

A few weeks later, we arrived in Madagascar. In addition to the lemurs, we were surprised to find an African country with a majority population of non-Africans. The majority of the population, we were told, had originated in Borneo, the Malay Peninsula, and India.

Ultimately we made it to Tsingy Park, a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

“On an island famous for its biodiversity,” *National Geographic* described, “the six hundred square mile protected area is an island unto itself,

a kind of biofortress, rugged, largely unexplored, and made nearly impenetrable by the massive limestone formation—the *tsingy*—running through it.

"The great block of Jurassic stone has dissolved into a labyrinth of knife-edged towers, slot canyons, and wet caves that ward off humans while harboring other animals and plants. New species are frequently described from the isolated habitats within—a previously unknown coffee plant in 1996, a minuscule lemur in 2000…Even larger animals have been found relatively recently, including a long-legged lemur discovered in 1990."

To enter the park we were required to trust our lives to our guide, who had a face younger than our grandchildren. He was not reassuring. He seemed apprehensive leading Granny and Grandpa on a seven-hour hike up knife-edged towers via rope ladders and over the slot canyons by way of swinging bridges.

But by the end of the trip, the guide overcame his anxieties. We did too. The ordeal became one of our many lifetime adventures.

Hoity-Toity or Humble, but Always Chauvinistic

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WHEN MINAKO AND I TRAVEL in foreign countries, we like to "average in" with hotels—a luxury hotel in one town, an economy hostel in the next. Sometimes we just get it wrong and end up in a dump.

That's how we woke up one morning in Jamaica. The gorgeous beach was nearby, but a morning monsoon was drenching the town. Nobody was rushing for the beach blankets. When you visit one of the less expensive dumps, you will not find cozy sitting rooms, verandas, or lobbies for moments like this. So we all sat around in the concrete-floor dining room, stalling until the rain abated. Other guests were refusing to give up their breakfast chairs as well.

"Another cup of coffee? Why yes, I think I will, thank you."

Our alternatives were to go back to our cramped, chair-less room or get soaked outside. After a third cup, we'd had more than enough time for a judgmental examination of our fellow half-star guests.

The other guests were younger than Minako and me. They were uniformly obese, and they exhibited an abundance of tattooed flesh. The situation offered us a perfect opportunity to make disparaging observations about our neighbors' dress code (1990s Goodwill), their dining habits (openmouthed chewing), and conversation style (shrill, mixed with barking laughs). Some of the men's body art was so intense, it appeared solid black. The women's deeply indented shoulders were heavy with bra straps. They weren't even a little exciting. With so much free time that morning, our snooty criticism knew no boundaries.

But condescension has its limits. We soon realized that "judgmental snobbery" is a two-sided coin. Other diners were doubtless making their own

derogatory observations about us: “Well, *look* at them: that pasty white northern couple sitting over there. They must be spending their last social security check for a once-in-a-lifetime trip abroad. Pity. They should vacation in Coney Island, where they can be with their own kind and live within their budget.”

Or the other guests might have been thinking, “We should stop coming to these one-star hotels. I feel uncomfortable with bald, white-haired seniors. They might be clean, but I don’t wish to be seen with them. This hotel used to be so nice, and now it’s going to hell. Why do they have to take on such clientele?”

I had always been aware of the joys of looking down your nose at your fellow hotel guests, but I thought it usually took place in the more posh resorts. Now I realize it’s not necessary to be privileged in order to be condescending. Wherever we travel, we might be humble or haughty, but we are always chauvinistic. Of course, we all know better. Our parents, our schools, and our moral leaders have preached equality to us since birth. But how is one to be proud and self-assured if one only sees himself in terms of egalitarian mediocrity?

Fortunately the weather improved before we went any further with these depressing thoughts, and we escaped to the beach. In the bright sunshine, we concluded you may entertain whatever thoughts you choose. But if you choose to live in a world with others, it is the thoughts you act on that count.

Hunting a Big Guy from the Hood

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JOHN VASSAL VAPORIZED. AFTER HE died in 1797, it was as if he had been an eighteenth-century hallucination.

Did we only imagine he was part of our history? How could such a prominent man who, together with his relatives, owned such a large share of early Cambridge leave such a small imprint? The magnificent three-story Georgian mansion he built in 1759 was occupied by George Washington during the siege of Boston. Today the building still stands and is owned by the US National Park Service. It is referred to as the Longfellow House, after the poet who owned it in later years.

I live nearby and found some family records in the building's basement archives. Vassal, with ninety acres, was one of the largest landowners in our town. He must have rubbed elbows with his Boston contemporaries: John Hancock, Paul Revere, and John Adams. All the other guys are eulogized as fathers of our nation. Vassal, however, is Mr. Nobody—never to be heard of again.

The mystery is partially explained once you learn Vassal was not like descendants of the Pilgrims, who settled the neighborhood and farmed the land. He was a Church of England loyalist who derived his income from overseas. When the American Revolution began, he and his family skipped town. His friends and assets were spread all over the British colonies. Revolution did nothing for a grandee like him. Fighting the king was a good way to lose everything and get shot for your efforts. John just couldn't bring himself to identify with activities of the revolutionary rabble who were occupying themselves with the Boston Tea Party or the Battles of Lexington and Concord.

Most of Vassal's substantial earnings came from the Caribbean sugar trade. The Massachusetts Bay Colony was nice enough during the summer

months, but who wants to hang out with crusty-butt revolutionaries? His money came from Jamaica. As long as that island remained loyal to England, why would he want to fight the king?

As a loyalist during the revolution, Vassal's reputation was not good in his hometown. After the war ended, he returned and sued the state of Massachusetts to recover his war losses. That was too much. Historians wanted nothing more to do with him. They're funny that way. You get on their wrong side, and they retaliate by ignoring or vaporizing you from the history books.

When I traveled to Jamaica, I wanted to get a better grasp of the Mr. Vassal history seemed to have forgotten. I traveled to the island's Orange River district. That's where Mr. Vassal earned his living and kept most of his assets—a factory here, a mill there, and thousands of fertile, waterfront acres. Unlike Massachusetts, Jamaica had remained loyal to the crown during the Revolution. It was reasonable for me to assume John Vassal might get better treatment from Jamaican Loyalist historians. But I was wrong.

I walked into the largest bookstore in Ocho Rios to inquire about the Vassal family history. The bookstore lady reacted as if I'd passed gas.

"Old English plantation owners are not what we or our bookstore customers want to deal with," she informed me. It seems that on Vassal's fertile acres, hundreds of African slaves were used and exploited. They were the ones producing the sugar that fed the Vassal fortune.

On August 6, 1962, Jamaica achieved independence from Great Britain. The new black-majority government, island historians, and bookstore ladies were interested in their own black historical figures. They did not wish to study ancient white slave owners. Just like in Cambridge, Vassal occupies no place in Jamaica's past either. The bookstore had no books on any plantation owners.

Thinking the bookshop lady might be unrepresentative, we hiked up the long hill to the public library to see if their volumes offered any more. It was a hot day. Halfway up the hill, I began to feel I was asking questions nobody on the island wanted to think about. The library was unaccustomed to tourists, but the delightful librarian furnished us with numerous encyclopedia-type books discussing the country's agriculture. Colonial sugar plantations were mentioned as part of the early settlement and development of the island, but it was a history that emitted an odor.

“The bad old days are best forgotten,” the books all seemed to conclude. Again, there was no mention of individual plantation owners.

John Vassal has become a nonperson, like in George Orwell’s book *1984*. According to the few records that survive, Vassal was, by the standards of his time, an upright citizen who accomplished a good deal. He was a man who moved things forward in his day while exploiting his workers. In these records, he is neither admired nor criticized for his deeds. In most history books, he is simply ignored, expunged, vaporized from history as though he never existed.

My unsuccessful search into the Vassal history left me with a discomforting thought: What makes a character worthy of history? Must the character serve some purpose to future values in order to establish a historical position? Vassal was a disloyal embarrassment to the early Americas. For Jamaicans, his ownership of slaves makes him unworthy of any mention in their history. It is all understandable but historically unsatisfying.

An Alternative History in Dublin's Fair City

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TOUR GUIDES ARE HAPPY TO share with you the history of the sights you are seeing. But what if the "long ago" is long forgotten and there's nothing interesting to say? You could take a nap…or you could fill in a few blanks on your own.

"On your right side," our guide announced on the bus microphone in a monotone voice, "you see City Hall, the Gandon Customs House Building, and there's the site where the City of Dublin was founded 1,200 years ago by the Vikings."

Just as I was about to nod off, these words provoked a thought: How could the beginning of the capital of Ireland, one of Europe's great cities, be so boring when explained by a tour leader?

"What was it really like here on this spot in AD 800?" I wondered. The Vikings didn't have an archivist with them at the time. They had other things on their minds. Archeologists found artifacts, a bone or two, but the Norsemen left few records.

I could only speculate that while Rome was founded by the brothers Romulus and Remus, Dublin was perhaps settled by Ingmar, Olaf, and Bjørn. Maybe the three of them had had a tough winter in 799 and 800. They had been cooped up in their windowless sod huts for six dark months. They had drunk too much grog, put on a few pounds, and had spats with the wives. Spring arrived, and the three were conflicted about spending another summer tending their flocks on the fjord. Worse yet, Olaf was having a midlife crisis. He was twenty-seven years old; he didn't have much time left. Life was slipping through his fingers.

Sitting around the fire pit one evening, Olaf blurted out his goofy plan:

“Why don’t we get a longboat, round up a bunch of oarsmen, go down to Scotland, and spend the summer pillaging?”

“What, are you nuts?” replied Ingmar. “You heard the guy two fjords to the south. They tried that last summer. All the towns and monasteries were already picked over. Couldn’t find a single virgin. Nothing left worth pillaging.”

“Just trying to be helpful,” Bjørn muttered. He was the youngest of the three. He still had assertiveness issues whenever they all got together. Determined not to be cowed by the other two, he continued, as boldly as he could, “It’s only a suggestion, but has anyone tried plundering the island of Hibernia?”

The other two usually didn’t like Bjørn’s suggestions, but the grog had scrambled their thought process. They couldn’t formulate an objection.

In the morning, the three set about locating a longboat and rowers. The boat was no problem, but it took them more than a month to agree on forty stout oarsmen. But when spending months in a jumbo-size canoe, belly to belly with forty stout rowers, you can’t be too picky.

It wasn’t till July that they finally launched. With constant rain, rough seas, and no GPS navigational assistance, it was nearly September before they reached the Emerald Isle. At that point their luck turned for the better.

By October the boat was filled with food supplies, silver altarpieces from the monasteries, and a few nuns. Heading back, a storm forced them to take shelter up the Liffey River. By the time the weather cleared, some of the oarsmen were objecting to crossing the North Sea in November gales.

“Why are we rushing home to spend another five months of Norwegian winter cooped up in a stuffy sod hut? This place ain’t bad. Food is plentiful, the weather is warmer, and we like the redheaded Celtic women.”

The three leaders once again gathered around a fire pit to decide whether to stay or go. Ingmar and Bjørn couldn’t agree and left the decision to the older Olaf.

Olaf didn’t like to discuss his dirty laundry with friends. He had a separate agenda. Before they left Scandinavia, the missus had been on him about his drinking.

“Your whole life is nothing but grog, beer, and mead, Olaf. If you think I’m spending one more winter in this smelly hut with a flatulent, rowdy drunk, you’ve got another think coming, buster!”

With that, she had washed her hands of him in the biblical sense. And with that, Olaf made his decision. Dublin was founded on the Liffey River in AD 800 by a Norwegian alcoholic.

This history is not corroborated by any reputable source, nor has it been refuted. It simply attempts to flesh out and add life to one tour guide’s uninspiring account.

The Wobbly Bridge

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FOR THOSE WHO ENJOY LONG, out-of-the-way drives to tourist traps such as the World's Biggest Ball of Twine, Northern Ireland has something for you. Take a two-hour train from Dublin, in the Republic of Ireland, across the border to Belfast in the North. Then grab a bus another three hours up the Antrim Coast. Get out of the bus, walk half an hour in the cold and howling wind, pay ten pounds, and…*look at you! You have arrived at the Wobbly Bridge!*

You can perch high on the cliff, watching petrified ladies being assisted across the swinging rope bridge. As they gaze down and whimper at the crashing surf below, they see their lives flash before them in the sea foam.

If you can't resist participating in all that fun yourself, you too can trundle across the bridge and back. Not to worry! If the ropes give way or the blustery weather carries you over the edge, there's a lifeboat hanging down from the cliff. Trust me, it's there. The boat can be lowered into the exploding surf—in theory at least. Then a crew might be dug up somewhere in the village pub who might be willing to row the boat around looking for you. With luck, they might locate and fish you out of the North Atlantic before you perish from hypothermia or get yourself bashed ashore on the rocks.

When Minako and I arrived at the Wobbly Bridge (whose official name is Carrick-a-Rede, which I am guessing is the Gaelic word for "wobbly"), we were among those who viewed this flimsy, swaying, trapeze-like structure with terror, but we pushed those thoughts aside. We had come this far. We had enjoyed the clean tourist restroom and paid the ten quid. Hey, why *wouldn't* we want to risk our lives and make the perilous crossing? We must not have been having enough death-defying terror in our lives—besides, ten pounds is ten pounds.

The bridge joins the stunningly beautiful, craggy, mainland Irish shore with an even more breathtaking, petite, green island. Three hundred and fifty years ago, a small band of fishermen on the island needed a quicker way to get their seafood to market—thus the bridge.

We didn't come to visit the bridge by choice, but rather as captives on a bus tour heading to the Giant's Causeway, an attraction farther up the coast. The bridge was an interim stop. Our bus group needed a pee break en route, and this stop not only offered a clean toilet, it also had the bridge thrown in as a bonus.

We struggled in the howling gale down the rocky path. Luckily, the ropes held as we crossed. We returned unharmed. We couldn't help but be grateful to the talented engineers. The builders who made the calculations and designs, who braved high winds and ocean spray to tie the two sides of the cliffs together, made our crossing safe. We were grateful because we could not fathom the complex load stress factors, the cable tensile strength, and the anchor bolt tension requirements upon which our lives depended.

As a tourist trap, the stop was little more than a pee break. But the bridge was worth the trip as a metaphor. It called to mind the fact that in recent years, a bridge of a different sort had been built in Northern Ireland by a set of political "engineers" who studied the tensions and dangers among the deeply divided local population. Ireland's so-called "Troubles"—the centuries-old strife between Catholics and Protestants—are both invisible and unfathomable today to upbeat foreign tourists. But somewhere, unseen bridge builders in the metaphorical sense assembled a political structure, equally wobbly and windblown, across a treacherous religious and political gap. Now, twenty years later, the Protestant-Catholic bridge is still standing. It has brought a measure of unity, safety, and normalcy to this deeply divided island. For many years, the threat of political violence made this area seem too dangerous for most foreign visitors. Those unseen political engineers made our trip possible.

How Did the Modern World Get So Smart? We Cribbed and Copied.

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ROUTE 66 FROM CHICAGO, ILLINOIS, to Santa Monica, California, is a monument to 1960s American culture. We sang, "Get your kicks on Route 66," and the road became America's best-known highway.

Without taking anything away from 66 or its contribution to the pop culture and TV show it inspired, I'd like to commemorate a much older road. The original Silk Route began a couple of thousand years ago with merchants and caravan leaders getting their kicks moving silk from China to Europe. They too changed our civilization. They deserve a shout-out.

Minako and I traveled from Kashgar, in far-western China, to the Iran-Turkmenistan border. We felt that Euro-Asian land bridge—its heroes and stories—cry out for attention. Alexander the Great came in from the West, bringing Greek philosophy, baklava, and gyros to Asia. Fifteen hundred years later, Genghis Khan entered from the East. He didn't bring much cuisine, but he greatly improved the Beijing-Rome Highway and made it safe for hundreds of years. Marco Polo publicized the route and nudged Europe toward the Renaissance with tales of Chinese paper, gunpowder, coal, and treasures. He also taught the Italians to eat pasta.

But Marco, Alexander, and Genghis were "yesterday guys." The nineteenth century had its own heroes and villains of the "Great Game." Colonel Charles Stoddard and Captain Arthur Connolly fought Imperial Russia to protect Britain's profitable Indian colony. That's what colonialists did. They preserved markets for England's products. In the end it was futile. Russia and England both lost the Great Game land grab. England let the

subcontinent slip away. Russia lost Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and the rest of the Soviet republics when the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics collapsed.

The caravans are gone now. Earthquakes, war, and neglect have destroyed most traces of the famous route. A few relics and monuments survive, such as the caravanserai buildings. These were roadside stops—like Motel 6, only with camel stalls instead of parking lots, and no coin-operated vibrator beds. For more than a thousand years, when the Silk Road was crowded, they ran at full occupancy.

Eventually the traffic and the wealth dried up. And yet, China and Europe continued selling stuff to each other. So what went wrong?

The Silk Route bad guy was Vasco da Gama. Da Gama sailed around Africa to reach Asia. He cut out the middlemen, shipping goods by sea—from Portugal, to India and China, and back. Vasco's ships paid no extortion to grasping warlords, customs guys, or highwaymen. Since 1496, it's been curtains for Silk Road caravans.

The oasis towns no longer see much treasure or trade passing through. Back in the day, caravans of up to a thousand camels traveled between East and West. The animals groaned under the weight of silk, spices, jewels, and other riches. Now Kirgizstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, and the other "Stans" have been cut out and forgotten. The "Vasco da Gama Interstate Bypass" ended the once profitable business.

Today tourist bureaus are attempting to revive interest in the history of the spice and silk trade, but to this Western visitor, it seems like a forgotten land. It deserves better! My school history books covered China and Greece. But in between? That was a blank piece of paper to those studying world history. While most of us never learned about the history of the "Stans," that is not to say there was no history: archaeology suggests otherwise.

Thousands of years before Alexander the Great, Tamerlane, and Genghis Khan, merchants were crossing the land bridge. Archaeologists recently discovered mummies in the desert outside Urumqi in western China. One of the mummies, a Caucasian, European woman, lived there four thousand years ago. She wore textile garments similar to those found in prehistoric Austria. Europeans and Asians have been crossing the land bridge and dealing with one another for a very long time. What was going on?

They were trading silk, tea, spices, jewels, and gold. But there was something more valuable than the exchange of material goods. Caravans

brought ideas, religion, philosophy, science, and military arts with them. The idea flow, the inventions, and the learning endured long after the silk and spices were consumed.

In Khiva, Uzbekistan, you can see the thousand-year-old astronomical observatory and the birthplace of al-Khwarizmi (780–850). At the time of his birth, Khiva was Persia but Uzbeks and many others call him the inventor of algebra. (Still others suggest mathematician Omar Khayyam (1048–1131) was more likely the first algebraists). While Europe slept through the Dark Ages, Central Asia kept the study of science alive.

Jared Diamond suggests in his book *Guns, Germs, and Steel* that the reason China, Europe, and India prospered, while Tasmanian Aborigines, Congo Pygmies, and early Patagonians did not, was that the Eurasian continent, with all of those caravans, allowed for an idea exchange that accompanied commerce and trade.

Diamond writes:

> *The landmass of Eurasia, laid out on an east-west axis, allowed for the sharing of crops, animals, and ideas. The Americas, stretched out on a north-south axis, traverse various climate zones and geographic boundaries that discourage trade.*

Just as the Vasco da Gama Interstate Bypass eventually cut the flourishing business on the Silk Route, US Interstate 40 had the same effect on Route 66. Our legendary American highway lost some of its significance. Yet today, it still retains its iconic status in history. And so should the Silk Route, which helped culture, science, the arts, and civilization as a whole to flourish for centuries.

As we sit here admiring the wonders of our modern civilization—our hospitals, universities, cars, and soap operas—we owe a debt of gratitude to those old camel drivers. Were it not for their trudging through the sand, trading and transferring scientific ideas for more than a millennium, we might never have invented cars.

Anyone for a ride down Route 66 on a camel?

The Land Was Given to Them by God… Until She Left Town

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"THIS LAND WAS GIVEN TO us by God, forever," is a phrase you often hear when traveling in the Middle East. The irony is that while God may or may not assign real-estate ownership, it is left to "God's Chosen" to take up arms and defend their title. Inevitably the "infidels" invade and attempt a land grab in the name of a "new god." The chosen on both sides must take up arms and defend their turf.

In Turkey, we expected to find a long history of ancient tribal conflict. What, after all, is history if not countless wars? Tribes settle, drive up housing prices, and build shopping malls so ugly that they too get pushed out. This is the normal sequence. What we did not expect to find in Turkey was that gods can also come and go.

The magnificent city of Ephesus, once among the trendiest cities of the Eastern Roman Empire, supported a growing population of fifty thousand moneyed citizens. Their god, Artemis (Diana to the Greeks), had lavished unbelievable affluence on her citizenry. She arrived around the time of Homer and must have put a chicken in everyone's pot.

During the centuries leading up to the fall of the Roman Empire, Ephesus continued to prosper. Endless tour groups of pilgrim tourists jammed the streets, seeking blessings from Artemis. They sent postcards, lined up for restaurants, and kept the cash registers ringing all over town. They crowded into Artemis's towering temple—and was it ever stupendous! The temple stood six stories high. It was three times the size of a football field. Artemis had done so much for the townies, they felt an obligation. Building her a big temple was the least they could do. Her temple would eventually be listed among the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World.

According to the father of that list, a Mr. Antipater of Sidon, when he first saw the Temple of Artemis in 140 BC, he gasped:

> *I have set eyes on the wall of lofty Babylon on which is a road for chariots, and the statue of Zeus by the Alpheus, and the hanging gardens, and the colossus of the Sun, and the huge labour of the high pyramids, and the vast tomb of Mausolus; but when I saw the house of Artemis that mounted to the clouds, those other marvels lost their brilliancy, and I said, "Lo, apart from Olympus, the Sun never looked on aught so grand."*

With a publicity endorsement like that, no wonder teeming hordes of tourists flocked to town. Souvenir-purchasing travelers commingled with free-spending worshippers. It was prosperity made in heaven.

During early Roman times, the Ephesus merchants scrambled to keep up with tourists' demands. On every street corner you could find stone statuettes of the goddess, not to mention "I LOVE ARTEMIS" T-shirts, which shrank at the first washing.

If that wasn't enough, the goddess had given the town a deep-water port that made Ephesus the leading Roman center of trade on the Eastern Mediterranean. What could go wrong when you had a goddess like that? But then, one morning, the sweet and generous Artemis woke up and skipped town.

It might sound biblical to say that all those people disappeared, that their rich metropolis crumbled and vanished. But vanish it did. Why did Artemis leave the scene? An early hint can be seen in the Christian Gospel written in Ephesus by Saint John.

John's scripture hints that not all the citizens in town were devoted exclusively to their local goddess. Who knows? Maybe the townies got to thinking, "What has she done for us lately?" Or maybe after all those centuries, they got tired of the old girl and were looking for something new. But for the solid conservative block in town, John's message of Christianity threatened not only the existing divinity but those statuette-carving capitalists as well. The more Christianity spread, the more Ephesus and its tourism business went to hell.

Then, when Saint Paul came through on a proselytizing lecture tour, things got even worse. He got everyone cranked up by stirring the religious pot. For this, he was tarred, feathered, and sent home, with a complete absence of Christian love. Yes, there were other, nonreligious factors that contributed to the city's demise as well, but as word of Jesus spread around the neighborhood, by AD 324 the fickle tourists stopped visiting Artemis and her temple. Instead, they began booking pilgrimages to the new god in his new Christian temple of Saint Sophia in Constantinople.

Soon after that, the worshippers stopped coming to Ephesus altogether. The city became a ghost town. Think Palm Beach in the summer when the snowbirds have gone north. During the time of the Crusaders, the greater metropolitan area was reduced to a small village backwater. By the fifteenth century, the last resident of Ephesus had packed his bags and retired to the Italian Riviera. The town was abandoned, covered in dust. It was buried and lost.

The old merchants knew what they were doing when they first imprisoned Saint Paul, then released him and ran him out of town. They should have acted sooner, however. Paul and his teachings of the new "New Thing" were about to wipe out their city.

Ephesus was a glorious town before Christ. Then, still another new religion arrived in 1453, pushing the Christians out. The great cathedral of Saint Sophia in Constantinople became the great mosque. The city of Constantinople changed its name to Istanbul.

The ruins of Ephesus today.

This makes one reflect on the transience of gods over the longer term. It gives me pause to think about the transience of humans' beliefs and ideas. The manufacturers and merchants of Ephesus were real people living good lives in a city of industrious citizens. The tall buildings were not just real; they were, in their day, absolutely magnificent. Then one day, they were not. Nothing was left but toppled, unexcavated stones.

I try to imagine my own beloved city vanishing and becoming forgotten. Boston is a glorious metropolis located in the superpower of our day. We Boston chauvinists won't admit it, but Ephesus occupied an equal or higher rank within the Roman Empire. It was nothing to sneeze at in its day. My town at 385 years is ancient by comparison to some. Among the New World, that makes us almost eternal—or so we like to think. We have outstanding institutions of education, brainpower, and innovation that will guarantee our city for hundreds more years into the future. We'll be okay… won't we? Or will artificial intelligence machines wipe out our institutions of education like Christianity swept away Artemis?

Ephesus had divine intervention. It had more than two thousand years of history from start to peak. Didn't that give it an unshakable claim on the

eternal? And yet, the city withered.

So there it is: transience is eternal, and the eternal is transient. Artemis, for all her longevity, adoring pilgrims, and temples, could do little to preserve her splendid city.

Alternative Realities in the Arab World

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As we rumbled over a Sahara sand dune, my daily concerns about life in the United States seemed remote. Minako and I were traveling the "Moroccan Outback" with eight other Americans in a rickety old van. We had been driving for hours through seemingly lifeless desert—no plant life or even decent-size rocks to be seen—when we were startled to spy a black tent.

Our guide suggested we stop and find out what was going on—maybe even pay a visit. We pulled up to the tent, where we met a weather-beaten Bedouin mother and her two young children.

The mother invited us into her dusty tent and seated us on the black wool carpet. There was not a trace of civilization anywhere outside, but the tent was perfectly habitable. It met all of her family's needs and protected us from the scorching sun as we sat there among the woman's blankets, pots, and ropes. She offered us tea, and through our guide's translation, we asked her questions.

"What do you think about Americans?" we were anxious to know.

She had never heard of Americans before, she said, but assumed they must be another distant desert tribe.

We explained America is not a tribe but a proud nation like her own country, Morocco.

A look of curiosity crept over her dark face. "What is Morocco?" she asked.

We chuckled at her Bedouin simplicity. She didn't even know what country she lived in! Here was a woman so deliciously unaware and uninformed, we were unable to hide our feeling of condescension. Our guide reprimanded us for our disdain.

“Her global geography is no match for yours,” he cautioned, “but she knows something more important—where water is to be found within walking distance. That’s critical here in the desert. Your geographic knowledge isn’t worth much absent our air-conditioned bus with its bottles of water. She has everything she needs. She will be just fine. Take away the bus, and you’d be dead.”

Our condescension quickly vanished.

The Bedouin lady got me thinking about our news headlines of human rights, sports scores, the Dow Jones Industrial Average, and election campaigns. They have little relevance for people in the Sahara. Could it be possible that 80 or 90 percent of the world’s population, like this desert lady, held America in neither high nor low regard, but rather took no notice at all of us or our headlines?

This was a deflating thought to me. I was brought up believing my country was recognized everywhere as a world superpower.

North Africa held other surprises too. Contrary to our expectations and what we often hear in the media, many Arabs are hospitable to the United States. They have centuries of pro-American history. Morocco claims to be the first country to have recognized our independence from Great Britain, and the United States was one of the first countries to have recognized Morocco’s own release from French colonialism. Their popular king has opposed Wahhabi religious fanatics.

We tend to think that Moroccans are Arabs, but the picture is more complicated. According to our guide, they too are a melting pot, of 50 percent Arab, 40 percent Berber, 5 percent French, and 5 percent everything else. The Arabs are divided into dozens of tribes, and the Berbers are divided into three linguistic groups.

In the Western press, one often sees Arabs as grim, stern devotees of the Prophet. So it was quite a surprise to discover how humorous, funny, and good-spirited many of these guys and gals could be. Many were hospitable and offered great company—even when challenging my beliefs.

In Turkmenistan, I was once approached by a man named Abu bin Abdul. Abu, like the Bedouin lady, was also hospitable, but he was more from the stern and grim school. He offered Americans a provocative insight.

Abu was an Arab chauvinist, with few good words for Western culture. His worn-out wardrobe and unkempt beard did not inspire much admiration.

He looked like a beggar. But when he spoke of the West, he defended his ideas well. According to his interpretation of history, absent the Eastern World, Europe would have peaked out during the pre-Christian Greco-Roman era. It would have then begun a long, irreversible decline into failed state after failed state.

As a Western Christian, I couldn't help but argue.

"We Westerners have done much to be proud of in both the pre-and post-Christian eras," I suggested. "All the while, you who exist along the Silk Route still live stagnant lives, much like you did centuries ago."

"Ah yes," he conceded, "but your Western progress in science and learning all came from us. After the fall of Rome, Europe went into hibernation for five hundred, maybe a thousand, years. Meanwhile, the Mongols united the lands from Peking west to the Mediterranean under the longest-lasting and enlightened empire of Genghis Khan, his son, and his grandsons. By the time you Europeans were ready to awaken from the Dark Ages, much of your own learning had been forgotten—lost or ignored. It was only thanks to the archives outside of Europe—in Istanbul, Baghdad, Alexandria, and other cities—that Greek literature, science, and philosophy were preserved.

"Just look at the field of mathematics," he continued. "Imagine your mathematicians stuck with their clunky Roman numerals. With those stupid Roman numbers, you can hardly do simple division. MCVII divided by IV? What is that? With division that difficult, how could you possibly ever advance into algebra and calculus? Take away our superior Arabic numerals, and your science is nothing. No, my smug Western friend, you owe us big-time. In the beginning, eight thousand years ago, we gave you agriculture from the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers. Before that, you were all living in caves or swinging up in the trees. Then in the sixteenth century, we bailed you out again. All of your science, all of your technology, all of your learning can be traced back to your Renaissance—and that was largely a gift from us. Without the East, what would you have done? You would have had to relearn and reinvent a thousand years of Greco-Roman lessons again, from scratch."

As we have traveled, we have met other Mrs. Moroccos and Mr. Abduls. They have presented us with momentary intellectual discomfort, but the insights they have offered have been the most valuable souvenirs we ever brought home. And that is why we travel—not to confirm what we think we

know, but to be challenged in realities different from our own.

In the Sailplane Cockpit

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I'VE TRAVELED TO MANY COUNTRIES, but my craziest, most exciting voyage was just three miles from home. This journey was neither northwest nor southeast. It was straight up. Of all the thrills in a lifetime of voyages, chasing hawks was the ultimate. It has been more than forty-five years now, but the experience does not fade.

In 1967, after a childhood spent watching birds, flying kites, and jumping out of trees with umbrellas, I satisfied a dream by getting my glider pilot's license. Two years later, I purchased a white and blue Schweizer 1-26 sailplane. I learned the New England air currents and updrafts all over the Green Mountains of Vermont as well as Salem, New Hampshire. The sensation was hushed isolation in a magical setting, kind of like entering a secret forbidden place. I was towed off the runway by a cacophonous tow plane, connected by a fifty-foot yellow nylon rope. At three thousand feet, I pulled the rope release and was cut off. Suddenly, with no visible means of support, I was launched into an eerie, dangerous world. I imagined the deep *basso profundo* voice of some heavenly deity intoning, "You don't belong here among the clouds! *Get out immediately!"*

Soaring with the birds.

When piloting a glider, the only sound you'll hear is the occasional groan of the aluminum wing spars hitting a strong updraft. Heat rising from a sunbaked parking lot below, heat from a burning garbage dump, or hot air from a group of politicians can carry a glider straight up at three hundred feet per minute—or more. If you really want to make the spars groan, pass under a thunderhead cloud, and you'll feel a powerful push—up in the seat of your pants—at a rate of more than a thousand feet per minute.

Circle around in the "up air," and you will be rewarded with a longer, higher flight in your pilot's logbook, fewer tow charges, and bragging rights with fellow pilots. Alternatively, hang around in a downdraft, and you'll be landing on the ground ahead of the tow pilot—as he is making a full power dive. That celestial God doesn't want you soaring higher and higher. He seems to keep you out of the updrafts. Typically, only one of your wing tips feels an updraft at first, diverting you into a turn away from the rising air column and bouncing you out of the lift. Downdrafts are the reverse. They suck you in. Try to fly through a forest of updrafts, and you'll get bounced out of all of them.

One solution, if say your right wing lifts up, is to slam the control stick to the right, kick the right rudder, and force the plane to turn into instead of

away from the rising air. Once in the column, lower the right wing further and make the tightest turn into the smallest diameter spiral possible. This will lift you higher and higher in the fastest rising air.

If you don't care for this blind hunt for up-air and you don't like the stink of smoke rising from garbage dumps, there is an alternative: keep an eye out for birds. You don't see many sparrows, ducks, or turkeys up here. Updrafts are reserved for the upper echelon of soaring birds: seagulls and hawks. They always seem to be where the wind is rising fastest. Swing in behind a soaring bird, and you're sure to be headed upward.

Seagulls are the peace-loving, loopy goofballs of the sky. You can pull up close to them, and they'll be like, "Hey, man, I'm cool with whatever."

No harsh beaks. No talons. No sweat. Gulls don't mind sharing the updraft. You can even fly your quarter-ton aluminum albatross up to "goose" their tail feathers, and no matter. They are the doves of soaring.

Hawks, on the other hand, aren't so peace loving. They are mean dudes—but like any bully being chased by a bigger bully, they know when to fold. Let us say they are versed in the Darwinian facts of life. Fly a six-hundred-pound glider anywhere near a falcon in an updraft, and you've got his attention. Any closer, and he will fold his wings, instantly transforming into a 120-mile-an-hour falling arrow as he dives to escape the threat.

That was the position in which I found myself one beautiful summer afternoon at fifteen thousand feet above the Salem, New Hampshire, gliderport. Mr. Falcon (I'll call him Hank) saw me approaching rapidly from behind. He folded his great wings and dived.

The Audubon Society might not condone such behavior, but I decided to follow him into the dive. I pushed the stick forward so the glider headed straight down. Hank was not okay with a high-speed chase. He probably thought he was about to become someone else's lunch.

My state of affairs was no better. I was less than a hundred seconds from eternity, about to become bug splat on a farmer's cornfield. The air screamed by. The airframe shuddered and bucked as my speed approached 130 miles per hour, well above the so-called "red line"—the airframe's speed limit.

My dive lasted less than a minute, but the adrenalin rush remained for decades. Hank, like all large birds of prey, had a sharp, stony face. There should have been be no emotional content whatsoever in his expression;

however, after that ten-thousand-foot plunge, as Hank turned to look back and saw me right behind him, I detected an expression of anxiety on his beak.

Hank, no doubt, flew home to the missus to boast of his heroic, death-defying escape from a twelve-foot monster.

I made my way back to the landing field, drove home, and told my wife my version of the exciting afternoon flight.

Really Big Travel Requires Einstein

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I JUST FINISHED READING J. Richard Gott's book *Time Travel in Einstein's Universe*, and it occurred to me: if you're wanting to go someplace *really* new, if you're dreaming about getting off the beaten path and going where no man has gone before, you might want to check out Einstein's "wormholes." With Albert as your guide, you could cover a lot of ground in no time at all. The trip would take you to a place where time and space are the same thing. Think about it: no baggage required, no visa, no jet lag or traveler's diarrhea, and you'd be back before you knew it.

The book got me thinking about something beyond a polar excursion, beyond those private jets around the world. What would be the grandest cosmological tour? The ultimate longest trip? How about a quick time-travel visit to the Big Bang or even before?

Unfortunately, Albert cautions, you can't get there from here. Going back before the Bang doesn't work because before the beginning, there was neither time nor space. Zip. *Nada!* It's kind of like going south, going and going till you reach the South Pole. Now, say you'd like to go even farther south. Sorry, pal. It doesn't work. You'd have to enter a whole new dimension to go any farther. There is no "something" before the beginning.

So that's a dead-end trip. It's humbling and grandiose at the same time. Our tour guide who came up with this stuff is, or was, the best in the business. It's ironic in that this colossus of intelligence, Mr. Big, with all of his grand theories, makes us all ephemeral and insignificant.

With a putdown like that, you might be thinking, "Cancel all my wormhole trips." But hold on. Any tour that includes stupendous events covering billions of years and trillions of planets and stars can't help but

make you feel a tad minute while simultaneously seeming wondrous.

So let’s try again. Let’s scale back a smidge. We don’t need to bother with the full fireworks display at the Beginning. Maybe there’s something less ambitious than venturing back to the start of time. If I could choose the right wormhole, kind of like choosing the right bus, and arrive where I wish, there are a few places I might consider visiting. I have a couple of favorites that quickly come to mind.

The Earth's "First Live One"

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YOU MIGHT THINK ME PROVINCIAL or chauvinistic, but I'd love to hang out at the time when life began on this planet. That moment must have been one of Mother Nature's all-time greatest accomplishments. For this opus, she should get a lifetime achievement award.

That also happened to be a premier genealogical moment in my family tree. According to Darwin, we all began when the chemicals in some primordial stew transformed into a little, self-reproducing fungus or bug. I know some of you boast about your ancestors and their humble beginnings, but get a look at "Mr. First"—no arms nor legs, homeless, an orphan with no parents and no education. You might have met some objects of pity in your travels, but nothing compares to Mr. First's handicap. He was nothing but lonely swamp ooze. (Call it "wetlands" if you need to get all PC about things.) This first progenitor wouldn't have been much to look at. You'd need a microscope to see him.

Feel sorry for him if you like, but also look at how things turned out. Think about what a fantastic future his diverse descendants had. Go forward long enough from that inauspicious beginning, and you'll discover that several Homo sapiens in his genetic line went on to become every parent's dream: president of the United States. Of course, others were losers who made nothing out of themselves and, for billions of years, remained swamp scum, but still.

I'm guessing that when you travel, you don't care about bugs and scum. Swamps are probably low on your vacation destination list. But what if this visit gave you the answer to *the really big question*: Did "First Guy" do it all on his own, like Darwin suggested, or did he have some assistance, as implied in scripture? Get the answer to that question right, and you'd have some real take-home value from your trip. You might even record the

moment with a selfie. At a minimum, it would give you some great pages in your journal.

Artichokes

Moving quickly out of the swamp, a great trip is never without culinary adventures. The one I would most like to experience is back at the point in time when a human ate his first artichoke. How did that happen? The damn things are prickly, greenish-purple, and unappetizingly ugly. They're 95 percent inedible, and if you drop the mayo, they taste like cardboard. Yet somewhere, way back in time, some starving human must have seen that repulsive thistle, defied all the good advice from the neighbors like, "What, are you crazy?" and taken the first bite.

In view of what happened to Adam with the apple thing, you might think humans would have learned a lesson, but this undaunted character ate the artichoke anyway. That showed something courageous about our species. I, for one, am proud he or she did it. It makes me believe we humans are nuts, but we have an adventurous spirit.

A Thousand Pounds of Gold

Travels should also include artists, art galleries, and museums. With this in mind, I'd like to take the wormhole bus back to the time of Vincent Van Gogh. I'm a sucker for a sob story, and this poor guy, who worked all his short life, never made a dime. He never sold much of what he painted, and he lived a depressing life of paucity. It would give me such a warm, tingly feeling to tell him, "Don't feel like a failure, Vincent. Just wait a hundred years until 1990, and your painting of Dr. Gachet will sell as the most expensive work of art in the world: 82 million dollars!"

He might look troubled. "What is a dollar?" he might ask.

"Let's make it easy, Vince. Eighty-two million bucks is the same as five thousand pounds of gold."

Granted, Einstein never said we time travelers would be able to interact with past events, but it would so perk up that poor artist's spirits to know how

things turned out. Just chatting with him about his later sales would allow us both to reflect on the crazy, changing attitudes and what we Homo sapiens value.

I conclude that travel today, with ships, planes, and busses, is a mind-expanding, enlightening way to spend your time. I can’t wait till they get this wormhole thing working right. It will be a whole new ball game that will enhance the entire tourism experience.

Smartphones for Seniors

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By the time I got to be a grandfather, I should have seen it all. Nothing left to be surprised about, right? But the shock and awe keep on coming. One little smartphone can shake the bejesus out of anyone.

Last month the phone monopoly inexplicably canceled my phone service. Not once but twice in a week. I get really pissed when someone cuts my connection to friends, family, and the outside world. After three hours of looping around in telephone hell, I finally got a Comcast repairman on the line. Days later he showed up at my door, tested all the systems, and reported with a self-satisfied smirk, “Nothing’s wrong with the phones or the lines. They’re all functioning perfectly. Goodbye.”

At that point, he tried to make his way out the door, but I wouldn’t let him.

“Well, then, why can’t I talk to anyone?” I demanded. “Why can’t I even get a dial tone?”

It seemed like a reasonable question to me. He answered in parables.

“For some mysterious reason, you no longer own your current phone number.”

“Oh?” I wondered out loud with a slight foreboding. “After forty-five years, suddenly this week, my number has vanished? Surely you must be joking.”

Comcast Phone Repair Guy didn’t look like he was joking.

“Your phone number has been exported to some unknown place,” he offered. According to company policy, however, he couldn’t disclose where it was or why it disappeared.

“What have you guys done with my number?”

“Comcast no longer owns it,” he replied. “It was given to another company, so I can’t help you. Goodbye.”

“Now wait a minute! I’ve had that number for forty-five years. I’ve paid my bills. You’re telling me I don’t own that number anymore? That number is my identity! All of my friends know it. It’s how I present myself to the telephonic world. You can’t mess with me like that. If you didn’t take it, then who did?”

Mr. Comcast Repair Guy whispered in a hushed voice, “Verizon now owns your number. They’ve requested that it be ported out of our Comcast domain. Since they now own the number, they can use it as they wish. My company demanded that Verizon port it back to us, and they complied for a two-day period. Service was temporarily restored to you for forty-eight hours. Then, they mysteriously cut it again and ported it back to themselves. You will now get your dial tone and service from them. Goodbye.”

With that, he slithered out the door and sped off in his truck.

I realized I would need to get Verizon and Comcast on the same line, talking to each other about what went wrong. Phone companies are not itching to talk to their competitors, however, about mistakes they might have made. The result was more hours in telephone hell—explaining, pleading, and coordinating—until I got both Verizon Guy and Comcast Guy on at the same time. Who was the guilty party?

As our joint-summit phone conference began, I asked incredulously, “How can this be?”

“Someone,” Verizon Guy shot back, “has requested we port the phone number out of the Comcast domain.”

“And just who is that someone?” I asked.

“That is usually confidential information,” Verizon Guy replied. “But under the circumstances, I will reveal to you that the signature on the written request appears to be from a Mr. Barclay Henderson. You made the request on March 3 when you joined your home and business cell services together at our Cambridge retail store.”

Oh shit! That was the day I purchased a new cell phone after my old one was stolen. I must have done something wrong with the reams of contract documents they had put before me. I must have signed the wrong document.

Then came the dreaded Verizon words all seniors fear: “Nothing can be resolved here on the phone, Mr. Henderson. You must go back to our Verizon store to straighten out the matter with our agents.”

I felt as if a knife had just been thrust into my spine. I don’t dread

technology stores, only their sales agents. Every time I had been in the Verizon store, I had heard exciting sales pitches. And I had left knowing less than when I'd entered. Guys my age shouldn't be allowed in smartphone stores.

Now, as I drove back to the store, I almost had an accident while pondering the argument I would use. I was sweating. A wave of nausea was welling up inside of me. I began to wonder if I should get counsel or some representation. The endless communication option plans for me are like navigating an extraterrestrial landscape. Reluctantly, as I arrived, I pulled the door open and stepped inside.

The store was well lit and hygienic, staffed by a wren of nerds under the age of puberty. The service reps were mostly shiny-faced girls who looked like my eighth-grade granddaughter. They knew the latest generation handsets, payment plans, apps, and everything else communications. Miss Pubescent Verizon Girl came to help me. She knew volumes about all that I was *not* interested in.

Worse yet, she spoke the jargon quickly, with the assurance and condescending words of a learned sage. What she knew nothing about—what she wanted to know nothing about—was "porting out home phone numbers to business accounts." She refused to fathom why this grumpy old geezer had wandered into her sparkly store ranting about…"Whatever."

I took a deep breath and started again. "Let me make it as simple as possible," I said in my slowest, non-ranting voice. "I simply want to restore my dial tone. You know what a dial tone is, right? Have you heard of those? All I want is to be able to talk to people on the telephone from my kitchen. At home."

This was beyond her. The Learned Pubescent Sage summoned a slightly older Ms. Super Sage. The supervisor had a stern, thin face, and a wardrobe that said "unimaginative business casual." She approached with a brisk step.

"You *have* the ability to call from your kitchen," she explained with equal measures of patience and condescension. "But first, you must plug in the router we gave you when you were here on March 3. That will connect to your modem and give you Wi-Fi service through Verizon's lines. We have already activated that service. You still remember the PIN number we gave you when you were here last, don't you?"

So much jargon so fast! I felt the ground under my feet getting slippery.

“No, no, no! I purchased a package of TV / high-speed Internet / phone last year for my home. I signed with Comcast. I’m already paying for an extended phone service. I can’t cancel that home plan without a big penalty.”

“We agree with you,” Ms. Super Sage said, still condescending and reaching the outer edge of her patience. “But once you activate our superior service, you will make up the cost. By combining your home and business lines, you get four handsets at the three-handset price. This combining of services saves you a bundle!”

“That might be true if I wanted four phones. But I don’t. It also means getting my company to pay for my home phone and TV service. My company doesn’t want to change their existing contracts. Nor am I authorizing alteration of our business phone service.”

“Are you crazy? You don’t want our incalculably superior service at a lower price? You must be one of those nut jobs!”

That’s not what came out of her mouth, but the look on her face was clear. She knew I was a dirty bastard trying to take away her sales commission, snatching the bread off her table and food out of the mouths of her children. Since her kids were now going to starve, she didn’t need to understand anymore.

I too had reached the limit of my understanding. All I knew for sure was I wanted out of that store.

After weeks of negotiations, an exorbitant cash penalty, and more frustration, they finally restored my service. Now all my phones work fine. I am calling friends and family. What has changed is I have gained a new insight into the modern world.

There is a variety of ways retirees can waste their newfound leisure time: shuffleboard, park benches, feeding the pigeons. For me, visiting smartphone shops is no longer on that list.

Adonis's Sphincter

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ALL DREAMS HAVE AN ELEMENT of surprise and even some magic in them—and sometimes, they turn around and bite you in the butt.

My dreams often crash up against unexpected realities. In our world of "lookism," where appearance is judged important, we tend to see people only in terms of their outer shell. Even weatherpersons must be stunning, with big hair.

And so, I too yearn for the enviable body of a Greek Adonis. I pursue my vain dreams by working out at the gym each week. I attempt to pump up my abs, biceps, quads, glutes, and cardio muscles to Greek proportions. How has the Adonis struggle worked for me? Has building muscles—with lifts, curls, and presses—brought me the admirable appearance I'd hoped for?

Almost.

But then, suddenly, unexpectedly, one day my gym work became irrelevant.

Of the 640 muscles in my body, 639 were just fine. One, however, was not. That one offending muscle bit me and superseded all the others. It was the very last muscle I want to think about. It was my sphincter.

I'm a refined guy. I read poetry and sip grand cru wine. I prefer to think about chamber music, not sphincters. But that little puppy just would not be denied. A slight imperfection, a little fissure, and that muscle started making every minute a living hell.

When a sphincter becomes faulty, it does not whisper. It screams. It demands top billing over every other concern in life. It ignites a level of pain even the strongest of men cannot endure. Fortunately for me, there was a solution. I opted for surgery.

Anticipating a hospital operation is a downer, but the episode was over quickly. I neither saw nor remember any of it. Whatever doctors are paid to

make these problems go away, they are worth it. In a couple of days, I was walking around—fully relieved, and with all 640 muscles working comfortably.

Once it was over, I wondered: Was there any meaning to my vulgar nightmare? Yes. It was the glaring irony between the heroic Adonis wannabe versus who we really are.

My whole vain appearance sits on (if I may say) a fragile bottom. It was not reassuring that my self-image dreams could be dashed by one single muscle. But what about the true Adonis celebrities we see? The world leaders, the famous athletes, even the gorgeous weather people? I wondered if they too endured unmentionable ailments. Those whose appearance dreams have come true, those who have won the "Good Looks Lottery," showing up on glossy covers and prime-time TV—did they ever need sphincterotomies? The split between their unmentionable private realities and their lofty public personas must be painful irony. They do apparently cope. I admire their grace under stress. They are a comfort to the rest of us as we try to reconcile our own dreams with reality.

Henry and the Jabbering Monkeys

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HENRY TOOK IN THE LATE November sun as he sat in his silver wheelchair outside the Pasadena Hospice Center.

"To be ejected from hospice does not happen often," he thought. "But two evictions in two months from the same hospice center? That must be a record."

He hadn't so much been ejected as encouraged to leave. Now he would have to figure out what to do next.

He hadn't liked the center. He was happy to be out. However, for the time being, he just wanted to enjoy this peaceful moment in the warm California sun.

His spiritual advisors had frequently counseled him: "Be at peace with each moment of your life. Jabbering monkeys are always trying to intrude upon transcendental moments. Resist. Repeat your mantra to clear your mind, and remain calm."

This moment was troubling, yes. But there was no need to dramatize the situation. Ever since he had arrived in Southern California sixty years earlier, he had adopted this mellow mind-set. From his first day in Los Angeles, it had always been about the sun. The warmth. The optimistic, brighter-tomorrow ambience. This thinking had become part of his DNA. He had been thrilled to leave the darkness of the West Virginia coal-mine town where he was born. His subsequent career as an engineer, surrounded by NASA space jockeys, only reinforced his sunny, can-do outlook.

Yes, he was now dying of terminal cancer. Yes, he had no place to go for the night. He didn't even have a plan. His situation would be a crushing fixation for others, but Henry was not like others. This was a passing cloud

on an otherwise sunny day.

The first time he was asked to leave the hospice center had been awkward for the nurses. When they had asked him to leave, Henry had simply wheeled himself out the door, down Fisher Avenue for six blocks, then turned and wheeled back. By the time he returned, the night shift had come on and hardly noticed him wheeling into his old room.

In the morning, the supervising head nurse erupted. “You can’t just sneak into our hospice!” she yelled as she stomped into his room. “You have reneged on our agreement. We are not a hotel where guests can drop in for free drugs and leave when they choose. You were discharged! You have no business being here.”

Under normal circumstances, a hospice center would never toss dying inmates out on the street, but Henry’s case had been exceptional from the day he was admitted. Upon arrival, there had been no question: the doctor’s prognosis was “terminal.” It was a routine case, Henry was told, and the end would come in less than two months. But it didn’t work out that way. Three months passed. Henry did not. Not only was he still kicking; he seemed to be rallying.

From the time he was admitted, Henry had been intolerably disruptive. The final moments for hospice patients are supposed to be sedate, appreciative, and penitent. Henry, however, was foulmouthed. He found fault with every aspect of the care the center provided.

He would bark at the nurses. “You can’t force me to take quack medicine! It’s poisoning me!”

Neither did he hide his contempt for the center when talking to other patients. One day he confronted the head administrator. “You are not even trying to honor my requests! I am going to pack up and leave!”

The administrator’s face had brightened. She had had enough and encouraged Henry to check out.

When the day for his first discharge came, Henry had assured the nurses there was someone waiting to pick him up. He had lied. It seemed a routine release, and the administrator thought nothing of it. She quickly regretted her trust when she found Henry’s grinning face back in his room the next morning.

Two months later, when it came to his second discharge, the administrator took no chances. She had taken weeks to plan everything. The

taxi arrived at noon. Henry's son had assured her he would take Dad in until the illness progressed further. The administrator had packed Henry up, said goodbye, and helped him into the back of the cab.

Minutes later, the driver jammed on the brakes. They had traveled a mere four blocks when the driver learned that the destination was bogus and there was going to be no payment or tip. Henry was out on the street again.

And now, here he was, sitting in his wheelchair on the sidewalk, with no money and no place to go. That was a jabbering monkey. Nobody chooses to spend the last days of his or her life in perplexity. But Henry had spent his life getting rejections from small-minded people who couldn't grasp his view of reality.

For Henry's friends and relatives, it would have been simpler had he been mentally retarded or insane. In truth, he was extraordinarily brilliant. After being thrown out of high school, he studied on his own. A few years later, he had applied to MIT as a master's degree candidate in the School of Engineering. He was not exactly accepted, but he talked his way past the admission committee. Soon thereafter, he was somehow awarded an advanced degree in engineering, despite the fact that he had no high school diploma and had never spent a day as an undergraduate college student.

Henry's sister, Mary—my mother—explained: "As a child, he was a wonderfully normal brother to me and my sister back in Wheeling. He played sports with the other kids and helped his dad with the household chores. But then he went to MIT and studied calculus. It jumbled his brain! He never recovered. Then he moved on to Southern California with all those fruits and nuts."

The family had spent many a judgmental dinner debating Henry's lifestyle, but that was all in the distant past. What was indisputable now was that Henry had cancer of the liver. It had spread to his kidneys and beyond. His condition deteriorated, and he had gone to hospice.

At ninety-one years old, he was okay submitting to X-rays. He accepted the doctor's diagnosis—cancer—and the prognosis, which was terminal. But when it came to the recommended treatment and prescriptions, Henry agreed to nothing. He refused chemo and all traditional medicine. Instead, he embarked on his own medical regimen. Acidophilus bacillus, found in expensive yogurt, was the only treatment he would consider.

Henry had taken this yogurt most of his life. He attributed his

remarkable good health to nothing else. As the doctors became increasingly adamant about the seriousness of his condition, Henry eventually accepted a more aggressive treatment.

“More aggressive,” he explained, “but not what the doctors were recommending. You see, many of the good acidophilus bacilli die when they pass through the stomach-acid bath. To get a stronger implantation in the intestines, I now must approach the problem from the other end.”

That “other end” thing was what had gotten him evicted from hospice. The nurses had initially agreed to provide him with the costly yogurt, but they drew the line at yogurt enemas. The nurse-patient relationship went south from there.

Henry protested. “If the center won’t provide me with my lifesaving treatment, then they are trying to kill me.”

Confronted with wild accusations of homicide, the center quickly warmed to the idea of Henry’s departure. He had begun proselytizing the wonders of acidophilus enemas to other patients.

“There is no ailment known to man that acidophilus cannot cure or dramatically ameliorate. You must insist the center provide this treatment,” Henry would lecture.

His new converts began demanding their own yogurt implantations. The situation became chaos. Nurses and volunteers, unaccustomed to being called murderers, threatened to quit.

Now the afternoon shadows were drawing long on Foster Street as Henry sat there on the sidewalk in his wheelchair. It was time to consider his new circumstances.

He was comfortable enough that he didn’t see any urgent problem. It had all come together up to this point. He had enjoyed a fine career, a loyal wife, and a vacation home in Waikiki. He had two fine boys who were doing well, farther down the coast. He took pleasure in the fact that his unconventional lifestyle had been an embarrassment to his family. In turn, the family found it best to give Henry slack and to keep their distance. The sons were good boys. There was no need to trouble them now. He had simply canceled the plan for the boys to take Dad in.

Henry started to wonder: What was the meaning of it all? Had he not played his cards well over the past ninety-one years? According to Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs theory, contribution and growth are the two most

important things for any human being. During his forty years as an engineer at North American Rockwell, Rocketdyne Division, he had experienced nothing but growth and contribution. The NASA space program benefited greatly from his contributions. Upon retirement at sixty-five, he'd been given a gold watch and a *sayonara* party. The next day, he had returned back to his old desk and contributed another five years of productive service. In addition to his numerous patents and technical fixes, he had made a significant contribution to the attitude of younger, newer engineers as well.

"Those kids, they arrive with blinders," he would complain. "They never visualize the kaleidoscope of possible solutions in each problem they face."

My Uncle Henry's life was a monument to unlimited possibilities.

As for Maslow's goal of growth, Henry never stopped growing. As a teen he had been destined to follow in his father's career as a local merchant in downtown Wheeling, selling coal every winter and seeds and farm supplies in the better weather. His father had been a pillar of propriety in the small community. Henry's dad enjoyed a reputation for rectitude all his life, and he wanted the same legacy for his children. But "rectitude" and "tradition" were words that never entered Henry's vocabulary. His dreams went far beyond anything coal and farm supplies had to offer.

Once he arrived in Southern California, Henry never looked back. Unlike in West Virginia, in California, his disruptive, unconventional attitude was no longer an embarrassment. Wild political ideas, nudist camps, and unconventional health diets were tolerated among his new friends and admired in his NASA community.

Long before Birds Eye shipped frozen orange juice and California vegetables to the markets back East, Henry had started his own company shipping frozen OJ. He borrowed heavily to finance his own fine business—packing, freezing, and shipping orange juice across the country. But one day, out of thousands of his packages, one shipment of juice thawed, fermented, and was refrozen and sold. The stinky, rotten juice was delivered. Word got out, and his company's reputation was destroyed. The business came to a quick end. For Henry, orange juice was a commodity much like coal. His mind was beginning to reach for a grander future. He wanted the stars.

A new company in Pasadena, Rocketdyne, was given a contract to study the German U2 rocket after World War II. With a huge military grant, they

soon needed many engineers. Henry was hired and spent the next twenty years working on the engine for the Saturn 1B rockets carrying payloads into outer space. In his late seventies, when he left Rocketdyne for the final time, he retired to Hawaii. There, he formed a health food society and exercise commune. The community eventually launched its own health food radio program in Honolulu. Henry became the announcer and host.

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How he got off the sidewalk that day in Pasadena is a mystery known only to Henry. Phone calls were made. His children were notified. Henry spent his final days in the loving care of his family. His own final thoughts on his life seemed to be lost.

At his funeral, it was obvious Henry had left an abundance of evidence as to how he lived his happy, wacky, eccentric life. Among his family and engineering friends, one speaker told of how Henry had introduced him to the *Skylark of Space* series by E. E. “Doc” Smith. This was in the early 1950s, when space travel was beyond comprehension. Henry is gone now, but what remains with all of us is the memory of his unconventional, experimental thinking.

Another speaker recalled Henry with a nostalgia for simpler days of long ago. But that was not Henry’s message. He was about excitement and the coming, futuristic world.

“There was no conventional activity that Henry could not turn on its head,” another old engineer recalled. “He had a unique viewpoint for everything. He would see me peel my oranges, toss out the rind, and eat the fleshy interior. He would then furnish me with documents proving the rind was the most nutritious part of the fruit. Once with a pain on his face, he moaned, ‘I can’t believe you are throwing out those eggshells! You don’t know the health benefits of ground-up eggshells? Your body is going to hell if you don’t toss out that yoke and white. Eggshells will save your life if you just give them the chance.’”

There were other stories and laughter about Henry’s successes and failures. If there is any answer to the question about the value of his life, which I imagine he might have asked himself from his wheelchair as he sat

on the sidewalk, it was found in the voices at his funeral.

At a time when the country was comfortable, conformist, and conventional, Henry was an eccentric blast of fresh SoCal wind. People said he was goofy and often a failure—and it's true, but he was also endlessly likable.

We can all take energy from Henry's life. He spoke to the enlightened, freethinking person we would all like to be. We might not envy all of Henry's antics, but he offered us a glimpse into a life freed from the shackles of tradition and rectitude.

Today Henry belongs to the hereafter. Heaven may also be a place of buttoned-down tradition and rectitude. If that is true, I can't wait to see how his arrival is working out for everybody else up there.

Comedy Is Hard. Death Is Easy.

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AN OLD FRIEND, KNOWING THAT Henry David Thoreau was close to death, asked if the writer had any sense of what was to come. Thoreau's famous reply was, "One world at a time." He died on May 6, 1862. Henry was just being droll, but what kind of person spends the last hours of his life thinking up witty words and pranks? Confronting the hereafter calls for a sobering, serious, even terrifying moment. If you can't take death seriously, then what is left? Nobody looks the Grim Reaper in the face and confuses him with a clown. At a younger age, that seemed obvious to me. Less so now.

My neighbor Averill Byrd passed on decades ago. Through his whole life right up to the end, he either played or saw the clown on every occasion. Mr. Byrd was a close friend of my dad. There remains something of their long-ago friendship that is still important.

Back in the early 1950s, Mr. Byrd learned my dad had purchased a hotel in New York City. It was a heavy financial undertaking for Dad. He worried his hotel was located across the street from, and competed with, the Hilton. Knowing how much anxiety Dad was feeling at the time, Mr. Byrd tried to ease Dad's worries. He found a dead, greasy, black bug. The critter must have been three inches long. Averill had it mounted, framed, and labeled. The engraving read:

> "*Found in a guest room of the New York Hilton Hotel on July 23, 1952.*"

I can still recall the large display box that sat in our living room. As a reminder of his friend's humor, Dad kept that encased bug through all the years of my youth.

Byrd was a jokester even in the last week of his long life. By the end, cancer had taken one of his lungs, among other organs, and was spreading throughout the rest of his body. When the last days of Averill's life finally came, he entered a free-clinic X-ray trailer for a body scan.

"I am in perfect health," he announced to the attendant with his one still-functioning lung. "But if there should be even the slightest blemish in my perfect-health picture, please notify me immediately. I'm a hypochondriac, so no matter how small, I'd like to be contacted if you notice anything that is even slightly irregular."

He then gave my father's name and address instead of his own.

After a lifetime of kidding together, Dad knew an Averill Byrd hoax when he saw one. When he received the alarming X-ray report, with its terminal prognosis, Dad took it in the spirit of a final act of humor.

In Hollywood, they say, "Death is easy; comedy is hard." Death and comedy should always be polar opposite words. But for Dad and his friend, they were not. Mr. Byrd's humor in the face of ugliness causes me to wonder whether the Grim Reaper and Bozo the Clown might have a bromance together. Death and humor always used to seem like animals in separate cages. In my youth, the hereafter terrified me. Byrd didn't see it that way, however. How far apart can "death and humor" be if, when I Google the words together, I find six million entries?

Gallows humorist George Mikes points out:

Laughing at death gives us triple pleasure:

1) *The pleasure of the joke itself.*
2) *The malicious joy of laughing at death's expense.*
3) *The pleasure of taming Death and fraternizing with him.*

Now that I'm at a more advanced age myself, thoughts of death and eternity don't wake me up at night. They can't be laugh-out-loud funny like Bozo, but isn't there some irony here? Something a bit like a joke? We all seek a long life, but nobody likes getting old. And the winners of the longevity game? What are their rewards? Gazing at the nursing home walls day after day? Watching soap opera reruns? What kind of prize is that? But wait! There's more! Those winners get to pay a thousand dollars a day to live like

vegetables, and they can’t check out. That is a joke on all of us.

If my “golden years” are like that, then I sign on to the Averill Byrd way of thinking. Stare at that wall long enough, and the Grim Reaper comes to look like a fun alternative. If immortality is a fate worse than death, that is funny. So I’m imagining Bozo and Mr. Reaper dancing and bonding together. And when my time comes, with Mr. Bird as my mentor, I hope I too can have a chuckle on my way into the afterlife.

Magic: Are You Really Looking?

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THE R-WORD—"RETIREMENT"—HAS A STIGMA. I'M no longer an economic producer; I just consume. But it's a transition—no different than the transition from the classroom to the office or from carefree dating individual to mortgage-paying PTA parent. The trick is to make the change a well-conceived journey. An eight-year-old girl can help.

Ever meet people who see aliens? I know guys who talk with the dead. It gives me the creeps. I view mystical people with humor, suspicion, or both, but I try to change the subject and hold on to my wallet. The supernatural never served me well in my career.

"Get the hell out of my office!" That's what my banker would say if I brought out a deck of tarot cards. If crystal balls and Ouija boards really worked, I would have seen them in the stockbroker's office. Never did. In all my years in business, paranormal phenomena didn't fit in. I never used to think about the mystical.

So it came as an abrupt surprise when my cute, blond granddaughter, Molly, accused me one day of being inattentive to her fantasy world. I worried, "Oh my God! My own flesh and blood. She's not yet nine years old, and she's already becoming loopy."

We were walking down an old, dirt road in Connecticut one hot, end-of-summer afternoon. Other than the horseflies, there was little to see or talk about. Out of nowhere, Molly asked in her sweet little-girl voice, "Grandpa, can you see the fairies in the forest?"

"No," I replied in a condescending, grandfatherly tone. We were supposed to be spending quality time together, so I suppressed my irritation. "I don't believe there are any fairies there today. I can't see any of them."

Experience has taught me not to be baited into religious or political debates with adults. So why should I get sucked into a debate with a child

about her take on pixies?

I tried to keep any further dismissive thoughts to myself as we continued walking, but Molly persisted with the discussion. This was an eight-year-old who had spent her life contemplating and studying pixies. You might say she was an expert. Grandpa was not going to evade the conversation. Not that easily.

“But, Grandpa, you’re just not paying attention. You’re not even trying!”

Suddenly she looked less eight and more like an angry parent. Was I supposed to feel like a naughty child in this routine?

“I *am* paying attention!” I responded.

I’m an open-minded guy. I have accepted many unexplained things: the astronomical mysteries of black holes, the spooky world of quantum physics, the life-altering powers of apple strudel, and the beauty of properly functioning sphincters, to name a few. But pixies? I think not. We grandfathers have to draw the line somewhere. We have standards.

As Molly and I continued down the dirt road, she eventually stopped talking. She seemed to have given up on me and had shifted to silent-treatment mode. The quiet grew awkward. A horsefly buzz filled the void. I was beginning to think quality time together wasn’t always high quality.

She rolled her eyes, and I imagined she must be thinking, “No more walks with grumpy old grandfathers! It’s just not worth the time to explain!”

Of course, at Molly’s age, there was a solution. For the price of an ice-cream cone, which she shared with the pixie, all was forgiven and forgotten.

Much too late for our walk discussion, I later read Thomas Moore’s book *The Re-Enchantment of Everyday Life*. Moore writes, “Enchantment is a condition of unending suspension of disbelief, the willingness to live in a bungalow of stories rather than a warehouse of facts. It places imagination before information, and wisdom before intelligence.”

At the time of my walk with Molly, I was newly retired, whereas she had a few years to go before starting her career. Neither one of us was anchored to the same reality as, say, middle-aged, fact-filled, working parents. I pondered our differences in life’s stages, and it occurred to me that in retirement, I should be looking for different perspectives. Cantankerous old retirees should seek “enchantment and wisdom.” I didn’t confess any change of mind to Molly, but I did resolve to pay more attention.

A few weeks later, my own “bungalow of stories” moment arrived. I experienced a type of enchantment in our garden in Woodstock, Connecticut. It was a late September afternoon, and I noticed little hummingbirds flying in a strange pattern. They were at eye level, perhaps five feet in front of me. Now that I was trying to see enchantment, these birds became pixies as they continued for a minute of fearless aerobatics. I was beginning to think we had a relationship going until the little ruby-throats dive-bombed above my left ear and made hairpin turns like space aliens. It was frightening. What if they missed a high-speed maneuver and crashed their needle beaks into my wrinkled old forehead?

The episode was disorienting—as if I’d drunk something weird, like my wife’s new powdered, Japanese tea. Then, after a minute of buzzing around my head, quick as a flicker, the hummingbirds took off. I never saw them again for the rest of the year.

Months later, after winter had ended, they returned with more strange antics. Minako and I were sitting hidden in the screen porch. Back the hummingbirds came with fresh aerial acrobatics outside our window. They seemed to know we were watching and that we were their benefactors who kept refilling the sugar-water dispenser.

For ornithologists acquainted with birds’ habits, there may be no magic in this at all, but I found it a delightful, out-of-this-world experience. Although these little creatures had brains the size of the iris in my eye, I still felt an anthropomorphic communication between us.

Since then, I have continued to pay attention in the garden. It’s clear something weird takes place every time these strange little birds are at play. Fluttering birds are not exactly breaking news like a Bigfoot sighting, but they taught me about Molly’s mystical, dirt road observation and about paying attention to the inexplicable.

Now that I have veered off the Career Superhighway, I spend more time walking slowly down the Retirement Dirt Road. Now there is time to examine inexplicable, enchanting things more carefully.

I mostly walk alone now because Molly is older today. She is turning onto her own Career Route Interstate. Her world is rapidly filling with her own warehouse of facts. Soon she will be doing budgets and taxes and balancing family and career. She will submerge her thoughts in all the nuts, bolts, and facts of the career life that I have left. Then, decades from now, she

will retire and enter into a new reality.

Like a caterpillar emerging from the confining career stage of life, she will open up in retirement as something new—like a butterfly. She will rediscover some of the enchantment that escaped her middle-aged career days. When that time comes, I hope she will be so lucky as to have her own eight-year-old companion to walk her slowly down that dirt road.