

In Dreams . . .

Essays on Dreams

by

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Preface

*In dreams I walk with you,
In dreams I talk to you . . .*

My title comes from the mournful song Roy Orbison made famous in 1963, in which that “candy-colored clown they call the sandman” entices him to sleep, where he can once more be together “in beautiful dreams” with a lover who has “said goodbye.” I have no particular interest in borrowing either the narrative or the mood from this sad tune. But if you rearrange some of its elements, it suits my purposes pretty well.

First of all, there’s an “I” and a “you” in those two lines above. As you’ll find out in “I’m Dreamin’ My Life Away,” if you get that far, given the way I live right now, in general solitude, for me, both the “I” who loves and the “you” it loves reside entirely inside me, among the raucous array of other Is and yous my identity comprises. So when “I walk with you” and “I talk to you,” at least in the very specific ways I describe here, it is in fact “all in my head.”

As you’ll also find out in that essay, I’ve decided to call that “I,” the one that does all the good lovin’, my brain, which takes care of my “you” (and indirectly everyone else I love both on the inside and the outside) in the most generous and amicable ways now, as yours can and will take care of you (and everyone else you love) if you just let it. And certain significant aspects of that care transpire “in dreams,” some while I’m asleep, others while I’m wide awake, an ongoing dialogue of imagery that is both entertaining and—if I spend enough time with it,

remembering it, mulling it over, reflecting on it—transformative.

I have over the years read a lot about dream theory, and I've written about it a few times in scholarly venues, as it pertains to poetics; but I am not a psychologist and have no interest in promoting any extant approach to dream "interpretation." I am a poet and relate to the imagery my dreams generate in exactly the same way that I relate to the imagery my imagination (and the imaginations of other poets I read) generates. I assume those images have depth, resonance, and are often merely cues or clues to follow toward much deeper meanings.

As a poet, I actually trust that mode of thinking and learning much more so than I do more traditional forms of "rational" inquiry. That may at first take sound kind of loony, and in the context of Western intellectual systems, which so often place poetry and poetics at the far fringes of our discursive systems, and almost always at odds with, and inferior to, scientific and philosophical discourses, it is. Eastern traditions on the other hand are much more generous toward poetry in this regard, which is in part why my penultimate essay here is in that vein; and why I spend a lot of my time now reading Chinese poetry.

In Orbison's song, the narrator says, "just before dawn/I awake and find you gone." The nice thing about establishing a loving relationship with your own "you" is that your own "I" will never find it gone, nor vice-versa, asleep, awake, no matter. My "I" walks with my "you," talks to my "you," and, most importantly in these essays, guides my "you" toward possible resolutions for things that afflict me, some of them immediate concerns, some of them longstanding problems, some of them lifelong burdens. "We" are constant companions now, at least "in dreams."

These essays provide a set of personal examples that I hope might invite you to listen more carefully to your own dreams, whether sleeping or waking, to stop to consider, instead of immediately dismissing, the sorts of images and imagery your brain generates routinely as one expression of its in-built desire to help you. That, too, may sound kind of loony, to which my response is simple: Doing so is, on the contrary, a way to stop being victimized by the routine kinds of looniness that culture, society, and our own skewed self-perceptions induce, a way to get back on a path toward some sort of sanity. Bold claims, to be sure. But it works for me. If you start reading these essays, I'm hoping I can gradually persuade you to at least consider whether something of this sort might work for you, too.

The Bodhisattva Asks . . .

1.

*There's no two ways about love.
It's true what they say about love.
Come what may, it's just that way;
there's no two ways about love*

*...
The schemes that you're dreamin' of
fit into your world like a glove.
Once you're hooked, your goose is cooked;
there's no two ways about love*

Those are some lines from a song called “There’s No Two Ways About Love,” which Lena Horne sings to Cab Calloway’s accompaniment in the 1943 classic movie “Stormy Weather.” It is clearly a B-side song, at least by comparison to some of the other blockbusters in that movie, including the title song. The second stanza I quote is particularly chunky. I couldn’t even find a copy of the lyrics with a Google search, including one Lena Horne reservoir that catalogued over 500 of her songs. I recorded a cover of this song a couple of years ago and used it as the title for the playlist the song appears in, so I must have found the lyrics somewhere, or maybe just copied them out listening to the Horne YouTube from the movie, like I did today. All of which is to say that it is not a particularly well-known, well-made, or memorable song. Except to me these last few years. I’m not even sure why, something about the “no two ways” business. I like the complexity of it, the implication that while two-wayness may be the way of the world in every other respect, at least with love it’s not. Or something like that. I

just happened to listen to that playlist while I was taking a bath today and knew I wanted to use it to open this essay, even though it seems a very loose fit, if it is a fit at all. Only time will tell if I can make it all work for you. I already know it works for me on a level that remains beneath my consciousness right now, so whatever the result of this work, I'll still be satisfied, even if, for my lack of verbal ingenuity, you are not.

The “topic” of this essay seems even to me at the outset to be at odds with the gist of this song, in that it is all about “two-ways.” So I have my work cut out for me. I'll begin with a dream I had a couple of months ago, one I took note of at the time and have had in the back of my mind since.

The scene of the dream is a Buddhist monastery where I am taking some sort of a test concerning my level of enlightenment. I had been reading a lot of Taoist texts this spring and summer, so the dream seemed in keeping with what was on my mind, not out-of-the-blue or overly esoteric, I mean. The question the bodhisattva asks: “What is your understanding of the (?) koan paradox?” I can't remember what that koan was or what sort of paradox it captured. But it had something to do with the desire for perfection, and I answered this way:

“The desire for perfection is always inflected by an understanding that human nature is by definition imperfect and, therefore, the goal is unattainable. So at every step along the way one has to confront the question: “Why should I even bother when what I seek cannot ever be found?”

You can feel almost viscerally the two-way tension in my response, the sense that one is always conflicted about how to pursue the highest human ambitions, that every

path toward them has a two-ways aspect, one urging you forward, the other warning you back, never one or the other, always both. The bodhisattva said I had passed the test and was ready to resume my path in the world. He did not say that I had achieved enlightenment, or even if that was possible for me, based on what I said. Desire is after all, I can see now, what needs to be overcome to achieve enlightenment. So in some sense even the desire for perfection is profane. I'm surprised the bodhisattva didn't take off points from my answer for failing to acknowledge and account for that. Then again, maybe he was so disappointed in it that I actually failed the test and was sent off so he'd be rid of me. Again, no clear way to know which of these "two-ways" his intentions pointed. Or both. But he did indicate that it was time for me to go off on my own.

The existential problem my response points to is one endemic to human enterprise in this world, most especially in relation to personal ethical choices: We never have any absolutely reliable way of knowing exactly what the best, or even better course is, not at least once we become conscious of more than one of the historically significant menus for guiding our behavior. By contrast I mean with a complete obeisance to one preferred script, always deferring to outside authorities to interpret its complexities for us. But even if we only know one such text, the Bible say, or the Quran, there are still profound disagreements among "experts" as to what they recommend or require: Should I pray for lost souls or pillage a village? Should I sing from a minaret or detonate a bomb in a public plaza? Or both? You can't end up with more extreme two-ways than that, both derived from texts that are commonly shared by all readers.

And once we step away from such fixed matrices, most especially into arenas that foster agnosticism, we are

always left with the conundrum of whether or not there is any reason to believe we can ever know what is “good” let alone see a good reason to do it. I really like mental states like the one induced by this kind of ambivalence. On the ethical side, such two-way murkiness mandates an almost moment-by-moment series of choices about how/whether one wants to continue to invest energy in an enterprise that appears to be futile; one that requires discipline, dedication, and sacrifice at the expense of more worldly rewards. One where it’s entirely possible, when it’s all over and you “see the light,” you might think: “What a chump I was. I could have been luxuriating in selfish pleasures; instead I had a V8.” In other words, one where there are always two incompatible and competing “ways” in the picture and we need to navigate a pathway through them.

2.

So, speaking of pathways. . .

*If I walk in the pathway of duty,
if I work till the close of the day,
I shall see the Great King in all his beauty
when I've gone the last mile of the way.*

I Zoom weekly with my siblings and a family friend. One of our recent tasks was to pick a snippet from each of three songs we thought about often and, over a three week period, explain why. I picked these lines for my final entry, which go through my mind maybe three or four times a week, always via the remembered voice of Sam Cooke, who sings this gospel song during his stint as a very young man with The Soul Stirrers. It is a very poignant song for me, at least in part because of this next stanza (Cooke doesn’t sing it, but I found it a few years

ago when I wanted to record a cover of the song. And by the way, if you want to cover a song, don't pick one Sam Cooke has sung. No matter how good you are, and I'm not very good, you will never be able to reclaim the song from Sam Cooke.) In any case, here is that stanza, one that resonates with me, as I suppose it would for anyone of my age who has endured great losses, which is pretty much anyone of my age, I guess, almost by definition:

*Here the dearest of ties we must sever,
tears of sorrow are seen every day.
But no sickness no sighing forever
when I've gone the last mile of the way.*

While the song does capture the sense of tension anyone trying to stay on a good path feels in a world that doesn't reward such endeavors, it is still quite clear (at the end of both of these stanzas) that once the last mile is passed, there will be ample rewards on some other side. But just by happenstance when I was learning this song I misread the final line of the first stanza, turning the statement into a question, i.e., "Shall I see?" instead of "I shall see." I actually prefer my mistaken version for my personal journey in that it carries the same two-way ambivalence as the Zen koan I can't any longer remember. In other words: If you're not sure there will be any reward at all in some promised future, and you know that doing good does not render external rewards in the present, why would you choose such a path? In practice, once you do (if you have) you know that you have that question hauntingly in mind at every step along the way. The advantage of having made it to the last mile with the commitment intact is that at least the mission's almost over, whatever the outcome, and you're not likely to be too tempted to abandon it given the sort of paltry pleasures that old age proffers, at least by comparison to those of youth.

This calls suddenly to mind a line from a bluegrass song I like (“The Far Side Banks of Jordan,” by the Carter family): “Lures of this old world have ceased to make me want to stay,” sung by an old man who fears he might pass first leaving his wife grieving. At one of my medical appointments after my wife died the doctor asked how I was handling it emotionally. I said with a smile I was doing great, and quoted that line, as if to say there was not that much difference to me right then between living and dying. I was sanguine about both. Fortunately, she understood that my smile was a sign of wisdom not depression. I know this paragraph is only tenuously connected to what preceded it. But it offers a good “last mile” for this section tonight. I’ll just have to wait and see what door it might open next tomorrow morning.

3.

So, speaking of doors. . .

Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you: For every one that asketh receiveth; and he that seeketh, findeth; and to him that knocketh it shall be opened. (Matthew 7-8)

Jesus delivers this famous promise as part of his “Sermon on the Mount,” at least according to Matthew’s version. I assume that everyone else’s experience is like mine in the sense that you have at points in your life prayed fervently for something to be given, or found, or opened unto you, and it wasn’t. And the aftereffect is a baffled, sometimes depressed, quandary, one that is at least vaguely analogous to the ones I’ve written about thus far. There seems on the face of it to be no two ways about it. But

there are. Something you wanted to happen didn't. Or didn't want to happen did. What do you make of this promise then? And how do you map a path forward?

This whole section of the sermon has primarily to do with faith, as in having it, confidently. And with prayer secondarily as an exercise of faith. So when a prayer is not answered, we can assume, as theologians have explained, that either our faith is defective or that what we asked for is not in God's will. But it is almost impossible to see how one's own faith is weak, from the inside I mean, when it's the best version of it we can muster. And if God's will is the determining factor, why would we have to pray for it at all, in that His will would be "done" in any case whether we asked, sought or knocked? Again, we have to decide not just how we want to proceed in the moment of such a crisis, in relation to asking for such outside intervention, I mean, but at every future moment we have to live in the shadow of that perceived loss. That takes stamina, a form of hobbled faith that may not lead to answered prayers but keeps us wobbling on the path toward an impossible perfection, whether or not we expect to see the glory after the last mile has passed.

When I'm puzzled by one of Jesus' almost always puzzling pronouncements, I like to look at the context for it. This one is inserted, in Matthew, between a series of warnings about being judgmental and a series of examples of how to give gifts. So maybe the key to coping with unopened doors is not to close doors to others and the solution to not receiving is to give. I just thought up that succinct sentence right here, but it conveys a set of ethical imperatives that became abundantly clear to me in the aftermath of my wife's passing; i.e., the way to cope with the failure of others to reach out was to reach out to others in need; and the way to cope with missing gifts was to make sure they were not missing for others who

crossed your path. I've written about this more extensively elsewhere ("Coming to Terms" and *This Fall*) so I won't go into detail about it here. I just happened to be preoccupied today with two very specific things I prayed and hoped for most of my life, neither of which happened to my satisfaction (a telling word there, to be sure!) I don't need, or even want, either of them any longer, but the "shadow" such unanswered prayers casts is a long and dark one. I'm going to go to bed now because I feel very frustrated by this troubling example of two-wayness. I'm thinking that by tomorrow morning I won't be as conflicted, or at least not conflicted in the same way. Good night!

4.

So, speaking of frustration with conflict. . .

Here is the most famous section of Paul's most famous letter, his first missive to the troublesome Corinthians:

If I speak in the tongues of men or of angels, but do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give all I possess to the poor and give over my body to hardship that I may boast,¹³ but do not have love, I gain nothing.

Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It

always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.

Love never fails. But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away. For we know in part and we prophesy in part, but when completeness comes, what is in part disappears. When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put the ways of childhood behind me. For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.

And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love. (NIV)

I was half-right. I'm still conflicted but not conflicted in the same way this morning. I had a bunch of weird dreams that, as usual, followed an emotional progression from "dusk to dawn" and I woke up laughing, with an image in my head of a list of possible translations of a passage from *Ecclesiastes*, the first of which was "Wow! No work! Gonna be alright, gonna be okay!" I think I can safely say without checking that's not quite textually accurate. More like a combination of Paul Kameen and Keb' Mo'.

It seems to me that even my dreams are most often both-way-two-ways, at least the ones I remember. But for some reason last night's (which, except for that quote—and the conversational context it was part of, too complicated and loony to document here—I don't remember the details of)

did show me a way back to the “no two ways” subject: via Paul’s enthralling paean to love in this letter, which was also, but vaguely, on my mind as I woke up. So I went and read it.

The second paragraph above is, of course, the most famous, but I quoted that whole section because, as I said, for me at least, understanding how to implement an ethical imperative from any significant source requires looking at the context. This is, after all, a letter designed to tamp down division in the early church, in large part an express challenge to Paul’s authority, which he claims is based on revelation. The early church was a wonderfully turbulent entity, more a community, or array of communities, than an institution, all kinds of competing theories and texts and values and systems, all so spiritually, culturally, and rhetorically generative. So unlike the rule-based, hide-bound, ultra-patriarchy it turned into once the threat of death for practitioners was lifted by Constantine about 300 years hence. Can’t beat that “threat of death” thing for bringing focus and intensity to one’s ethical/spiritual enterprise in this world! Look for example at the difference between existentialism in the French resistance during WW II and what it turned into in the 50s and 60s.

The immediate context provided by Paul’s mid-letter peroration of Biblical proportions seems clear to me: He is saying that everything, including him and his apparently externally sanctioned authority will pass. So get over it, friends. You need some sort of leader and right now it’s me. But the only durable remnant of his regime, and everything and anything else for that matter, is and will be love, which gets me back to the one-way street I’ve been looking for, the point where Paul (both the original and me) and Lena Horne meet on common ground. As to my

apparently unanswered prayers, well, that, too is a “get over it” matter. Who cares, at least now, this late in the game? Stop talking, thinking and reasoning as a child, Paul. Faith and hope (which the other Paul addresses earlier in the letter, the former in considerable detail, the latter more indirectly) are essential of course, no matter the circumstances, but only because they serve as a foundation for love, “the greatest.”

I’ve been writing about love in one way or another for over six years now, starting with *This Fall*, my keystone book. I can’t repeat here all I’ve said about it there and in the other six books of personal essays I’ve cobbled together. But right from the outset, the stunned shock I felt the moment I found my wife lifeless when I came home from work, plunged me into a river of tears and words that seems never to find a sea willing once and for all to receive everything it needs to empty from its mouth, settling into silence and peace. But I am certain that whether those torrents quiet or pour, whether they ever find a place to rest in wider and deeper waters, what endures is the intense overwhelm of love that “remained” in that moment, for her, for myself and my family, for everything in the universe really, the one and only thing left after everything else was boiled off in those first few seconds of grief.

Paul says three things remain after his long discourse. But I think he, like me, knows there is only one. I have lived long stretches without hope. And I still live for the most part without faith. I can assure you that you can survive as an ethical presence in this world, which I think I have, without copious amounts of those two. Or any at all sometimes. As long as you have love, “the greatest,” the only thing in this whole universe, at least as I’ve experienced it, which is one, the only one that’s always and only one.

The other Paul says love is the way to “know fully” and be “fully known.” For him, though, that state of awareness, I’ll call it “enlightenment,” at least in its perfect form, can only be achieved after the last mile has been fully walked, on the other side. I disagree. If there is another side, I think the one we’re on here is where we’re supposed to learn how to love, especially how to keep giving it when it’s not forthcoming. Love is the way humans become godly, and it works that way no matter what “god” you might imagine, or even if you cannot imagine one at all.

If I had to answer the bodhisattva’s question now, I think I’d say exactly what I said, except I’d add that if you can learn how to love, truly and deeply, which is a worthy aspiration in this world, the highest aspiration really, and is achievable I am certain, then answering that perpetual question about how to proceed moment by moment in the face of all those wonky two-waynesses is easy. The answer will always be “yes,” without question, “no two ways about it.” Which gets at least me, if not you, back where I started, with Lena Horne and Cab Calloway, that swanky nightclub setting, rendered in black and white, explaining simply how we can cope with all this stupid stormy weather we, for some unfathomable reason, have to endure while we’re here.

I'm into Somethin' Good

1.

As I said, my two remaining siblings, a family friend, and I, all retired now, Zoom for a couple of hours every week, music a regular topic on our discussion agenda. Next week I'll be making a brief presentation on Fats Domino, a 50s icon and one of my favorite music-people. Great musician for sure, but even more so such a wonderful human spirit. Among the four songs (our usual number) I chose is, of course, "Blueberry Hill," a 40s Big Band staple that Domino made ultra-famous, his signature piece. If you just let that song start up in your brain—"I found my thrill on Blueberry Hill"—chances are pretty good it will be in the voice of Fats Domino.

I honestly have no idea yet what Fats Domino or that song have to do with what I am planning to write about here: A series of dreams that ended with a proclamation to "emancipate your brain." But I look forward to finding out, one of the many great gifts you receive when you emancipate your brain, setting it free to do not what "you" want (which is most likely "your brain on late capitalism," that egg sizzling in the money-hot frying pan) and not what you've been indoctrinated by culture to assume is "productive work" (the bane of American culture in particular, as it pertains to time), but simply what it does on its own serendipitous initiative, once it is liberated from all of those externally imposed, tortuous, laborious constraints.

Antoine Domino toured making his music during the 1950s, another heyday of American racism in a long line of them, having quite often, especially in the South, in those waning days of the most egregious expressions of

the Jim Crow culture (many being reinvigorated now in the “new” South), to eat and sleep in “Blacks only” establishments, his body enslaved by the cruelty and stupidity of the American imagination. Here’s a link to a live performance of Blueberry Hill in 1956: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t6H_sxI6jG8. I have no idea where the man at that piano ate or slept beforehand. But here he is the epitome of freedom, his body following what must have been a most fully liberated brain.

Domino had a well-deserved reputation for being kind and humble, which you can tell instantly from his smile, his eyes, and his energy, even the timbre of his voice. All of those may seem like implausible “you can’t get there from here” qualities, given his real-life experience as a Black man in that moment (which is still our moment in many respects.) Again, though, only a brain set free can create such a freedom for him to experience, celebrate and share its gifts, against all odds, with us, 70 years hence. All brains are like that and do that, if and when you let them. That’s what this essay is going to be about once I get to it, once I let my head wander a bit, until it’s ready to press the keys it wants to press, in some ways like Fats Domino at the piano. Yes, he knows the song and notes, but it’s the fingertips that say what that piano has to say in order to create a context and template for his inimitable voice to take us, literally if we listen, take us, to our own blueberry hills, wherever and whatever they were for us, in reality or with wistful wishfulness.

Maybe that’s all that Fats Domino has to do with what I’m about to write here, a loose connection, like an actual loose connection, throwing off a few sparks until I break the circuit to fix it. But even if *you* didn’t, *I* enjoyed and appreciated that bit of fireworks, my brain’s meanderings, at least in part because it disrupted what I was thinking.

And when I use the term “slavery” in relation to the way we most often treat our brain, what might seem an egregious offense to people of color who know what real slavery is and means, you can think of it more in this belated iteration, Jim Crowish, the taken-for-grantedness of everyday-ugly segregation and oppression rather than the brutality of embodied slavery in 300 of the 400 or so years that preceded Fats Domino sitting at that piano in 1955.

I’ll start with a dream I had last night, in the immediate aftermath of a Zoom conversation I had with a good friend in Colorado, one in which, among many, many other things, I narrated a series of dreams I had had on the four consecutive nights preceding our talk. I had no intention to have the dream I had last night. I was hoping I might have another in what was by then the ongoing series of my dreams, each of which pertained to, and offered solutions to, the problem of the divided-up, broken-off selves I live with, that we all live with, the pieces of our once-integral self that got separated from their source by culture (as in race and gender stereotypes, which start way before we are even born), or by choice (as in things we decide or give up not out of desire but in deference to need), or by happenstance (those accidents of circumstance that abbreviate certain life-paths and necessitate others), or by trauma (those life events, some overwhelming, some surprisingly small that arise in our minds thereafter over and over always with angst, turmoil, or literal pain, a dysfunctional, un-blueberry-hill-like variation on “though we’re apart, you’re part of me still!”), which has been my main concern lately. I didn’t specifically ask my brain to “solve,” or even explore, these problems for me. They were just on my mind currently, and my brain, like yours and everyone else’s, is quite often willing, even eager, to take on challenging matters, a way to flex itself maybe. For me, when that happens, the

“answer” is quite often delivered to me cryptically via a dream, one that stands out enough from my routine REM patter that I remember something from it when I wake up and, if I’m smart, write it down, a phrase, even just a word, before I forget it in the ongoing amnesia of wakefulness.

The main trauma that has been on my mind for some time now originated with my wife’s sudden passing 6 ½ years ago, the moment I found her when I came home from work on what had seemed before that like a just another normal day. In the interim since then, I have written 10 books, prose and poetry, and recorded numerous albums of songs I wrote, read voraciously in multiple philosophical and poetic arenas, as well as many, many books pertinent to race and gender, in keeping with the crises of this historical moment, retired, moved across country to set up a brand new life, worked assiduously on my mental health, and for all apparent and practical purposes have re-invented a happy and normal life for myself. And I am truly and deeply happy, no lie.

About 3 months ago, though, out of the blue, all of that “work” just stopped, on its own I mean, the things I had been making almost manically and all the multi-media ways I have invented to share them (primarily with family and friends) most of the reading (except for Chinese poetry and quantum physics, which are my relaxation topics now), all of the directed thinking that animated that work, well, it just stopped. My moving to a new place with my reclusive temperament, both of which truncate one’s social life, amplified then by the obligatory isolation of the now nearly two-year long pandemic, means that my local social network is extremely small: basically, my daughter and her husband, who live nearby, the couple who own the house I rent, and a couple of recently-met friends. I am, of course, in ongoing conversation with many others,

family and friends, remotely, by phone, Zoom, email, etc. But my immediately embodied “community” is a small one, indeed.

After I moved to Olympia I made a strenuous effort to connect remotely with as many “friends” as possible, some back in Pittsburgh, where I worked for 40+ years (colleagues), others scattered around the world (former students) in the hopes that they would enjoy being in conversation with me. No big deal there, nothing I “needed” or expected. I just enjoy exchanging thoughts with other thoughtful people and wanted the comforting ongoing “company” that such interactions offer. I’ll call what I had in mind “intellectual dialogue,” if you think of the former term very loosely, like maybe the kind of animated conversation you might have about things pertinent and/or strange, in a bar or coffee house. You would think university clientele would be keen for that. You would be wrong. It worked kind of jerkily for a while, brief and often months-delayed responses to my entrees, the kind that say that a routine, Christmas-cardy conversation is acceptable, but nothing too deep or personal. Unlike most people I know, I enjoy deep and personal way more than Christmas-cardy. So those “relationships” gradually withered, as equitable two-way streets I mean. I finally concluded that if the energy I was investing in them lapsed, they would lapse, too. A couple of months ago, along with all of the other things that lapsed, that energy did, too, and most of those relationships followed suit, adding an additional layer of quietude to my inner life.

I want to make clear that none of these stoppages—the writing, the thinking, the reading, the remote dialoguing—felt intentional on my part, in much the same way that everything I’ve been making, sharing and doing these last 6+ years has felt to me (and I’ve written about this

multiple times) largely out of my conscious control. The books and songs especially wrote themselves, as far as I could tell. I just provided the synapses and fingers for those circuits to complete themselves. And then, on June 6th, it just stopped. Oddly, rather than feeling like just another array of losses to me, small aftershocks from the big one, it was as if I were set free from the inside-out, my head “blessedly blank” (which has been my favorite way to describe it in the meanwhile) instead of churning. It has been that way for three months; I have no idea how much longer that state will last and don’t care. I still take my daily walks in the woods or down to the bay, read the few remaining kinds of books that interest me. I do my household chores, watch some TV, from the most pointless car repair shows to the most interesting documentaries on science, nature and art, I make healthy meals for myself with the fresh foods I buy locally, and I sleep. Perchance, lately at least, to dream.

2.

*Let it be, let it be, let it be, let it be;
there will be an answer, let it be.*

As I mentioned in “The Bodhisattva Asks . . .,” one of our little musical projects for my weekly family Zoom was to pick out three snippets from songs, delivered one by one over a three-week period, that have had, and are still having, a memorable impact on our lives. This one, from the famous Beatles song, has been on my mind all summer here, just a wondrous time for me, three months of nearly perfect weather, all the sea, sky, woods agleam with light, the inside of my head mimicking that quietude on a scale I’ve never experienced in my life, all so magical for me. It has been as if the weather inside and out has

just said “let it be, let it be, there will be an answer,” all for me. I used it as my second pick.

So, about these dreams I had last night, the process of emancipation, the business of this essay. My friend and I have an ongoing conversation about working efficiently, something that I have always been assiduous about my whole life and that she struggles with. The three dreams that seemed to me to pertain to this were quite straightforward. I sleep wonkily and tend to wake up after every dream cycle at night, so I often remember at least fragments of the dreams that just finished, writing down a few words if it seems worth doing that. After the first dream last night I wrote down: “The deck is switched off.” Much of my friend’s work involves creating elaborate series of complex PowerPoint slides, which she calls decks. I’ve seen and reviewed for her some of them, so I know how easy it would be to become absorbed by their intricacies, a kind of infinite recursive process. What this dream seemed to me to be saying was to develop the ability to put a halt to that, to say, with finality, that the deck is now off: i.e., good enough in its current iteration to satisfy all the parties involved. That seemed kind of trivial to me—easy to say, hard to do, I mean—so I just went back to sleep.

At the end of the second dream cycle I wrote down “then walk off,” clearly the next step in the process of letting go. That, too, might seem trivial, but part of our conversation earlier in the evening had to do with “doing” as a driver for (rather than an outcome of) thinking; in short, the ways in which behaviors, the body acting, serve as powerful agents of change, more so, for example, than words, which are quite weak by comparison, at least in part because we are inured to their effects and in part because our culture has generally severed the relationship between saying and doing, as if words alone are enough to

promote change, which they aren't. As Fats Domino laments: "All of those vows we made were never to be." So, in this case, the advice was to literally walk off, for as far and for as long as it took to put the deck fully to rest mentally. Five feet or five miles, no matter, until the deck's hold on the brain is broken. I figured that would be it, so I went back to sleep.

The next dream cycle went off in a different direction and took me quite by surprise. When I woke up I wrote down: "We treat our brains like slaves and need to emancipate them." I assumed this was not directly connected to the previous two dreams, but now, I thought, I was getting somewhere, not just with my friend's immediate problem with work efficiency, but with something larger and more complex, the ways in which, as I said earlier, we treat our brains in the same way as the Western economy treats "labor": either buying its time and pushing it to its limits until all it can do is eat and fall asleep (the 19th-20th century factory/mine model) or tricking it into believing it has all the time in the world to complete its obligatory tasks, so it spends all of its time forestalling completion, parceling out smaller and smaller segments, until every available second is consumed but hardly anything gets done; i.e., simply "perseverating" (the term my friend prefers) on things that, for all practical purposes are already done, or easily could have been; as if they can be made better, even perfect, when infinite mental time is devoted to them, mental time that you know, if you work that way, is rarely very productive and is always enervating. This allows late capitalism to achieve an even more insidious form of control over workers' mind-bodies than early capitalism did in the factory/mines: driving them to exhaustion. Except in this case, "the man" doesn't even need a building, a production line, a foreman, or a time clock to make it stick. We take on all of those roles internally and enforce

them ourselves by turning our own brains into slaves on behalf of agendas we actually care little about.

Don't get me wrong. I have no objection to work, even pointless work. I've done tons of it with dedication and pride because I had to in order to get paid to support myself and my family. That sort of work is just as honorable as the work my grandfathers did in the mines. The difference I want to highlight is this: Those factory/mine laborers a hundred years ago, and those who do that work now, know in every fiber of their being that their bodies and minds have been indentured in the service of someone else's agenda and wealth. They work assiduously between punch-in and punch-out. Then they go home and try to recover and enjoy life. The economy of late-capitalistic professionalism hides this reality quite cleverly from its workers, actually "buying" far more of their time by creating the illusion that their self-worth, their identity really, is implicated so deeply with the work that it becomes all there is. There is no time left for anything else, including recovery and enjoyment. I was fortunate to have been born with an aversion to work, so that ploy became visible to me when I was just a boy. I never gave my time away like that and, retired now, never will.

The key, of course, is first to see how and why this is happening, which is hard. Even when you do, though, finding a way to stop doing it may seem like a formidable, even insuperable, task. But my two simpler dreams, I now see, offer some keynotes to start with: that it was more a function of stopping things than starting things, walking off rather than working on. When I thought again about the first dream, it no longer seemed so trivial. I became enamored of the metaphor of the "switch" especially. I've struggled all my life with anxiety related problems and have a head that can be quite hard to switch off once it

gets going. But I have over the years found ways to get access to at least some of the most pertinent switches, and developed the ability to flick them off when I want. I won't go into a lot of detail here about the hows of that. One essay of mine that is clearly pertinent is "All the Time in the World," the swansong talk I delivered in the English Department in advance of my retirement, now the Postscript in this book. For me, control over time was of the essence when it comes to liberating my brain to do what it is best at, what it craves the opportunity to do, instead of the many routinized, often arduous, sometimes pointless, tasks it was either obligated to do while I was employed (for me to keep getting paid) or now that I'm retired (for me keep eating, e.g.) As that essay points out, once you take control over your own time, the available time is amplified exponentially, seems sometimes almost infinite. That may sound preposterous, but I guarantee that if you turn that "switch off" you will be stunned to find it is absolutely true.

The second dream—"then walk off"—is applicable to the matter of emancipation in these complementary senses. The activity of walking, especially "taking a walk" outdoors has been demonstrated by practitioners (poets, spiritual leaders, philosophers, psychologists and tons of ordinary people) to liberate the brain from its routine tasks and to open the mind to new, often surprisingly unexpected ideas. Much of what I've written since my wife passed has arisen in my mind, of its own accord, totally out of the blue (as in, where the hell did that thought or that series of words come from) during one of my daily walks. But emancipating one's brain requires an even more radical kind of walking away, one that basically says as often as possible that you will cede executive control over your intellectual functions for as long as you can. I've written about this quite extensively in *Living Hidden*, in the two chapters on identity, so again I won't

go into a lot of detail about it. But the John Lennon song above is a good capsulization of the gesture most essential to getting free: Let it be, let it be, just let it be for godssake! Sooner or later, there will be an answer, one you will not have to do any apparent work for.

Here's one recent experience that serves as an example, and that got me thinking about how the brain may actually prefer to function on its own, without our making it behave slavishly in service of our ephemeral preferences. Last spring in one of our family Zooms I mentioned the half-sister of someone we knew in the neighborhood growing up. She lived a couple of houses over for only a year or two, at my grade level in junior high school, but was memorably sweet, to me at least. I've thought about her visually many times since then, at least in part because she had many of the physical features my wife had: black hair, a refined, porcelain complexion, alert, haunting eyes. But I could never think of her name. In any case, I tried on and off to recall it and couldn't. Somehow my head going quiet in June created space for my brain to go about this work in the background, on its own initiative.

About two months later while I was eating breakfast, her name gurgled up to the surface of my consciousness. It felt as if it was a fish I was reeling in from deep in the ocean. And there it was, just like that. This is, of course, a common human experience, the background-brain solving problems for us. I had experienced it repeatedly before, as you certainly have. But this time my reaction was to imagine what it might be like if I just turned my brain free, maybe posed questions or problems for it, then "walked off," not even bothering to think or write about them. Just wait until whatever my brain was able to accomplish gurgled up in its finished form for free. That, I thought, would be quite cool. And that's what I've been doing. And it is quite cool.

3.

*I woke up this morning feelin' fine;
there's somethin' special on my mind:
Last night I met a new girl in the neighborhood;
somethin' tells me I'm into somethin' good.*

That's the opening of one of my favorite Herman's Hermits songs, part of a playlist of my HH covers I listen to quite often now on my morning walks. You might be wondering, as my siblings do, why a guy of my age would be singing this sort of bubble-gum pop, imagining he's met "a girl in the neighborhood" who walked him home hand in hand, said he could "see her next week." Nothing but a silly teenage fantasy. Well, I'll tell you: this song, and all the other HH songs I covered, and a similar playlist of Buddy Holly songs I covered, the first of which starts this way—"Every day it's a gettin' closer, goin' faster than a roller coaster, love like yours will surely come my way, a-hey-hey"—they make me happy, not so much to remember a simpler and sweeter time in my life, which they do, but to help me to imagine that I am still young at heart, flush with hope and life, even if my body doesn't quite fit the part. These songs fill me with an actual belief that one of these days I might happen into "somethin' good," and "love like that will surely come my way." Okay, so it's a million to one. But I guess I enjoy feeling like Jim Carrey in "Dumb and Dumber:" "So you're telling me there's a chance!" Why not. It's way better than the array of grim fantasies that our culture creates for people my age to wallow into.

The nice thing is, it doesn't really matter if that happens. I have been on my own for going on 7 years now, the first 4

of those extremely difficult to handle alone. Now I'm generally happy with things just as they are. To be honest, most days I can't even begin to imagine how I'd negotiate a new relationship after 40+ years essentially on the bench, or whether I'd be able to accommodate another essential presence given how flakily free I now feel. Or maybe more to the point, whether another essential presence would be willing to accommodate me, the way I am, which is fully myself, flakily free, and intending to stay that way "for better or worse, for richer or poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, till death us do part." Or something like that. I like those silly songs not for what they promise but because they allow me to imagine a wonderful life without longing sadly to live it. I've had one great life already, and, as I've said repeatedly over the years, in this world, one is the difference between everything and nothing, no two ways about it.

My brother in particular always grimaces when I bring up my continuing affection for Peter Noone and the boys. And I bring it up at least in part to aggravate him in a playful way. I actually picked this stanza as my very first selection in our three-part song-snippet assignment. And I meant it. Why I'm writing about this song right now is still not clear to me. Again, I guess I'll have to write what I write to see if/how it fits.

One thing that crosses my mind immediately though is how often I wake up in a good mood these days. One of the reasons for that is I often follow a very specific emotional progression in my dream sequences. I don't sleep especially well or deeply, so, as I said, I wake up after each REM cycle, maybe every 90 minutes. Early in the night my dreams tend to be dark and scary. I often wake up a little shaky, with a low-level headache, and think: "This is going to be a rough night, Paul." But as the dream cycle proceeds, it moves gradually toward the light,

a resolution, sometimes a very important one. Last night for example, my first dreams were about a troubled relationship I started and ended between my marriages, one that has afflicted me on and off, for a variety of reasons, in the intervening years, just the unsettledness of it. I attempted to initiate a conversation with this woman about a year ago, hoping maybe to resolve things, and was quite rudely rebuffed, reigniting my dormant resentments. My first couple of dreams brought all of that burgeoning to the surface. But in my last couple of dreams I actually had a chance to sit down and talk with her, find out more about her life now, the intervening years, her feelings back then. It was wonderful. The various kinds of angst I had felt all of those years were transformed into a deep and authentic compassion, the very word I chose when I woke up to describe to myself my attitude toward her. I actually felt that I understood her as a full human being for the first time. That's a lot to get for free from your brain-on-dreams with someone you haven't spoken to for over 30 years.

Which does get me back, I see, to what I set out to write about way back with Fats Domino, which I had almost forgotten: a series of dreams I had not during one night but over a four night cycle in late August (the 27th through the 30th), all pertaining in one way or another to the recovery process I turned over to my brain early last June. The general assignment I gave it was to help me with the remaining elements of the trauma of my wife's passing. I have been working on that for over six years, doing really well, but something inside me said "now is the time to take the next steps, not necessarily to finish the process, which is, of course, impossible without the option of time travel to change history, but to address the matter directly." The feeling was so pressing that I resigned all of my local obligations to make room to deal with it.

The first night's dream had expressly to do with trauma. All I remembered from it was that the traumatic image, the visualized originary event, I mean, was like a decal applied over a huge, much more amorphous emotional reservoir, the actual impact of the event on a deep level. The first step in the recovery process was to peel the decal off, i.e., to separate the visual image from the emotions. This, the dream indicated, might prevent that image from flashing up repeatedly and unexpectedly into consciousness, as such traumatic images do, dragging its emotional cargo with it. This does not of course resolve the trauma, but it makes it possible to begin to deal much more directly with the emotional cauldron the image tends to mask. I've been experimenting with various attempts at this, I mean getting the details of the scene out of my head and feeling what's left when I do, and I think they're working. I can actually name emotions and feelings now, delve into them from what I would describe as a quasi-rational point of view, not a "clinical" awareness, of course, but also not simply a traumatically induced brain freeze.

One of the afterthoughts in this dream, at least according to the notes I scrawled, was that if you want to change how you feel, first change how you act, which is akin to the "walk off" message of the dream I had for my friend. That will sooner or later change how you think, which will change how you speak, which will change how you feel. I assume the implication was that you can't change feelings directly, simply because you want them to be different or go away. You have to do a lot of work and it takes time and patience. But before you do any of that, you need to peel off the decal. Which I have done to the best of my ability, and have started the rest of the process, which I like, though it is not far enough along yet to verify that it works. In any case, I'm finding this dream to be quite useful.

The next night, the dream I remembered and took note of was a scene in which I was in some sort of psychologist's office taking a battery of tests to determine my general wellbeing. The "therapist" was a very handsome woman in her 40s, tall, thin, shorter curly black hair, fine-featured, smiling, with the kindest demeanor. The first test had something to do with puppies, which were in some kind of distress, sick or dying, I just can't remember enough to know for sure. I had to attend to them, and I did. I have no recollection what I did. The second test involved breathing into a long, tubular "instrument" of sorts, like a car exhaust system made of bamboo. When the woman demonstrated it, the effect on the sound was interesting. She would "sing" a long note, but all the sound would disappear once it entered the instrument. So I did the same, sang a very low tone and held it for a very long time. When I was done, the therapist stood up quickly, walked over and embraced me with the warmest hug. As she separated, she tried to kiss me gently on my right cheek, but she kind of missed, ended up half-catching the corner of my lips, so sensuous to me, both such beautiful gestures, despite the awkwardness she seemed to feel about it. As we separated she said enthusiastically that I was just amazing, the most amazing person she had ever met, that my performance on these tests was off the charts and I was ready to go off on my own. I think this dream speaks volumes all by itself, so I'll stop there.

The third night's dream, at least the part I remembered, was a simple scene. I was in my living room and could see someone standing outside the window, just standing there, about 10 feet from the door. I opened the door and saw a boy of about 10, very thin and pale, his arms folded in like he might be cold, looking sullen, forlorn, not sad or desperate really, not asking for anything, just standing

there as if he had been waiting patiently for decades. I could tell immediately that it was me at that age. I remembered everything about how he looked and felt and why. I just smiled and said “Why don’t you come in now. We need to be together.” I put my arm over his shoulder, he smiled warmly, and, basically, he moved in with me. Again, I think the dream speaks for itself.

The final night’s dream in this series involved driving up the ramp of one of those circular parking garages. My purpose, I knew, was to find all the cars I had lost in there over the years, forgot where I parked them, e.g., or just never came back for them. I often have dreams about forgetting where I parked my car, with all the anxiety attendant to that. In this case, I picked out one after another. Each one I somehow knew was some aspect of my identity that had gotten misplaced along the way. And with each new discovery (and I could see and find them all) I became fuller, richer, more and more “myself.” It was a wonderful feeling. On the top level of the garage, I saw my mother and father, both passed now, just standing there, as if they were waiting for me, a little anxious-looking I thought. I got out of the car with a huge smile on my face, told them I was fine now, and kissed each one of them on the cheek. Again, I don’t think you have to be Sigmund Freud to figure this one out.

And that was that. I had no more dreams in this series. But I think you can understand why I woke up each of these mornings “feelin’ fine.” With “somethin’ special on my mind.” I did meet a variety of “new” people in “the neighborhood.” And, yes, “somethin’ tells me I’m into somethin’ good.”

I'm Dreamin' My Life Away

1.

*'Til the end of the world rolls round
I'll keep on loving you.
As long as the sun goes up and comes down,
big blue sky goes down to the ground,
as long as the world goes round and round
I'll keep on loving you.*

“Fake Banjo!” That’s the only phrase I wrote down after waking from this dream on the night of September 5, and I’m glad I did. It allowed me to remember and recover at least a portion of what I know was a longer and more complex dream, the details of which were, of course, lost in the absence of a more extensive mnemonic. But what was conserved has turned out to be, over the last week or so of thinking, extraordinarily useful to me.

So, the dream, or at least the portion of it that pertained to this fake banjo business: On stage, in a scene being broadcast live for an internet audience, is a bluegrass band, a very good one, with a fantastic banjo player. I can’t remember what song they were playing, but it was a brisk one, like the one I quote above, a favorite of mine, with lots of banjo. The lighting is too low, though, to highlight anyone in particular, including the banjo player, who remains anonymous. Off to the right of the band (left side of the screen, from my POV in the dream) in a bright spotlight is me, pretending very animatedly to play the banjo, using exaggerated motions and gestures in a clownish fashion to simulate what the real banjo player is doing. The effect of this, you might imagine, is that the fake banjo player would be perceived as the center of

attention and also, at best, as a kind of comic aside, a fool. But that's not what happened. For some reason the audience loved this parodic commentary on the performance, and the fake banjo player very quickly clicked its way into a viral sensation, on its way to becoming a cultural meme.

Since I was the fake banjo player, I had to decide/figure out how to feel about all of this while it was happening. Initially, I was irritated, not quite angry, but affronted that I was being insulted in this way, my getting famous, I mean, for this thing I was incompetent at when all the things I do extraordinarily well get no public notice at all. Then I thought, "Okay, this is an embarrassment, but maybe I can use it to direct at least some in this audience to those other kinds of performances—writing especially—that (like the real banjo player) I have been working at for most of my life and am now quite good at." In other words, I thought, public notice, even fame for the things I want attention for might come secondarily from avid fans of the fake banjo player.

When I woke up, that's where my reading of this dream stood: a vague sense that I might one day achieve notoriety for some stupid thing I do badly, and that would lead to greater notice for the smarter things I do well. But I've been thinking through the implications of this image in the meantime, and now realize that's not what this dream was about at all. For one thing, I and everyone else with a computer or phone knows that's not how the internet works. Viral fame is almost always forever attached to the original meme. Internet fan energy is rarely transferred to more legitimate or worthy endeavors. Even artists who had some relatively positive if modest reputation for their work inevitably lose even that when they are memed, Rickrolling one good example. So, in effect, once a fake banjo player, always and only a fake

banjo player. I'd rather stay where I am, I finally concluded, beneath notice except for the few people, including me, who read my work than to trade all of that in to become simply and solely a mega-famous-flash-in-the-pan fake banjo player.

Again, I thought that was it. But on my walk today the implications began to expand to the broader social sphere to include friends, colleagues, peers, of course, but even more so intimate and romantic partners, all relationships which often operate invisibly on a similar fake banjo economy, in that they evolve and even depend on the many masks we craft and put on to win approval from others. The dating site profile gambits are a good example, everybody a winner, sensuous, good-looking, exciting. Such masquerades are inevitable, of course, even essential for survival in a community or the pursuit of social or sexual happiness. The problem arises when we begin to substitute those appearances for reality, gradually losing contact with our intrinsic "self," you might say; and more pointedly to let others do that to us. Or, to pick up my dream's analogy, we gradually give up our real "music" and specialize instead in fake banjo playing. Why? Because it works, often much more effectively than playing our preferred instrument well.

One of the inevitable problems with this kind of self-marketing is that once it begins to work as click-bait, you become tempted to keep up the charade indefinitely, or risk disappointing your audience. Romantic or intimate relationships are already, by their nature, complicated enough. For one thing, men and women in search of a partner often have a specific template in mind at the outset, a paradigm if you will, that dominates their process. There are gender-specific stereotypes that guide those paradigms as well as individual quirks and expectations. As such relationships emerge, both parties

are constantly sending off specific cues and clues about the kind of partner they prefer, and the one on the receiving end (if they want what's being proffered) often creates a sort of fake banjo version of themselves to satisfy those pre-conditions. The longer this goes on (I know from experience) the harder it becomes to escape those externally imposed but self-accepted constraints and just be oneself comfortably. At some point, it's just too late to go back to being yourself without risking the whole enterprise.

There is a sort of Pavlovian mechanism that enforces these boundaries, reward for meeting the requirements of the paradigm, penalty for violating it. Control is paramount in this, and usually one party establishes that sooner or better than the other, to the detriment, I would argue, of both parties, at least in the long run. My wife Carol explained to me not long after we met that her previous lover had a habit of saying she was "almost perfect," after which he would indicate what the specific deficit was. So she'd attend to that as best she could. But as anyone who has ever been in such a dysfunctional relationship knows, there will always be another thing that crops up to forestall the progression from "almost" to perfect. In other words, you will never get there, and it's by design. The chronically critical partner would lose control if the process were complete. And control is, of course, the issue here.

I had never thought much about this, but realized I had been in relationships like that, ones in which my almost-perfectness (and, yes, it is, of course, easy to presume that I am almost perfect!) became a chronic condition, ultimately depressingly so. I decided right then two things: If someone I'm romantically interested in ever says I'm almost perfect, I'd walk away right then, save myself lots of time and torment. And if I'm romantically interested in

someone, I want to feel, and let them know right from the outset, that they are already perfect, just the way they are, thus the lyrics above. That is what unconditional love is, says, and does.

As I was explaining to my friend last night while we were talking about this dynamic, it doesn't mean that the other might not want to change, even dramatically, for what they feel is the better. And of course it presumes that the other will change, again often dramatically, just by happenstance. It's just that at every stage along that way, the perception of perfection needs to be felt and communicated. I compared this to how you feel about your child when they are born. They are perfect. But you certainly don't want or expect them to stay infantile forever. They grow and change transformatively over the years, and in the case of my children the decades. Yet somehow they are always perfect to me. Here's a stanza from another song I like that I think captures this succinctly:

*I said I love you, that's forever,
and this I promise from the heart:
I couldn't love you any better;
I love you just the way you are.*

That is unconditional love, which says over and over at every step of the way, through all the changes and permutations, come what may, "I love you just the way you are." What a great song.

Even normal social relations are prone to this fake banjo affliction. We all want to have friends and be part of a community. And, at one end of the spectrum, when we are absent friends or new to a community, we're often willing to make significant sacrifices in our authenticity to achieve those goals. At the other end of the spectrum,

those already well-ensconced often feel justified in prescribing the qualifications an “outsider” needs to demonstrate to be worthy of inclusion, at the most dysfunctional extreme applying some type of “Real Housewives” or “Proud Boys” template for inclusion.

The desire for and pursuit of fame *per se* (as distinct from specific performances) is another arena where this process plays out, in the sense that once you have done something to achieve it, you are tempted to keep doing the same thing, or to inhabit the persona that achieved it so fully there is little room for anyone else in there. Quite often, the road to recognition is paved with a lot of fake banjo playing, pressing the flesh, currying favor, cynical social networking, until that’s what seems real, or is all that is left. Writers, artists, and (in my experience) scholars sometimes end up spending so much of their inner capital to achieve notice, and then sustain it, that they lose connection with the rich, complex self that generated the real music in the first place.

In any case, my general advice would be to can the fake banjo act. No matter how famous or loved or befriended you might become via that sort of performance, you’ll be trapped forever in its stupidity. About 20 years ago my wife and I built cheap, homemade banjos from a kit. They didn’t sound that great, but I learned to play mine a bit. No matter how hard I’ve tried to make music, and I’ve tried hard, it never turns out very well and almost no one I know besides me really likes it much. That was the case with my banjo music, too.

By the way, you may or may not like my writing, either, but that’s no fake banjo act. And I plan to keep on loving it, no matter how invisible I am on that grayed out stage, while everyone else is distracted by some fake writer out

there in the spotlight, gyrating wildly as if that's what matters, until the end of the world rolls around.

2.

*I can make you mine,
taste your lips of wine,
anytime night or day.
Only trouble is, gee whiz
I'm dreamin' my life away.*

That is a stanza from the Everly Brothers song which provides the title for this essay. I woke up a little while ago with a plan in mind to write a brief coda to this essay, mostly just an argument, or more accurately just a reminder, to set your brain free to do what it's designed to do. But now there is more stuff that seems to want to get said, so, in deference to my emancipated brain, which is doing all my work now, I'll do my best to say it.

First of all, I had some great dreams last night, a process truncated by the fact that I woke up at 3 AM and couldn't get back to sleep. So here I am, writing this instead of dreaming. Since I missed the second half of my night's normal dream progression, I have nothing of consequence to say about them. But I want to write about one scene in particular, just so I'll remember it. I was walking in the mountains somewhere, a place ultra-lush with greenery and flush with all kinds of water. At one point I came out into a clearing and saw below me a gorgeous lake, surrounded by great trees, in the middle of which, on a tiny island, was a huge, and I mean huge, oak tree, multiple trunks each 5 or 6 feet in diameter, and massive branches levering out in the manner of Southern live oaks, nearly reaching the shores of the lake. I thought: "This is where I'll build my house."

As I walked on down the hill, I could see that the lake's outlet gushed down a steep incline, so fast that if you slipped into it you would surely be lost, and someone or something told me: "This is where the river starts." I recall some subsequent details from the dream, but I want to forget them. This scene I want to remember forever, and now that I have this reminder, I know I can and will. I've built my house for the last 6+ years in the woods, the last 3+ of those years also by the water. That's where my head lives, and to be honest, has always lived. I recall as a boy going down to the river that ran through our town, more a large stream, I guess, but one that rushed along magnificently. There was one spot down a steep bank overhung with heavily leafed branches where I could reach a huge boulder that jutted out into water that was particularly swift and turbulent, a spot completely out of sight from any angle. I would sit there and stare at the trees and the water until I wasn't really there as "me" any longer, more a presence that mingled with these other presences which were my wonderful friends, as I was theirs.

Now I'm here, 60 years later, essentially doing the same thing, like Wordsworth's "William" sitting on a stone apparently doing nothing, much to the chagrin of his friend "Matthew" who asks:

*Why, William on that old grey stone,
This for the length of half a day,
Why, William, sit you thus alone,
And dream your time away?*²

Matthew thinks William should be studying, making something of himself, in worldly terms. William answers this way:

*'The eye—it cannot choose but see;
We cannot bid the ear be still;
Our bodies feel, where'er they be,
Against, or with our will.* 20

*'Nor less I deem that there are Powers
Which of themselves our minds impress;
That we can feed this mind of ours
In a wise passiveness.*

*'Think you, 'mid all this mighty sum 25
Of things for ever speaking,
That nothing of itself will come,
But we must still be seeking?'*

*'—Then ask not wherefore, here, alone,
Conversing as I may, 30
I sit upon this old grey stone,
And dream my time away.'*

So Wordsworth's William has something in common with the Everly Brothers, probably the first time these three people have appeared in the same sentence together! And I am a lifelong practitioner of the "wise passiveness" required for extended rock-sitting.

Wordsworth wrote a companion piece for this poem called "The Tables Turned," which is just William speaking. Here are a few stanzas from that poem:

*One impulse from a vernal wood
May teach you more of man,
Of moral evil and of good,
Than all the sages can.*

*Sweet is the lore which Nature brings;
Our meddling intellect
Mis-shapes the beauteous forms of things:—
We murder to dissect.*

*Enough of Science and of Art;
Close up those barren leaves;
Come forth, and bring with you a heart
That watches and receives.*

I had no intention to write about any of this—all sentiments I fully endorse—when I sat down. But it all seems pertinent to me now, almost 4 AM, September 26, 2021.

3.

A few months ago, as I said, without any specific plan to do so, I just stopped writing, I stopped making videos of my readings of poems, I stopped making slideshows from photos I take, I stopped singing, I stopped playing my guitar, I stopped sending all that stuff I've been crafting to the gradually diminishing list of friends willing to tolerate it, my primary audience since I started my little cottage industry of stuff-crafting 6 years ago. What a wonderful relief to me, as I'm sure it was to those people afflicted by my many missives, since no one seemed even to notice or complain. Until a couple of days ago when I heard from a very kind man in Pittsburgh wondering what was up with that. As I said above, this cessation left my head blessedly blank, full of space to begin to do more important work on behalf of something deeper, both in me and with the world around me.

A month later I quit all my volunteer “jobs” here to vacate even more space in my head. And by that means, all of it,

I set my brain completely free to do what it was designed to do, what it enjoys doing, what it's had a hankering to do, for its own pleasure, yes, but also, with the most generous spirit I now see, for my benefit as well. The summer that intervened has been the most magical time of my life, my inner weather an exact match for 3 months of utterly perfect weather here in Olympia. Aside from a couple of inordinately warm days, it was day after day of bright sunshine, blue skies awash with floaty, fluffy clouds, temperatures in 70s or 80s; lush gardens with wave after wave of flowers all over town where I walk (there have been roses in full bloom all summer long, as well as the bleeding hearts bush outside my front door, as if they have never heard of "drought" and could care less about it); overwhelms of greenery in the woods, including the endless savannas of ferns beneath the great cedars, firs, hemlocks and alders; and countless waterways where I stand and watch the tidal ebbs and flows from vantage points all over the immediate area: the boardwalk downtown, Evergreen College, Woodard Bay, Watershed Park, Burfoot Park, you name it, water, water everywhere, all that the eyes can drink. With the exception of two quickly written poems and a weird essay on quantum mechanics the inside of my head has been crickets. When my brain wants to talk to me, it waits until I'm asleep, thus all these dreams, though I'd have to say that even while I'm awake these days, it feels similarly dreamy, just seeing, savoring, loving, whatever from out there happens to find its way in here, like the way Wordsworth's William dreams his time away in that poem.

Now I'm writing again. I have no idea why. It just started up out of the blue a week or two ago, as it has over and over during my journey "in the chilliest land--/ and on the strangest sea" (Emily Dickinson's words) of my solitary life these last 6+ years. The quote I took from the Everly

Brothers begins “I can make you mine . . . any time night or day.” Obviously, they’re singing about a fantasy romantic relationship, one that exists pretty much only inside a head, the way mine do now, as I’ve said. But that line also keys into something I’ve been thinking about these last couple of days, in the aftermath of a conversation with a friend about ways to promote self-love, so crucial in a culture where its flow from the outside in is so often choked off by fear. I was explaining to her about the multiple alter-egos I have in my head, which speak to me and one another in various ways, each with a sort of role to play in my overall identity parade, and told her that I say over and over to myself, “I love you, Paul,” a gesture of self-care I’ve come to cherish and have repeatedly recommended to others (using their own names, of course, not mine) lately in conversations, essays and poems.

That sentence has two pronouns, an I and a you. I have no idea how many “Is” I have in me, but it must be at least two, the caretaker who is offering love in this sentence and the more general “I” that is the composite of all the other “Is” (I assume there are more) and the multitude of “yous” in there, a number I can’t even hazard a guess at, though Virginia Woolf playfully calculates it at 2052. Emily Dickinson calls this composite “I” her “me,” Whitman his “me myself.” Which is to say there are other authors and poets operating with this kind of internal “blooming, buzzing confusion.”

What I spontaneously realized for the first time, and told her, was that the “Paul” in that sentence, the noun I name with my actual name, the “Paul” in my identity parade, is always the one who desires and receives love and care, which issues from other destinations within, including from the seemingly impersonal “executive” “I” in that simple sentence. I have no clear idea who that “I” is or

why he/she/they are so caring, and generous, and strong. And I have no idea, either, whether anyone else's inner world is divided up in quite this way. All I want to say now is that if you have an "I" of this sort in there, one that is clear-minded, wise and strong, listen to it. It wants what's best for you, knows how to care for you. It loves you. I just right now decided to call that "I" my brain, in keeping with my theme in these three "dream" essays, the one I more fully emancipated a few months back, though I've clearly had it on a very loose leash for most of my life, as you know if you talk to me or read what I write. You have a brain, too, with similar super-powers, looking for opportunities to help you. Set it free. Emancipate it. It will repay you handsomely. As for me, "*Only trouble is, gee whiz, I'm dreamin' my life away.*" And once I finish this essay and get it and its companions uploaded to my website, I'm going to go back to doing that full-time again!

Memory Is a Kind of Accomplishment

1.

*Row, row, row your boat
Gently down the stream;
Merrily, merrily, merrily, merrily,
Life is but a dream.*

I could have used Heraclitus' famous dictum—"you never step in the same river twice"—to open this piece. But these simple lines from a famous children's ditty feel more pertinent to, and more generative for, my overall purposes. Obviously, I get "dream" into the picture this way, a big plus. But that's not the reason I picked it. It was more because this image is founded on our interactive relationship with the stream, human agency integral to the narrative, all of that personal exertion keeping us afloat along an extended timeline, which is what life is and how we best live it. When you row, you navigate. Okay, it may be "*down* the stream," the only direction time moves in our universe, but the path is somewhat self-directed, not accidental. In the context of that song, you and the boat are like needle and thread, the river cloth, creating a traceable seam. In Heraclitus' vision, you can certainly step in and out of the river as often as you want, a sort of narrative sequence. But it's not progressive, like trying to sew without thread: the cloth moves, the needle pokes, nothing connects.

Sooner or later, I intend this to be an essay about "memory," how it functions, primarily because I want to write once again (I have multiple times previously) about one of my favorite William Carlos Williams poems, "The

Descent.” I have no idea yet how I’m going to get there. But I am certain that this boat on that stream is where I want to start. I appreciate the addition of merriment to the equation, too, always a good thing. Merriment may not be an inevitable derivative of personal agency, but asserting some control over one’s passage often makes it more enjoyable. Heraclitus is many, many things. Merry is not one of them. I like merry. And I like gently, similar set of reasons, again, not Heraclitus’ jam.

Then, finally, there is the astonishing closing proclamation that “life is but a dream.” Most kids probably don’t question that much, their experience in the temporal world having an inbuilt dreamlike quality to it. But to have reached my age and find myself instinctively acceding to that characterization of a life, well, that’s kind of stunning. The “but” is especially intriguing. Life is not “like” a dream, a shallow simile. And it is not simply and exactly a dream, a simple platitude. There is something casually dismissive about the “but” that gives the whole picture the right flavor for me, lowering the temperature of the ongoing challenge, all that row, row, rowing suddenly becoming more merry and gentle. If you’ve ever rowed a boat down a stream, you know the ways instinct and the body interact autonomically, most often skipping past conscious deliberation. You “go with the flow,” as you do in a dream. Or you don’t go far.

It just struck me that I can use the word “stream,” as it pertains to consciousness, as a next move toward my main theme, memory, via the now commonplace phrase “stream of consciousness,” one rooted more rigorously in the European Surrealism of the 1920s, a movement favoring the abandonment of rational control over the activity of the image-making, word-generating mind, just letting the powerful currents that swirl beneath

awareness—what they and contemporaneous psychologists called the unconscious—generate their immediate truth for the conscious mind to then consider and explore, if not fully understand. Going with the flow, but without a paddle.

You can (or at least I will here because I think it's pertinent) trace the roots of this inner liberation all the way back to the concept of "association," emergent in the 18th century, which became central to the Romantic poetic method. Among British writers, it is foundational, for example, to Wordsworth (see his "Preface to Lyrical Ballads") and most especially to Coleridge, who borrows his version of the concept from his friend, the proto-psychologist David Hartley, and uses it most vividly in his beautiful "conversation poems," which generally open with a simple image that the process of association then riffs down an emotional circuit, via previously disconnected memories, until the original image reappears in a transubstantiated form at the close. It all feels, even for the reader, like row, row, rowing down a "stream of consciousness" that subsurface oar-strokes (via images or words) punctuate. Except in this case the stream circles back to where it starts, a physical impossibility in nature where you can't go downhill all the way back to where you started. But two of the places you can do that are in dreams and in memories. So now, I guess, my theme, memory, is afloat and on its merry way, via the very process of row, row rowing I opened with, the added bonus being that I can see it in relationship with, or as analogous to, dreaming. I'll need to come ashore for a while to think about where I want to row next.

2.

For some reason, my head keeps coming back to a dream-based term that I know little about but have long been curious toward: The Australian Aboriginal concept of the Dreamtime. So I just spent a good part of this morning reading and watching YouTubes about it. The first thing I learned is that the word Dreamtime, one concocted by a 19th century anthropologist, Francis Gillen, working from a Western perspective, is not an entirely accurate translation from the Aboriginal languages, in that, for them, it has nothing whatsoever to do with either time or dreaming. Can't beat that "Western perspective" for row, row, rowing boats down the wrong stream! This reminded me of T.S. Eliot's critique of Wordsworth's famous statement that poetry is "emotion recollected in tranquillity" which Eliot calls "an *inexact* [my italics, to highlight the irony] formula. For it is neither emotion, nor recollection, nor, without distortion of meaning, tranquillity." Gillen's term, which, in keeping with Western colonial privilege, has been globally accepted as the go-to name for what the Aboriginals believe and do, is similarly "inexact." In that it is all wrong in all of its aspects!

A somewhat more accurate translation of what the Aboriginals believe and do, as it pertains to time, is "Everywhen," the timeless state that serves as the context and foundation for everyday temporal experience, circular and cyclical, always returning to its source. The way water flows only in dreams and memories. Another possible translation is "eternal, uncreated," which, like Everywhen, seems to me to be akin to the Taoist concept of Way, that generative tissue from which everything extant issues and returns, a fluid process we can witness and participate in via the activity of ordinary perception.

Both these notions row, row me further down my preferred stream here, in that they seem applicable to my own experience, or at least sensation, of what nighttime dreaming feels like. The customary strictures of time and space cease to apply, and the average dream, while it may contain certain elements from my first-hand experience, via memory, never, ever replicates that exactly, or most often even remotely. Usually, it's just the opposite: The details of some dreams seem to have been drawn from a reservoir other than my personal, conscious memories, they look that unfamiliar. What all of that nightly invention and re-creation is for eludes me, as it has dream theorists throughout the ages.

Neuroscientists now have at least a rudimentary idea about how our conscious memories are acquired and stored. And, like you, I have an existential sense of what it feels like to have an inventory of such memories, which constitute not only my personal past, via first-hand experience, but also the extrinsic pasts that contextualize those experiences, assembled via various kinds of conscious study, or assimilated without much scrutiny from the cultural water I swim in. I also have a sense of how I “remember” some of my nighttime dreams, far less than 1% of them, via the note-taking and subsequent reflection I've described in my writing. But what, I wonder, happens to the 99+% of those vivid dreams that I don't remember consciously? Do they end up as “memories” of a sort as well? That's where the Dreamtime, or slightly more acceptably to the Aboriginals, the Dreaming, comes in, at least tangentially. The stories and songs comprising the reservoir of cultural memories that Aboriginals experience via various kinds of rhythmic activities—intense dancing, drumming, music—are not simply learned elements of their cultural past, nor are they either history or myth. They are contemporaneous embodied memories constitutive of

their identities, which in some respects don't exist outside of that rich contextual web.

The closest analogy to this that I can think of in Western psychology is Jung's "collective unconscious," which he believed was a sort of broadly cultural/ancestral reservoir of meaningful symbology that sheaths and supports the more traditional Freudian personal unconscious. I'm not a big fan of either Freud or Jung, but Jung's concept at least implies the possibility that individual memory is more than the sum of its autobiographical parts. Here's what Jung has to say about that, in "The Significance of Constitution and Heredity in Psychology," (November 1929):

And the essential thing, psychologically, is that in dreams, fantasies, and other exceptional states of mind the most far-fetched mythological motifs and symbols can appear autochthonously at any time, often, apparently, as the result of particular influences, traditions, and excitations working on the individual, but more often without any sign of them. These "primordial images" or "archetypes," as I have called them, belong to the basic stock of the unconscious psyche and cannot be explained as personal acquisitions. Together they make up that psychic stratum which has been called the collective unconscious.

. . . The collective unconscious comprises in itself the psychic life of our ancestors right back to the earliest beginnings. It is the matrix of all conscious psychic occurrences, and hence it exerts an influence that compromises the freedom of consciousness in the highest degree, since it is continually striving to lead all conscious processes back into the old paths.

This suggests how I may have memories that are not entirely “my” memories, which is what remembered dreams often feel like to me, both mine and not-mine.

Last night for example I had a series of dreams over multiple REM cycles that were quite disturbing, vaguely rooted in autobiographical moments or details, but, for the most part, more like surrealistic inventions. In one of them Humphrey Bogart and another man were slathering raw ground beef about 2 inches thick on the lower half of a big car, like a 60s Cadillac, to create what Bogart called a “suicide machine” for himself and his wife. They then had a number of misadventures in that car, which I won’t document here, though I know that none of them led to the death of either. The only material that came directly from my personal memory was the setting, my hometown, the hill behind our house, which was the launch point for the car. That was just one of the REM cycles. I don’t recall the exact details of the dreams that followed, though they generally had to do with cars and roads and misadventures, all equally wacky, including one with a large steamroller flattening a car.

None of these images are even remotely ancestral archetypes, or even, most likely, symbols. I’d have to defer to Jung on the latter. But their source is ambiguous. In other words, they were both mine and not mine, remembered and unremembered, with “meanings” I found almost entirely elusive. I was very happy yesterday, unusually so, and very calm, unusually so. Yet, for some reason, my brain invested an enormous amount of its creative energy last night generating these wild and unnerving dramas. Why? I have no way to answer that definitively. Except that it now allows me to think about memory in a more complex way, as a faculty with perhaps multiple layers and parts, some of which (1) are conscious

(like those we create and store during our waking periods, often turning them into story); (2) are unconscious (that is, fully hidden unless we do a lot of work on them, like what culture inculcates in us and “critical theory” attempts to make visible, or that haunt our dreams and depth psychology strives to decode), or (3) are essentially extrinsic to our personal identity-center, belonging to different times and places.

What I like about the Aboriginal approach to the Everywhen is that it makes this last group express and normal, shared in waking time via stories and song, available anytime to anyone; not at second hand, darkly, via dreams or brightly, via crafted artifacts (which in Western systems tend to isolate the active maker from the passive audience and to commodify rather than sanctify the medium of exchange). The Everywhen not only contributes to personal identity but makes personal identity possible in the first place, shifting the power dynamic between inside and outside considerably in favor of the latter. In fact, it is via embodied activity—dancing, singing, drumming, didgeridooing—that the Everywhen is engaged, entered. And in the ecstatic moments of contact, the individual identity-center is subsumed into a broader identity that both includes and redeems it. Such “dreams” become by this means both a way of living and a mode of active learning.

I’m not in any way saying or implying that my dreams have anything to do with the Aboriginal Everywhen. Their culture certainly didn’t start with a hamburger-coated Cadillac pushed off a hill in Forest City, Pennsylvania, kamikazeing into the outback with Humphrey Bogart and wife aboard. They have much more beautiful and plausible stories to account for all of that. But I have had a number of experiences, both waking and sleeping, with dreams that could not possibly have arisen entirely on the

basis of my personal, wakeful life events. Some may be questionable in that regard, like the sequence of four dreams I report in “I’m Into Somethin’ Good.” But some are not, like the “Free” dream I use to conclude *This Fall*, far too long and complex to add here or to have arisen in that form and detail on my own initiative. Or the “phantom thespian” dream I use to conclude *Harvest*, originating a concept I could never have come up with on my own. These dreams simply exceed my creative capacity as an isolated organism.

On the waking side, the little snippets of images that opened a way to my “froth of bubbles” essay in *First, Summer*, or my “Chinese field” story in *Last Spring* are on the questionable side, too. There are, though, several other quite extraordinary events that happened while I was wide awake that I never tell anyone about—fearing the generic “You believe in UFOs” effect—that clearly weren’t. The “questionable” groups could possibly be accounted for in the context of traditional Western ideas about individual identity, a sort of “creative” unconscious. The others can’t. Jung’s collective unconscious works there, but awkwardly. Everywhen works better, but still awkwardly. So I am left wondering.

3.

I have written repeatedly about the way the creative work I’ve generated in the aftermath of my wife’s passing has seemed simply to come to me “out of the blue,” where “the blue” is either an inner sky I’m floating down through or an outer sky I’m flying up through. Unconscious or visionary, take your pick. I do the work, but it is quite unlike what work was prior to that event, which I believed was genuinely “mine” both in the

process (quite diligently practiced) and in the product (which I felt warranted my name as “author.”) Think and write was the discourse that applied. This more recent work is simply and obviously, to me at least, not “mine” in those ways. I describe the strange sensation I experience while making these artifacts—essays, poems, songs— variously along the way, most recently, in “I’m Into Somethin’ Good,” the sense that I simply provide the synapses and the fingertips to produce the material. In other words, I feel and I type.

It is, I have admitted all along, possible that most of that can be accounted for by a traditional unconscious, all of these artifacts like long complex dreams I am having while I sit staring at a blank computer monitor. Perhaps the switching mechanism that typically separates dreamtime from waketime was re-toggled oddly by the trauma of my loss. That would explain, I guess, why I seem to dream so much more, or at least remember so many more dreams, than other readers of my work. And it would explain the sense of disconnect I feel between what’s happening in my head while I write—almost nothing—and what I type up. In this scenario, I might say that my inner apparatus, what I name “my brain” in “I’m Dreamin’ My Life Away,” is simply trying to help me get righted again, to get that switch returned to its “normal” state: on while I sleep, off while I’m awake, all of its background work hidden properly in the background where it belongs. It generates these artifacts primarily, if not exclusively, for me to learn what I need to know now, which, as I’ve also said repeatedly, is what I try to do with them. If there are other “ears to hear” out there willing to listen, all the better, but not essential, is what I think it thinks.

But, as I said, there is a small part of it that just doesn’t fit that paradigm; that to me comes from somewhere else,

somewhere outside of me. I have used the word “ecstatic” quite often to describe my relationship with this outside, a word that has “outside” built into its etymological roots. I bear witness in that realm, then do my best to relay it all back to myself and any willing others who might have “ears to hear” it. It is, I suspect, at least potentially, a much deeper reservoir of meaning than I have been able to tap along the way, awesome in both the beautiful and scary senses. I am so grateful for the gift my little dip into the shallows of that ocean has given me: the capacity to keep afloat, head above water, whatever. Too much of it would drown me. And I’m glad it all came late enough in my life to allow me to do the more “normal” work I needed to do along the way to hold down a job, get paid, raise a family, etc., which I am similarly grateful for and actually prouder of, because it took hard work to accomplish all of that. Now, I mostly just walk and then type, two pretty easy things.

Had I been born into a culture with a healthier relationship to that outsideness—and the American version of the Western OS is in that regard one of the worst—I would have been able to inhabit both realms comfortably and appropriately, the way (it seems to me based on my infinitesimally small bit of research) the Aboriginals in Australia do. All of it would seem to be of a piece, the daily survival, the dance. Identity from the outside in. No need for a switch to toggle. Just go with the flow. Gently down the stream.

I’ll close this section with this weird and funny dream I had last night, one that has no particular value in relation to any of what I’ve written here, but that somehow, I’m not sure how, allowed me to feel and type all of this today.

So, in this dream I get a call from a neighbor named Mitch saying there was a local realty covenant that allowed him to claim my house by throwing a rock at it while I was out. He would have to do this twice, on separate occasions, and inform me after the first that the next rock was coming. He had thrown the first rock while I was out grocery shopping. I had never heard of this odd sort of “quitclaim” maneuver. He explained that the only way for me to avoid losing my house was to be prepared to defend it (that is not leave the house) with a bigger rock of my own. So I found one, the size and shape of a conch shell but with many jagged edges, quite beautiful and dangerous looking, and was outside on my porch waiting.

Mitch’s girlfriend came along and began threatening me verbally. She came toward the house, but instead of a rock, she pulled a long knife, like a butcher knife, and ordered me leave the house so she and Mitch could have it. Right then two young women on bikes happened to pass by. I asked them to call the police. They recognized Mitch’s girlfriend as the one who sold them drugs in front of the local school. If the police came, she knew she would be identified not only as a knife wielder (the covenant allowed only rocks in a fight of this sort, so this was a clear violation of the rules) but also as a drug dealer for school children, thereby losing her job and ending up in jail. I went into the house and phoned Mitch explaining the standoff and he called off the quitclaim fight. When I woke up I was trying to decide whether I could trust him or his girlfriend enough to go to sleep in my dream house that night. Fortunately, I was able to go back to sleep in my real house on Bigelow Avenue here, no one as far as I know lurking outside with a rock trying to force me out.

I’m guessing I could make some sense of this odd tableau if I tried hard enough. But I don’t want to. Whatever my hidden brain or outer aura wanted me to learn from this,

if anything, will, I know, get accomplished without any intervention, in the form of work, on my part. So I'm going to stop rowing now. The sun will be up in about 20 minutes, Mitch and his girlfriend are nowhere in sight. Merry and gentle will be my bywords this morning while I walk by the water, which I hope will be very calm.

4.

One corollary to all of this might be that our dream life while we're asleep has a reality to it that is equal to our daily ventures in the world, except that it taps into a vaster reservoir of images and orchestrates them not according to the strictures of temporal sequence, the way we "remember" our autobiographical lives, but according to some asynchronous, synthetic generative scheme. All of this extraordinary visionary activity constitutes a life of its own, of our own, whether we remember it or not, perhaps shaping us just as powerfully, if not more so, than what we do wakefully.

One of the things I've learned from sharing early editions of this book with others is that many people don't remember much about their dreams. A few don't remember anything! That was a revelation to me. As I've explained in "I'm Into Somethin' Good," I wake up often during the night and remember whatever dream has been ongoing in quite vivid detail. I usually stop for a moment to decide whether it is one I want to come back to for more reflection. If so, I take a few notes as a mnemonic. The rest, the vast majority, seem to me to be just bizarrely arcane and colorful spectacles, resistant to "interpretation," not worth remembering consciously.

Often I can't begin to imagine how my brain could have invented them, they are in their details so far removed

from my own autobiographical experience. Occasionally, I feel like I'm actually having someone else's dreams! These dreams I don't take note of disappear completely into oblivion. But I don't think they are unremembered. They just enter memory along a different trajectory, through embodied imagination instead of through the conventional senses.

The fact that I happen to remember so many of my dreams may be outside the norm, at least among the cohort that reads my work. I'm quite sure, though, that, having human brains like mine, they do dream the same amount and just as vividly. So where do all these dreams end up, memory-wise? It seems ludicrous to believe that evolution has created a system that uses all of this energy—enough so that our brains need to disconnect from our bodies to keep us from enacting our dreams—toward no purpose. And it seems plausible that “remembering” all of that business, even if not consciously, is somehow crucial to their purpose or to our survival. Which to me suggests there is another sort of memory system expressly devoted to this material, one quite distinct from our conscious memories and from embodied processes like kinesthesia or proprioception.

There is a contested term called “body memory” that psychologists use to think about the various ways memory enters the body outside of the normal conscious pathways and remains stored there in much the same ways as it does in the brain. The only element of that argument I take interest in here pertains to trauma, which induces a super-powerful memory akin to a bad dream, one we have repeatedly while waking. Or suffer repeatedly as we sleep. Some therapists theorize, and there is anecdotal evidence to support them, that trauma of this sort is stored not just in the brain but in the body, causing a variety of incidental problems. Eastern philosophies are

much more confident and comfortable with this way of thinking about embodied memory. A whole range of practices from meditation to yoga expressly depend on it, using the body itself as a venue for learning and change.

5.

I have gradually come to believe that we both learn and change while we sleep. And I don't mean the everyday "housekeeping" that some neuroscientists believe is the function of dreaming, the computer-like brain moving bits of data around into long-term storage locations to promote efficient access or deleting a bunch of extraneous stuff to prevent overload. I'm pretty sure the brain is powerful enough to do most of that kind of housekeeping in real-time relationship with experience. I mean like the kind of learning we study and go to school for during our waking hours, except that in this case what I called our "background-brain" in "I'm Into Somethin' Good" does all the work for us, out of our conscious awareness.

I have no evidence for this of course. But it is just otherwise too hard for me to explain why all that astonishingly inventive activity is going on beneath our attention. And this background brainwork may be happening not just at night, but all the time, sometimes erupting into what we call, mundanely, daydreaming, for example, when we're bored; or creative work that so often seems to come out of nowhere, unbidden, a process that, as I've said, feels more and more involuntary the older I get; or even hallucinatory visions akin to the ones Aboriginals experience in the Everywhen. There may also be vast amounts of it that simply can't make it up through the sensory noise of wakefulness.

At one extreme, it is even possible to believe that our dreamlife is our real life, and our daily conscious life is just a sort of survival-related-scrim that allows it to proceed. This inversion of “realities” has happened to me from time to time, as in this example from *This Fall*:

Just before I woke up I had maybe the most vivid dream of my life. Carol and I were sitting in bed together, having just returned from some work-related function out near the airport. Carol had been offered a low/mid-level job opportunity of some sort and we were talking about it, as we often had as she tried mightily but unhappily to situate herself in some “professional” capacity. She finally said she just didn’t want to take it and looked up at me, those beautiful blue eyes simultaneously plaintive and hopeful, asking me without ever saying anything whether I would still love her if she were just her, not “somebody” in the world’s eyes. I looked back at her, instinctively, my eyes wet with emergent tears, almost mournful, that say I will always love you, to my utmost, from the bottomlessness of my heart, no matter what the world out there says or does about either one of us. Jobs, money, houses, cars, friends, fame, credentials, status, none of it means anything at all to me by comparison. All I said was, “Carol, I just want to be with you. That’s all I ever wanted or ever will.” Then I asked her, repeatedly, if this were real, if I was awake. She didn’t answer but I went through several testing stages: I rose up on my knees and shook my head as if to clear it, asking “Am I really awake?” We were both still there. I pinched myself hard, asking again. We were both still there. I was thrilled, ecstatic. I was just about to tell her about a horrible nightmare I had had, for months, that she was dead, gone, that I was alone. I

couldn't contain my joy to know that, finally, it was over. When I opened my mouth to start speaking, I woke up. (91)

I was stunned and heartbroken to have to leave my dream “reality” for the nightmare of wakefulness. If you’ve ever had a dream of this sort, you know how it invites critique of the simplistic Western paradigm for orchestrating the status relationship between conscious imagery derived from sensory input and the various kinds of imagery that derive from un/sub/preconscious experience, from dreaming to creativity. And it calls into question our cultural tendency to valorize wakefulness and devalue dreaming. Maybe nocturnal experience is more real than diurnal experience. Many Aboriginal cultures seem to have no problem with that inversion, in some cases prefer it as a way of explaining where we came from and whatever the hell we’re doing here.

If you haven’t ever had a dream of that sort, there’s not much I can say, I’m sure, to persuade you to re-think your current notions about this. All I’ll say, and it’s in relation to this specific event, is that under the stress of certain kinds of trauma—deep grieving is a common one—our connection with everyday experience and reality is temporarily suspended. I entered a nether-state of that sort for about nine months after Carol died. Daily life took on the aura of a dream, something not quite happening to “me,” as “my real life” raged on just beyond the periphery of my awareness. Here’s another passage from *This Fall* that tries to explain it via TV imagery:

Between February and November I resided in a strange nether world that is neither of this world nor of the next, whatever that might be. As I explained to a friend at a restaurant a few weeks after Carol died, I felt as if I were watching myself,

my old self, on TV, in a series populated by all the characters I knew, for whom the ongoing narrative went on, normally. But the real me was now outside the plane of that reality, simply a viewer. My character in the program, I could see, was not a very good actor, forgetting his lines, mucking up the story line. The writers would have to get him out of the script soon. The me watching, on the other hand, was on fire, full more of rage than of words, that feeble currency of human experience; but, like most of us when we watch TV, so captivated by those moving pixels, without an identity of his own. And the rest of the cast was, of course, as oblivious to him as characters on TV are of us, sitting in our living rooms watching them. (8)

When that disconnection takes effect, I believe our brains are wise enough to replace the “reality” we’ve been dislocated from with one that is equally vivid, and much more in keeping with our expectations of what life in this world needs to be at that moment, providing us with a therapeutic bridge, a way to sustain sanity until we wander back to a more conventional reality. But there’s more to it than that: Once you’ve experienced such an interlude, “conventional reality” will forever look like a very thin veneer, one that we humans often cling to as a way to avoid contacting actual reality, which is so much deeper, more complex, and awesome, than the one we prefer to believe in while we are putatively “awake.”

This diurnal mirage is not necessarily a “bad” dream in the sense of being scary; more a flimsy and infirm dream, bad in the sense that we are culturally conditioned to believe it’s really all there is. I could go on and on about this, via multiple “strange” experiences I’ve had not only since my wife passed, but for my whole life. But I won’t. I just invite you think whether in your own experience

there have been events or perceptions that you dismissed as “mere dreams,” good or bad, when you could just as easily have welcomed them, and installed them in your memory, as foundationally true encounters with what’s “real.”

6.

[This section previously opened with the clause “I want to write briefly . . .” It evolved very quickly into a more extended exposition about something I’ve had on my mind for maybe 15 years, mulling it over, thinking it through. I’ve never had the opportunity to write it all up, and may never again. So I decided to do it now. The tenor here is different enough from the rest of this essay that you could, if you want, just skip to section 8 to pick up the ongoing thread].

In any case, I want now to write (no longer briefly) about something pertaining to memory as a way of setting up what follows, my goal all along, a discussion of that poem by William Carlos Williams. I’ll begin with a term that may seem disconnected: misunderstanding, that chronic affliction of human relationships both individually and collectively. I started to think about this when what I intended as an innocuous comment at a meeting among my program’s faculty ruptured a relationship I was hoping to establish with a newly hired colleague. Briefly: As we were trying to figure out a collective identity among us, I remarked that my own formation was not “stereotypical” to the field. Meaning it was unusual, almost out of bounds, and that needed to be accounted for. Our newly hired colleague took this to mean that her formation, which was more mainstream in that moment, *was* stereotypical—not as in recognizable in its context, but as

in boring, weak, lacking originality. She was quite angry about that and responded aggressively.

I knew right then from prior experiences of this sort that the “misunderstanding” at the root of this disagreement was irreconcilable. And it was. I think you can see why, based on your own experiences. The point of contention may seem on the surface to be merely a matter of definition: I meant the word in this way, you took it that way, isn’t that funny. But for each of us, the definition we instinctively chose was vested in our identities, quite deeply so. Which means each of us would have to navigate across some very rocky terrain to find an equitable meeting place. You have a chance, an obligation even, to attempt that in a marriage or a family. It is almost impossible in a workplace where mutual contact is so hard to “schedule.” So I just sat back quietly, resigned to a misunderstanding I knew was intractable.

A few years later I was re-reading I. A. Richards’ *The Philosophy of Rhetoric*, can’t remember why, when I came to his famous statement that rhetoric should be “a study of misunderstanding and its remedies.” Richards is delivering the talks that became these essays in the mid-1930s, in the midst of all the angst in advance of WWII. You can feel almost palpably his deep anxiety about the fate of Europe, buried beneath, even built into, the discourse of his arguments. My sense (he never even comes close to saying this) is that he believes the ominous political disconnects of that moment remain negotiable, if only the major players can come to a collective understanding that their differences are the result of mutual misunderstandings rooted more in language than substance, a matter of “translation” in a sense, a process “rhetoric” could facilitate.

Richards had recently been working with his long-time colleague C. K. Ogden on a project called *Basic English: A General Introduction with Rules and Grammar*, the goal of which was, in part, to generate a simple vocabulary of about 850 words that would “take away the redundancies of our rich language and eliminate the words that can be made by putting together simpler words,” a lexicon that would, I take it, be more immune to misunderstanding. It’s an inane project I can only make sense of in the context of the hysteria and paranoia of that historical moment. But it provides some context for what Richards fears about the elusiveness of language and what he hopes rhetoric can accomplish.

My instinctive and immediate reaction to Richards’ subsequent assertion about misunderstanding, as I re-read the sentence this time, remembering my recollection of that moment where things turned in our program planning meeting, was: “There is no remedy for misunderstanding.” And I thought further that the key to peaceable relationships, if and when they were still possible (which they weren’t in Europe in the mid-30s) was to prevent the misunderstanding from becoming established in the first place. It took me a while to unpack all of this to my own satisfaction, as follows.

One thing that helped was thinking about the way I learned students’ names in my classes. I had an almost foolproof procedure for memorizing names during the first class-session. Almost. One thing I noticed over time was that if I misremembered a name for some reason, it was very hard for me to dislodge it and replace it with the correct one. My mental process thereafter was something like reading those signs that warn you about not turning left at an intersection, the left turn signal with a red, cross-banded circle around it. In order to process that information, I need first to think about turning left, then

tell myself not to. When I learned a name incorrectly, every time I invited that student to speak I would see the “wrong” name, have to cross it out in my head, and then use the right one. This would take maybe a second or two, a hesitation the student would notice. Which is about how long it takes me to realize I can’t turn left when I see those signs.

My point is this: Learning the name incorrectly is like a misunderstanding. Once it is established, it can be worked around but not removed. Relearning a correct name is a relatively simple matter of substitution. The correct name is inserted, but the wrong name still remains, under erasure. Resolving the tension that arose between me and my colleague would be much more complicated than that, not just negotiating the definitional ambiguity of “stereotypical,” but also the many other attendant ambiguities about disciplinary history and professional identity, including age, that might pertain to each of us personally. This could well take many long conversations, each of which had the possibility of further aggravating rather than pacifying the disagreement. Better, as I decided initially, just to walk away cold.

No one misremembers a name intentionally, of course. They believe it is registered correctly. Just as no one intentionally decides to self-install knowledge that they know is false. They believe it is true. And no one believes that a misunderstanding is a misunderstanding when it is first ensconced in memory. They believe they have in fact understood. So “understood” shares the same status in one’s memory as “correct” and “true” and is therefore just as intractable, no matter the accuracy of any of them. One of the most formidable tasks in resolving what one believes is a misunderstanding is persuading the other (or yourself) that it *is* one. And that’s only the tip of the iceberg in terms of resolution, as I suggest above.

So what's the solution to this, I wondered? Here's what I came up with: First of all, ditch the simplistic binary structure of everyday interpretation, the presumption that one either understands or misunderstands, especially if you believe the former is most often the case and the latter is an occasional exception. No one who reflects for even a few minutes on their relationships with other people, as they are negotiated via language, can possibly assent to that trivial generalization. In my experience (which may not be "stereotypical" I admit) understanding seems a rare gift and misunderstanding a constant menace. And ditch the belief that resolving a misunderstanding is a matter for which either a dictionary, simplistically, or even "rhetoric," in its glories, is all the equipment you will need. Other terms that cross my mind as potentially useful: tolerance, patience, will power, faith, for a start, all things that come both before and after language.

The way out of this conundrum for me was to invent, and then learn how to use, a new category called not-understanding, a state of mind that keeps the judgmental side of the interpretive process always open and in play, a liminal state in which meaning-making has no final destination or endpoint, no place to put a period at the end declaring "understood" as the outcome. "Misunderstood" is, after all, just an aberrant form of "understood." It may be a stretch to suggest that understanding is always to some extent also misunderstanding. But the more I think about that, the more I believe it to be true. What is imperative is continued listening, careful attention, constant adjustment, a lovely (to me) extended process of "coming-to-know." In short, not-understanding is not only not misunderstanding, it is the very means by which misunderstanding can be avoided.

7.

[In all my excerpts from Bakhtin below I neutralize or feminize the pronouns. Not knowing Russian, I have no way of knowing whether the standard translation to the male pronouns in English is literal/necessary. But I've read enough of Bakhtin's work quite lovingly to believe he would approve of what I do, even if it might take a bit of "dialogue" for us to come to "agreement" on it, two terms I borrow from Bakhtin's core lexicon.]

My go-to source in matters of this sort is always Mikhail Bakhtin, most especially via his concept of the "unfinalizability" of human identity as he outlines it in *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (edited and translated by Caryl Emerson, University of Minnesota Press, 1984), by far my favorite of his treatises. He introduces the concept this way, describing the distinctively realistic way Dostoevsky deploys his characters:

They all acutely sense their own inner unfinalizability, their capacity to outgrow, as it were, from within and to render untrue any externalizing and finalizing definition of them. As long as a person is alive [s]he lives by the fact that [s]he is not yet finalized, that [s]he has not yet uttered the ultimate word. (highlight his, 59)

In the mode of not-understanding, there is never an "ultimate word," and every "externalizing . . . definition" is by its nature "untrue." I like all of that.

Bakhtin then generalizes it this way, as it applies to human life in the world:

A [wo]man never coincides with [her]self. One cannot apply to [her] the formula of $A=A$. . . [T]he genuine life of the personality takes place at the point of non-coincidence between a [wo]man and [her]self.” . . . The genuine life of the personality is made available only through a dialogic penetration of that personality, during which it freely and reciprocally reveals itself. (highlight his, 59)

I especially like that baffling second sentence, which suggests to me that “the personality” of an individual can only be “genuine” when one is non-coincidental with oneself, a kind of radical freedom from the before and after in the moment, which is related to the A that was already there but alters it into something non- or extra-A in the serendipity of the interaction, such that “the formula of $A=A$ ” “cannot apply.” Ever.

As this might pertain more specifically to my term, “not-understanding,” Bakhtin goes on to say:

For it must be emphasized that in Dostoevsky’s world even agreement retains its dialogic character, that is, it never leads to a merging of voices and truths in a single impersonal truth, as occurs in the monologic world. (highlights his, 95)

In other words, or at least in my words, even the strongest forms of “understanding,” as a mode of “agreement,” must remain by their very nature unfinalized, always unfolding, and intimately personal on both sides of the dialogue. For example, had my colleague in the instance I described asked me what I meant by “stereotypical,” or had I been wise enough to foresee the potential for “disagreement” about that word and had explained how I was using it, or had I just chosen another word in the heat of the moment, the prospect for dialogue would have

remained open, misunderstanding replaced by at least not-understanding, if not “agreement,” which would likely take much more ongoing dialogue. That’s not what happened, unfortunately.

Bakhtin further extends the radical openness at the crux of our unfinalizable natures along a temporal axis this way:

Nothing conclusive has yet taken place in the world, the ultimate word of the world and about the world has not yet been spoken, the world is open and free, everything is still in the future and will always be in the future. (all italics his, 166)

There is a breathtaking sense of liberation that becomes imaginable here, the futural unfurling of not-understanding toward deeper and deeper forms of “agreement,” along a timeline that might take hours to fully negotiate in a conversation, or years to develop in a relationship, or a lifetime to pursue in becoming, always becoming—via all of this outward reaching, through dialogue with the other voices of living people and the artifacts they create—more and more oneself. Or less and less oneself, which for Bakhtin may amount to the same thing.

This is not to say that we can’t know things, believe things, assert things, or commit to things. It’s just that all of those states of mind must have a provisional aspect to them, an openness, not only to further inquiry in their proper arenas but also to alternative ways of knowing, believing, asserting, or committing. It is the very foundation for critical thinking. Which is why I suppose so many fundamentalists, who presume an eternally finalized position, are so antagonistic to any mode of teaching or learning that includes the word critical. A critical mind is

not weak or wishy-washy or unprincipled, or, worst of all “woke.” Just the opposite. It is vivid, alert, responsive, open to change, dreaming-while-awake. Which to me (and Bakhtin) means it is still alive, not yet dead.

We live in an historical moment in which politicians and pundits operate with the currency of “alternative realities,” intentional misinformation, and outright lies. This is the ideal environment to promote ignorance as a substitute for learning. The ultimate form of this aberration is the cult, a delusion in which incorrect is correct, false is true, and misunderstanding is understanding. All perfectly insulated from rational critique. A truly critical mind, one that feels comfortable in the liminal realm of not-understanding as I’ve described it here, is rarely fooled by shabby rhetorical ploys and rarely deluded by ideological propaganda.

We also live in a moment where the term “science” is bandied about as the antidote to misinformation, sometimes a problem of its own. There is a tendency these days to valorize science as a guarantor of “universal” truth and technology as the go-to problem-solver, a misguidedly “stereotypical” Western bias. I will, I admit, take “science” over “politics” as a guide toward right thinking any day of the week. But many turn science into just another avatar for religion, the repository of “truth” reductively conceived. If you spend any time doing some scientific work, and it doesn’t have to be studying quantum mechanics or quasars, just everyday things like thinking about climate change, or a favorite animal species, or the nighttime sky, with a willingness to read books and watch documentaries, you will quickly enter the state of mind I just described: an excited awareness of not-understanding as the foundational condition for further learning.

Professional scientists, the best of them in any case, say over and over that the more they learn about whatever systems they happen to be studying—subatomic particles, cosmic events, weather, animal behavior, trees, rocks, insects, you name it—the less they “know” and the more they want to learn about their subjects. The Western scientific tradition, in its popularized forms, tends to promote paradigmatic delusions like “fact” or “data” or “information” as equivalents of “true.” Newtonian physics is a good example. It purportedly worked always and everywhere. And it did for a long time. Until that pesky speed of light thing came along, requiring an Einstein to resolve it. And post-Einstein there are a dizzying array of competing theories seeking to account for what his system can’t. Will this process ever end? I hope not. In the same way I hope my own process of using not-understanding as a way to promote insight and self-change will never end. Coming to a stop in that sense is, to me, basically being already dead, as Bakhtin implies.

There are, of course, situations and people and words and sentences for which we can simply declare an endpoint, a way of saying for any number of very good reasons, from deep revulsion to a paucity of time, we already know everything we want to. The outcome from this position is still neither understanding nor misunderstanding. The arguments between those two tend to remain most contentious precisely in these situations. One simply chooses to conclude the process of coming-to-know and move on, an affirmation of the value of not-understanding.

In the end then, understanding becomes merely a form of misunderstanding about things we commonly agree on or just don’t want to think about any longer. Even with Ogden’s ultra-stripped-down dictionary, there was no universal consensus about what a word, or the new syntax

it was situated in, actually “meant,” not least of which because he posited English as the foundational world “language” (an assertion of colonial privilege that I’m sure he was incapable of understanding); and then the fact that words, even the simplest, don’t have and never did have, by their figurative nature, a unitary definition.

That is, I admit, an inordinately long “transition” to the next phase of my essay here. But it is something I’ve been wanting to write up for years, for myself if for no one else, just to frame it out as a foundational philosophical/ethical/rhetorical position. And now I have. I may even go back and announce these two sections as an optional read, one you could easily have skipped over to get to the end of the line here. Okay, I just did that. So if you heeded that guidance, you’re not reading this sentence. If you didn’t, it’s time to get on to the next one.

8.

Now, back to my main track, and, finally, to William Carlos Williams.

About a month ago, kind of serendipitously, almost offhandedly, in the midst of a conversation I was having with a friend via Zoom, she talked briefly about a little piece of jewelry she had seen in a store many years before and hadn’t purchased, something she came to regret more and more over the time intervening. Memories of that sort are not what I’d call traumatic. But they can be haunting and troubling nonetheless, generating regret. I have no problem with regret as a response to memory as long as it can lead to some change of behavior and then redemption in the current moment. This one for her, and many darker and deeper ones for all of us, don’t offer that prospect. What has been “lost” cannot ever be

recovered. The “mistake(s),” if in fact that’s what they are, that led to that loss cannot ever be rectified.

I found all of this quite poignant, a kind of metonym for all the many deeper and more painful losses we carry in memory that arose not from what we did, but what we decided (often for many good reasons at the time) not to do. I didn’t say much about this right then, but it stuck deeply in my memory of that conversation, enough so that I decided to do something myself in response to it. I thought if I could find a general semblance of that piece and send it to her, it might precipitate a process of “recovery;” again, not in relation to a piece of remembered jewelry but in relation to the regrets that afflict her and all of us most deeply. So I searched online, found something I thought might be an adequate semblance of the piece she described, bought it and sent it to her.

Our relationship is not an obvious jewelry-buying one, if you know what I mean. I have learned through experience what my age makes me ineligible for with women considerably younger than I am. So I am quite attentive to, careful about, and respectful of boundaries in situations of that sort. I knew that sending this piece could end in a misunderstanding about all of that. But I did it anyway, hoping the gift would be seen more as a dialogue-opening than a transgressive gesture.

I figured that the rhetorical ambience I created for it was the key, so I spent some time thinking about that. That’s how and why I came back to Williams’ great poem. I offer just below here the note I enclosed with the piece to provide the context for my sending it, which then provided the context for my thinking about the poem, which then animated me to start writing this essay, all these things I see now in the poem that would never have

become visible to me were it not for this incident, a new layer of meaning, and what I might have not only to say about it but to do with it.

Life is full of risks, as are relationships. After my wife passed I was riven with regrets that I have had to come to terms with over the years, and more remain. Many, maybe most of them, I realized, were vested not in something I did, but something I didn't. What we do can, of course, be hurtful, but we can often then acknowledge and apologize for it. Or it can be misunderstood, a state of confusion in a relationship that, as I've explained, can over time be clarified in an enduring partnership, like a marriage. But quite often in less durable relationships it can never be fully resolved, just one of the costs of "doing business" in this life is how I think of it now. What we don't do is a void that is much harder to escape from. So now, when risks of that sort—related to doing or not doing—arise, I prefer to do, and damn the consequences. If apology doesn't work, there is misunderstanding. I can live with that much more easily than regret. So I sent the gift.

Here's the note I sent to accompany and explain it:

"no whiteness (lost) is so white as the memory of whiteness"

That's a passage from William Carlos Williams' poem "The Descent," and it suggests the incomparable clarity and poignancy that inheres to beautiful (lost) things remembered.

I know that nothing can override the memory of the [piece of jewelry] you didn't buy way back when, but sometimes there are comparable things

*inhabited by hordes
heretofore unrealized
of new kinds—
since their movements
are toward new objectives
(even though formerly they were abandoned)*

Memory, especially at my age, feels quite often like a “descent”—into the past, first, to the extent that anything accurately survives the ways in which we archive and then transform it over time—away from what’s here and now to something that was there and then. This process, Williams says, is “*a kind* of accomplishment,” “*a sort* of renewal” (my italics), not exactly either of those things, just like them. It is more accurately, he finally affirms “an initiation,” with all of the ceremony—the pomp, the fear, the excitement, the disappointment—inherent in such experiences. Like any initiation, it opens “spaces” that are truly “new places,” places that didn’t previously exist, even in the original moment when the experience was first cached. And each return to those spaces brings forth “new kinds” of “hordes, heretofore unrealized.”

Memory then, at least of things consequential, is never simply eidetic, the recovery of an isolated artifact left long in storage. It is more a portal that opens into a complex array of associations, which varies, often considerably, over time; a web of connections that cannot ever be fully predicted beforehand. Sometimes, as Williams implies, memory can even have a futural aspect, opening “toward new objectives”—interestingly to me, even those that “formerly . . . were abandoned.”

Everyone harbors “hordes” of such memories, some of which recur repeatedly and feel in their emergence like deep loss—mistakes made, opportunities forsaken, or more commonly never even recognized in their actual

moment. The feelings of poignancy or sadness associated with memories of this sort, may have some existential value, adding dimension to life in the moment. But, in my view, very little. The key is what we do with such memories, what we make of them not retrospectively but forwardly, the way we use their intrinsic lament to change right now, for good, and toward the good.

When memory is redeemed in this way it becomes revelatory, in the sense that we can now see, and will continue to see, an array of values in experiences, often tiny ones, that were previously invisible, will cherish certain analogous things that come our way instead of dwelling on what is “past,” has passed beyond reach. The former path is deep contentment, even joy; the latter is misery, even despair. That is what I think Williams is trying to work out, to deal with, to renegotiate actually, at this latter moment in his life as he looks back not so much on the people and things he simply left behind, but on the people and things he didn’t properly value, the people and things he took for granted instead of loving. In other words, memories of things lost, when properly resurrected, can be redeemed from a uselessly nostalgic regret to increase our capacity to love right now.

9.

So how does this apply to the memory of things you left behind? Well, you have two choices: You can lament that loss over and over, regressively; or you can cherish what remains of that relationship, using it as a reminder to attend more carefully to all the other beautiful things that cross your path, only a few of which are destined to become “yours” in a permanent way.

The piece I sent my friend cannot ever compete with the memory of the one she left behind. By that measure, it is a mere semblance, a figment, a sham, as Williams makes clear: The memory of whiteness is always whiter than any right-now white. I knew all of that. But it shouldn't have to, and has no desire to, compete with memory in that way. Only to enrich it. Dealing with the loss of any sort of loved person/place/thing is a risky business. If you expect the next and new person/place/thing to replace what was lost, it/they will always come up lacking. Memory is incomparably formidable in that paradigm. If, on the other hand, you use memory to enhance your capacity to see and value what is next and new for what it is, on its own terms, it will "open . . . new places . . . heretofore unrealized," each of which will not be trivial or disappointing but will add a new layer of meaning to the original memory. In this case, the gift I sent may allow my friend to see that now she has both the piece she left behind and this new one that her story brought forth from the oblivion of that moment in our conversation. Two instead of none. That's a pretty good deal.

I can see, having written this, something I hadn't seen previously about both the gift and my friend's decision to leave the original piece behind: Not taking something is not the same as not doing something. Not taking is in fact a form of doing, a choice. An object for sale in a store does not intrinsically belong to its habitat, like a leaf on a tree, say. It was made to be taken. Still had my friend bought that little piece, it may by now be languishing at the bottom of a box of such purchases. Or lost. Or just forgotten. She has no way of knowing what its fate became. But it could have been a good one, with someone who would cherish it forever. That is always our best hope for the things we encounter with love along our way here. Not that they come home with us to stay, but

that they will always find a cherished home to share with those who cherish them.

I didn't hear from my friend for several days after I knew, via USPS tracking, that the package had arrived, which made me a bit anxious that the gift had been "misunderstood" and our relationship would have to stumble past that going forward. But I believed good would come of it somehow, for both of us. And it did. The very next day we Zoomed in a normal way. She appreciated the gift and what it represented (she is so smart I have no idea why I worried she might not!)

As it turned out, the piece I bought did not resemble the remembered original. But facsimile was not the key to its purpose, which was to displace a memory not to replace an object. It's possible that throwing it out might accomplish that more effectively than keeping it, an embodied gesture of cleaning house, as it were, of attachment to regret. That will be up to her to decide.

Oddly, in the end, the main beneficiary of this transaction might turn out to be me, in that it has helped me to think about that very process of severing attachment to my own regrets. And, as added bonuses, it inspired me to re-read "The Descent" from a new point of view, to find out about the Everywhen, to re-visit Bakhtin, to think more deeply about dreaming and memory, and to write this essay, each of which points me toward the future not the past, all of which were wonderful and worthy uses of my time and energy during the darkening days leading up to this year's winter solstice. Today the light starts coming back, just a couple of extra minutes of it, maybe, but "a kind of accomplishment/ a sort of renewal," which is what the future always is. Very cool.

10.

Williams ends his great poem this way:

*With evening, love wakens
 though its shadows
 which are alive by reason
of the sun shining—
 grow sleepy now and drop away
 from desire
Love without shadows stirs now
 beginning to awaken
 as night
advances*

There are many things, relationship-wise, that age makes one ineligible for. But love, in its truest and deepest sense, is not one of them. It awakens in the evening as brightly as it did all day, in some ways more so, free of its shadows, which drop away “from desire” as night advances. I try to imagine what love’s shadows are once they grow sleepy. And what this has to do with desire, which must be what animates them while the sun shines. And all of a sudden, I find myself reaching

*. . . toward new objectives
 (even though formerly they were abandoned)*

And then . . .

*The descent
 made up of despairs
 and without accomplishment
realizes a new awakening:
 which is a reversal
of despair*

*For what we cannot accomplish,
what
is denied to love
what we have lost in the anticipation—
a descent follows
endless and indestructible*

A descent. Down the stream. All that row, row, rowing going on down below in the body, gently, and up top in the brain, where life is but a dream. How memories of all kinds are made, making us who and what we are, uniquely, not what we cannot accomplish or have lost in anticipation, those things denied to love, but a constant awakening to the quickening stream, the path we make as we follow it, love without shadows, endless and indestructible. What could be better than that? At any age.

Don't Be Afraid

1.

*You hold the key to love and fear
All in your trembling hand.
Just one key unlocks them both.
It's there at your command.*

Those are some lines from “Get Together,” The Youngbloods’ song released in 1966, just as anti-war fever was heating up the American streets and multiple cultural institutions, including the traditional university, were about to come apart at the seams in the late-60s cauldron of chaotic rage and resistance. The opening lines of the song are both poignant and prescient: “Love is but a song we sing./ Fear’s the way we die.” Having lived fully within the white-hot intensity of that moment, I can say with assurance that those sentiments were true barometers of what was best and worst about all that fervor and its aftermath. Love and fear seemed always balanced on a knife-edge, almost inseparable. And they stayed in relative equilibrium, in the imaginary of my memory in any case, for almost a decade, until the mid-70s, through the street battles at the Democratic convention in 1968, through the late-60s assassinations, through Watergate and impeachment, through to the “end” of at least the specific war being fought by American soldiers on the ground in Vietnam.

Looking back now from the endpoint of my generational epoch toward this opening salvo, I am often filled with sadness and shame, in part for what my cohort of peers

turned into, so swiftly I see now in retrospect, just another cadre of selfish, greedy, now-old white men who so quickly reverted to type, once the pressure of the draft was removed, coveting power and money, eager first to restore and then to prop up the status quo and, finally, a quasi-dictator as their president. That's the sadness part. The shame part derives from what looks to me now like the abject failure of what I deeply felt, and truly believed back then, would be a seismic shift in how the American culture operates, in relation to race and gender, in relation to projected global military violence, in relation to money, in relation to almost anything you can imagine when the balance of power from that knife-edge leans more toward love than fear.

Instead, I had to witness the swift sell-out of so many of those I stood with in the streets, first captivated by then capitulating to the allure of the fear that re-inspired the patriarchal, racist capitalism we/they seemed destined to derail with "flower power" in that "summer of love" the year after The Youngbloods' anthem first aired. There were, of course, many cosmetic changes that took effect, as there always are in the aftermath of crisis; but at the systems-level, which is what drives culture and economy, the old order was not only restored, it was fortified.

One symbolic inflection point for me was the publication of Abby Hoffman's "Steal This Book" in 1971. Hoffman could not at the time find an established house to publish the book, so he created one of his own, Pirate Editions, with Grove Press as the distributor. Many bookstores refused to stock the book and it was banned in Canada, of all places. But instead of fading into oblivion, it became a bestseller, primarily via an "underground" network and word of mouth. You might think the success of this "notorious, radical survival guide to living free as a revolutionary from one of the greatest activists of the 20th

century” (part of the blurb now on Amazon, which still sells a Kindle version of the book for 12 bucks and a paperback for 17) would be something to celebrate as a permanent instantiation of the countercultural energy I so admired and founded my hope on. But to me the book represented then—and still does as it celebrates its 50th year in the marketplace with an “anniversary edition”—the ultimate sell-out, not because of what it promotes and argues, which is sketchy enough, but in the way it was marketed, quite brilliantly, to maximize notoriety and (at least small amounts of) fortune, as well as permanent celebrity for its (in)famous author, the “Steal This ...” trope becoming his ongoing cash-cow franchise.

To me the index to the problem is in the title. I’m sure Hoffman and Grove Press and many booksellers believed that some readers would in fact try to steal the book. But I’m equally sure it was very, very few, even back then, who actually did. The title served more as an attractant, beckoning with ironized radical allure the purchase of a book that was telling you to steal it, more a creature of the Reagan 80s or the Seinfeld 90s than the briefly generative early 70s. And, of course, given the trajectory of the publishing industry over the last 50 years, my guess is that there are now almost no readers who steal the book, an impossibility in any case if you’re shopping for it online.

I decided right from the outset that I would neither steal the book, which seemed an inane sort of resistance to capitalistic culture, nor to buy it, which seemed an equally inane sort of capitulation to the capitalistic impulses of the author and his purported movement. Which means I have never read it and never will. I did, via discussions with others among my college and grad school friends, and subsequent incidental research, learn a bit about what Hoffman recommended specifically in the book, a combination of grubby survival tactics and grandiose

schemes, neither of which in my view, either then or now, had any prospect of actually changing “the system,” just momentarily thumbing a nose at it (via various forms of stealing/grifting) or momentarily hobbling it (via homemade bombs or fake IDs.)

The primary effect of the book was that it made Hoffman even more famous than he already was and made him enough money that he ended up in legal arguments with his “co-contributors” over how to split the take, which is in itself as full a capitulation to the culture he purported to be countering as you can imagine: ending up in court not for stealing a book, but for short-changing your colleagues contractually, then appealing to “the system” to enforce your greed! Hoffman became to me the ultimate icon for what went wrong with my generation, using the sleaziest parts of the regime we claimed to be resisting to ensconce ourselves in privileged positions to slop away at its trough. Donald Trump is the ultimate example of just such a one, and my generation both created him and elevated him to power. That’s at least a thumbnail sketch of the “shame” part of the equation I set up.

That may seem like a long sidetrack to wander down on my way from that Youngbloods’ song to what I really want to write about here, the balancing act between love and fear that is always at play, both in our social interactions and inside our own heads. And it is. But like so much of what I write now, rants of this sort help me to situate myself contextually, not just in terms of where I came from generationally; or in terms of how hard it can be to survive as an ethical presence in a cultural context where even the most “radical” critics of the system are so quickly hooked by its cheapest lures, one kind of evidence, in this case, for how easily fear can win over love once you turn that key; but also in the midst of whatever happens to be

my current composition, highlighting the theme both emotionally and intellectually.

2.

One of the topics that comes up from time to time in the weekly Zooms I have with my siblings and a family friend every Tuesday pertains to our individual perceptions of shortcomings in our upbringing, often in relation to a paucity of love, at least of the unconditional sort if not the generic sort. I won't go into all the details of those discussions, which are personal—i.e., should by definition remain private and are simultaneously of little interest to anyone who wasn't in the context back then that founded them. But soon after one of those discussions, a couple of weeks ago, on a walk, it struck me that the true antithesis to love is not hate (which in many cases is actually a perverse form of love) but fear, which chokes off love before it even has a chance to catch a full breath out there in the wide world. I had written about this sort of fear many times before, but for some reason that day the binary relationship it shares with love struck me especially strongly.

I came home and as is my practice I wrote about it for a while, more a series of interrelated notes than a coherent text, one I may dip into from time to time as I work this through today, which I am doing because late last night, the middle of the night really, around 2:30 AM, I woke from one of those long, dark epic-style dreams I assume most people have from time to time, one that seems to go on forever and is quite frightful. One I have recurrently involves the Nazis invading Forest City, my tiny home town, coming up the hill from the Lackawanna River, hunting down everyone in sight. I and whomever I'm with, which varies from dream to dream, keep moving

from hiding place to hiding place, which as inhabitants we know and they don't. Sometimes we have guns to fight back with, sometimes not. These dreams will transit through several REM cycles, so last for hours. Even if I wake up between "chapters," the narrative remains unbroken unless I actually get up for a while, long enough to fully disrupt the plot.

In any case, I didn't take any notes on this one because I did not want to give it any purchase in my long-term memory, which means its details are consigned to oblivion. But its dark shadow remained, and I could not get back to sleep to start on the upward ramp to image-cleansing. So I decided to take a bath to warm up and relax, which I often do when that occurs. I usually listen to one of my own cover albums when I'm taking a bath, most often the one I'm working on right then. But last night I picked one I did over three years ago, right before I left Pittsburgh to come out west here, one with a dark and plaintive aspect to it, in keeping with my dream-induced mood at that moment, called "Long as I Can See the Light." The album ends with that haunting Creedence Clearwater song: "Put a candle in the window, 'cause I feel I've gotta move. Though I'm goin,' goin', I'll be comin' home soon. Long as I can see the light." Beautiful, heartfelt song. But it opens with the Youngbloods singing about love and fear, the key we hold in our trembling hand that unlocks them both at our command, one "the song we sing," the other "the way we die," as stark and fearsome a contrast as you can set up between two such ordinary human instincts.

So, "instincts": Fear, of course, but love? I've written before, and honestly believe, that we humans are actually born with an instinct for, an inbuilt desire to, love. To love others, I mean, unconditionally. And it's founded at the outset on an authentic in-born form of self-love, a

prerequisite for proffering unconditional love. I have no evidence for any of that. I have just never been persuaded—by the many philosophical arguments and ample available evidence in the annals of history and the daily news feed—that the paucity of love in human society is an indication that there is very little there to begin with. What happens, I think, is that what’s in there is simply being withheld from expression, stifled by any number of biographical or cultural imperatives, sometimes fully warped into its alter-ego, hate. There are many possible reasons for this, all of which share a kinship with fear.

In “Coming to Terms,” for example, I describe my sense that so many who could have reached out to me in my deepest grief were “cheap with their care,” which is, I realize now, a harsh and insensitive assessment. They behaved this way, I thought, because they operated on a sort of banking concept of care—one installed early in life when care may have felt scarce, and then amplified by a cultural habit of mind that turns everything, inside and out, into “capital”—afraid that even a small installment might diminish the value of the account. And that a gesture of this sort could open up the risk that the recipient (me in this case) might then feel entitled to a much larger installment, or a series of them. So it just feels more prudent all the way around to conserve by withholding. Love, of course, does not operate this way, is always amplified via expenditure. As fear is as well: The more you indulge it the greater it becomes. Again, I have no evidence for that outside of my own autobiography and the biographies of many great human spirits throughout history, from the Buddha to bell hooks, who all say pretty much the same thing, or in many cases just enact that dynamic as a given, with no need for saying.

3.

Here's one of the sentences I wrote after my walk the other day: "Withholding love is a failure of empathy founded in fear." I like what this adds as a complicating factor to the equation I've set up so far: the failure of empathy. One of the themes I have recurred to often in my work, and expressed again in our family conversation, was that the perceived absence of *anything* we consider essential in our childhood memories creates a feeling of loss that then induces a form of grief that, if repeated often enough, or in some cases even once with intensity, becomes trauma. And it will rear up over and over in disturbing ways, unbeckoned and seemingly irreconcilable, throughout life.

In the face of such traumas we have two primary options: We can re-pay the same pain down generationally by depriving others in our company of what we grieve having lost, or we can do the opposite, say "this stops here, now, with me. Those I encounter will not long for what I missed out on. Period." The former can take many forms, from outright physical abuse, which often metastasizes generationally; to a sort of "hazing" habit of mind which often operates professionally, expressed roughly this way: "I had to do it/put up with it when I was less empowered, so you should, too, now that I'm empowered;" to everyday bullying, an economy of violence that is always geared to fear, on both sides of the interaction, in that only fear (on the bully's side) can foster a desire to mirror fear on the other's side, to mask the fact that the bully is full of fear, an intolerable self-insight. In other words, fear operates exactly as love does. The more you dish out, the more you create in yourself. For some reason, many humans seem to be quite tolerant of that dysfunctional "banking" system, ignoring the fact that doing the same thing with love is a legitimate and

preferable alternative. As The Youngbloods say, “just one key unlocks them both,” and “it’s there at your command.” Take your pick.

Psychologists and educational theorists, who have been working mightily to reduce the level of bullying in schools, the extremity of which sometimes now leads to death by gun violence or suicide (which is to say it’s not just normal “kids’ stuff”), offer empathy training as one potential counterforce. I am not an expert on all the methods and discourses related to this work (I have learned what I do know mostly from my daughter, an extraordinary teacher, who wrote her Master’s thesis on this subject, one I helped her edit.) But I surely know from personal experience that empathic behavior locates one’s perceptual/ethical center extrinsically, in the position of the other—whether it’s your own inner child, as I argue in *This Fall*, or the entire universe, as I argue in “The Curious Cosmos,” thereby defusing selfishness and all the more deleterious behaviors it motivates, from withholding everyday sorts of routine care to outright violence. Genuine empathy makes that whole spectrum a “you can’t get there from here” palette of options.

I’ve also written before, in many places, about what I call “ecstatic” states of mind (as in, following this word’s roots, literally standing outside of), never to my recollection calling it empathy *per se*. In some cases I associate it with self-care, in the sense that giving to others what you feel you have most lacked actually fills the void in you while you’re filling it in others, a reflexive effect that by definition debunks the “banking concept” of care. In many cases I associate it with poetic experience, the extraordinary ability that humans have to use this specialized mode of language to get, and then stand, fully outside the range of language, and ourselves, in intimate confluence with anything from a falling leaf to another

human presence, even, in one instance I document, a manhole cover! And more recently, I associate it with the role we can each play to allow the cosmos itself to become conscious of its own nature, what may sound on the face of it like a capacity of mind one must take years to acquire, but is in reality one of the simplest things a human brain and its related perceptual apparatus can do. Even (I speculate) a frog sitting on a lily pad can do it, so it is neither difficult nor acquired, but simply naturally endowed perception, when it is animated by that in-built instinct for love I started with.

4.

*Destructive rage is founded in fear
Constructive rage is founded in love.*

Those are two more sentences I wrote down the other day after my walk. I think it's fairly easy (for me at least) to make the connection between fear and rage just by following the daily news feed on TV, which I never watch, so I have to depend here on bits I read about it online, hear on late night comedy shows, or endure from a too-loud TV in a doctor's office. It is most obvious and offensive to me (given my political inclinations) on the far-right side, Fox News, say (especially the evening rant shows), or OAN, where the whole enterprise seems expressly designed to instill fear and then fan it into rage. You can just as easily do it from the left side, of course.

Politicians have known of this simple mechanism to assert control for generations. In my lifetime, Nixon seemed the master, until Dick Cheney came along, the real president during the inglorious and catastrophic Bush years. His mouth-twisted snarls persistently amplified the fear-mongering, infecting even as sane a mind as Colin Powell,

that led first to the disastrous, unwarranted, and unnecessary war in Iraq, then to the collapse of the American economy. And created the blueprint that Donald Trump borrowed and perfected. The fact that Cheney's daughter has been cast out by the leader his recipe created is an irony of monumental proportions.

My evidence for how a fear-inspired rage can create docility in a culture is nut-shelled in my memory of one interview I heard on some news program post-2008. The reporter was interviewing an older couple somewhere in the Midwest. The husband had lost his job as a result of the financial meltdown, the family was going to lose their house and had no resources to fall back on, and one of the sons had been killed in Iraq, a war they admitted was sketchy at best. Yet they were adamant in their support of the Bush administration, had voted for him twice, and the overall Neo-con agenda that had hijacked the Republican party by then, a precursor to the even more insidious cult of Trumpism that, I'm sure, this couple would fully endorse if they could be tracked down and interviewed again. My point is a simple one (and you can see examples like this repeated on a large scale almost anywhere you look): If you are animated by a fear that fills you with rage, you will follow the leaders who created and sustain that state of mind (Cheney was masterful, clearly cognizant of that causal chain, and took advantage of it with intention) no matter how destructive its effects are for your own personal circumstances.

At another extremity is the sort of fear-inspired rage that the ongoing COVID pandemic has unleashed, all those fights on airplanes and in stores over something as innocuous as mask wearing, all the screaming and yelling at school board meetings, which started over mask mandates but has now bloomed to include a whole range of hot-button topics related to curricula—critical race

theory, transgender information, sexually explicit content in longstandingly admired and taught books, sex education of any but the most routine sort, etc., etc.—all of which reside in the umbra of patriarchal White privilege. These complaints and critiques have of course been seething more quietly forever in relation to public education. But something has clearly emboldened the loudest, shrillest, and often dumbest voices to show up raging in front of school boards.

There are, I'm sure, many cultural forces that induce the fear that foments all this rage. But one contributing factor that is largely being ignored is the fear induced among socially normative people by the loss of one of their till-now taken-for-granted privileges: social normativity. I have listened to and read about the sense of loss felt by those who feel deprived of their customary social activities, a loss that reaches deeply enough to promote not just anxiety (which is fear, of course) but grief, genuine grief (which is as I and many others have pointed out rage's partner in the human universe), even literal pain.

At the same time, non-socially-normative people, like me and many of my friends, have felt just the opposite. My life has actually improved under the lock-down conditions, in that what I'm good at—solitariness, introspection, reading and thinking—can go on normally for me, as they always have. But without the guilt and to some degree shame that social normativity tends to induce in those of us who are reclusive or “on the spectrum.” In other words, I now feel much calmer and happier, as if the social universe is set up to privilege me and my kind instead of vice-versa. And I realize that this must be what socially normative people felt like before the pandemic. Which means that social culture operates just like any other aspects of culture: certain groups and types will be privileged (most often without even knowing

it let alone acknowledging it) and will, quite often, abuse the power associated with that privilege to systematically “other” those who are different.

I’ve taken to joking lately that if the pandemic conditions went on for multiple generations, evolution might favor the reclusive to such an extent that we would become the dominant social cohort and what is now social normativity would be perceived and treated as aberrant. I’ve spent my whole life feeling to one degree or another alien in the context of normative social standards. Over and over my perception is that most people just don’t “get” me, seem always to misread me, misunderstand me, even at times chide me just for being my seemingly inscrutable self. I wrote specifically about this experience, in *This Fall*, as my ticket to “getting” Emily Dickinson.

The current conditions actually make me feel empowered and normal, reducing my own loss/grief-induced anxiety considerably. And many of those who have spent their entire lives enjoying their normative social privilege now feel deprived, so they lash out. That privilege is already being restored in bits and pieces, and will be fully I assume within another year or so. They will likely forget what it felt like to be marginalized in that way and go back to (mis)treating people like me as mysterious and/or aberrant. But I will never forget what it felt like to be socially normal. As a consequence, I will never again feel the sort of anxiety, guilt and shame, or even the disconnectedness, that I have always felt as an “outsider” or “lone wolf” or just plain “other” in my various social universes.

I have taken every opportunity over the last almost-two-years now to try to persuade the socially normal people I know to reflect on their current loss/grief/fear/rage so that when the pandemic ends they will then be cognizant of

social normativity as a privilege and be more grateful for all the advantages they are accorded culturally simply for their temperaments. Likewise, I encourage them to be more sensitive to, more tolerant toward, or even just aware of, those of us they have routinely “othered,” if only by trying to learn what it might take to “get” us. I and others like me had to spend years learning, and then years more perfecting, a set of tools and skills to “pass” in the socially normative universe. Because of that, I understand that universe and its inhabitants quite deeply and in detail. As I said in one of my books: I know it well enough to teach it! It would be great if “they” would do the same for “us.”

The unbridled rage that has issued forth from those who have temporarily lost this minor privilege suggests to me that none of those modes of awareness will arise in the aftermath of the pandemic. They will just go back to “business as usual,” calm down on planes and in stores (probably not with school boards), their entitlements having been fully restored. But at least I will not go back to feeling that the alienation and misunderstanding in my social relations among those who are “normal” is my fault. Via the gift of my temperament, I know myself inside-out. Via my otherness, I have had to learn, and now know the dominant temperament outside-in. Those who have it unreflectively know next to nothing about me. And maybe even themselves, never having had to “learn” their social skills. Who is the winner and who is the loser in that equation?

5.

Again, that’s an overly long rant (my bugaboo) to get to the real point I want to make, as per my second sentence above, that purposeful state of mind I call “constructive

rage,” a concept that may seem self-contradictory on its face. I’ll use myself as the primary example to illustrate what I mean by this, with passages I take from previous books. In seeking out these passages, I had to search a number of my books. I was stunned by how often, and with what energy, I write about rage as a creative force. Here are two examples taken from *This Fall*, the first more general, the second pertaining specifically to teaching:

As I walked on I felt a fierce, fiery, determined force steeping in me, in my heart, deepening my drive to go forward, which I did, strong step after strong step. I thought for the first time in while about my [grief-induced] rage, how refined it had now become, not that wicked firestorm driven wildly every which way by spiraling winds of fight or flight. No, this one is more like the cool-blue to yellow-hot flame at the tip of a plumber’s torch. Not so bright you can’t look at it, as a welder’s torch is, but soothing, perfectly still, its edges blending imperceptibly into the surrounding air, which it heats, just enough, to do the work you need it to do, melting solder into the joints, sealing water where it should be, inside the pipe, instead of all over the floor, the walls. I said last spring that I didn’t think my rage would ever go away, transitioning over into one of the subsequent (much more boring I would say now) stages Elizabeth Kübler-Ross names. Now I know I was right. The tank that fuels this flame of mine is full. I love being able to point its cool-hot blue tip wherever I want. This rage is good. It seals the leaks. It keeps the water where it belongs, flowing toward a purpose or just waiting to be drunk. I can use it and I will. (76)

. . .

And, I want to argue, even those who never felt, or can't remember, anything of that sort [unconditional love as a child], well, we have rage, the potentially generative rage that can turn us away from trying to repeat that cycle and toward trying to break it. For example, nothing, and I mean nothing, is more powerful in my motivation to be a good teacher than all my memories of the bad teaching I endured along the way. I took umbrage at it back then, every time, burning with a belief that even I, who had no tools, no natural "gifts," none, for public performance, could and would do better than that someday. I was lucky, on the other hand, to be loved. But even if I hadn't been, I hope I would use my rage in that area exactly the same way I do in the classroom: OK, Paul, pony up, do better, right now. Or shut the hell up. (183-4)

And here is more extended passage from *Living Hidden*, where I broaden the scope well beyond my personal experience:

. . . I've spent a lot of time thinking about my rage, which I've come more lately to realize has been with me not just since Carol passed, not just since 1968, but forever. And, I've further thought, it is with everyone forever, from that first moment when we are thrust forth, against our will, from the dark, warm saline sea of the womb in which we have been floating until then, all the time we have known, before we even know what time is, negative time, it not yet having wound down to the zero that inaugurates our first year here. Then, of a sudden, all that blinding light, these days sterile hospital light, the need to suck in air and keep doing it over and over just to stay alive, the craving for

sustenance that has to be sought out and worked for. Such a loss is instantly and inevitably grief-inducing, and it inspires a rage that is essential for staying alive, thus all that noisy crying.

This rage, I want to insist, is both healthy and necessary. Our survival depends on it. The problem with it is it can get amplified in quite dysfunctional ways by the hurts, pains, and, worst of all, abuses that we encounter as children, when we are most defenseless. Even before we have words, those memories get stored in our bodies, our psyches, and sooner or later we have to deal with their consequences. Later, extreme or repeated traumas can do the same thing. I was talking about all of this in a Zoom conversation with a friend a couple of days ago, explaining how rage is and always has been my constant partner in life, which I think surprised her because I seem so mild-mannered, even-keeled and positive most of the time. But positive rage, to me, is not driven by anger, its short-lived aberration, which comes over us, the “red mist,” the “must,” careering us out of control for its duration. It is a fire that burns. It’s just a matter of how much. (179-80)

I then connect it directly to love this way:

Rage is not only essential to life but also, I’d say, to love, genuine love, the kind focused truly on the other, the kind of love that Jesus, for example demonstrates over and over for the lost and forgotten souls he encounters, while he rages justifiably against the self-righteous, self-serving elites, the hypocrites, who persecute them. His parables are full of examples of his critique of dysfunctional rage, as in the case of the debtor who,

*after his own loan was generously forgiven
remembers the pain he felt in carrying that weight,
the shame he felt in seeking to eliminate it, and
ends up abusing all of those who owed lesser debts
to him. Instead of forgiving them, too. Yes, his
choice is our choice, a simple one. Take your pick.*
(180-1)

Which is essentially what I said earlier in this piece, of course, having arrived at it here via a different route, which to me is often a very good indication that something is true: No matter what route you take, if taken in good faith, you will end up there sooner or later.

6.

Each human voice is entirely unique, so much so that it can be used as a highly secure password. In my previous professional field, composition studies (which is basically these days teaching writing at the college level), the concept of “voice” has been a longstanding and often enigmatic trope. It is especially interesting to think about in relation to written discourse, which is of course silent. It is, I believe, possible to use writing to capture and encode one’s uniquely personal “voice,” and I strive to do that, not just in writing of this sort but in the writing I do via less formal digital platforms. I think most readers who actually know me (either personally or by previous exposure to my work) would “recognize” my voice in my written texts even if my name was not attached. But that takes a lot of work over a period of many years writing and revising. The distinctive qualities of an actual human voice take no time or work at all to “master,” either for the speaker or the listener, which I why my communication preferences are for platforms that include actual voice, like Zoom or the phone.

The human voice encodes and carries an enormous amount of information about the immediate state of the person using it. When I'm listening to voice, both consciously and unconsciously, I try to think that I'm receiving its information via numerous antennae located all over my body, the places where its dynamic range is being registered physically and automatically, though actually being able to "read" the various "graphs" of that voice takes sustained attention. When I'm in that state of mind, I sometimes feel as if I'm awash with sensation in the simple act of listening. This is especially so for me, oddly perhaps, via the phone, that laggard and waning platform among contemporary media, which these days transmits voice with great clarity. I like and use all kinds of communication strategies. In-person dialogue is, of course, the gold standard for full-range reception, in that information is being carried and shared via whole bodies, a veritable overwhelm of sensations. Zoom is analogous, but akin to a "two-dimension" version of embodied interaction. I like both of these encounter strategies quite a lot. But I want to make a specific case for what is becoming the lost stepchild for voice interaction these days: the phone.

I communicate remotely with my daughter and son almost exclusively by phone now. Maybe an occasional text to exchange factual "news" (my plane arrived, e.g.) or email to provide practical material (here's the link to a website, e.g.); but day to day personal contact is always by phone. Because of that, on top of having spent 18 years within daily earshot of their actual voices while they were growing up, I know those voices quite intimately. I can usually tell within seconds what the "state of the person" is on the other end of the line: happy, confident, energetic, healthy; tired, worried, sad, sick—those general states

communicate quickly. The one I'll focus on here, in keeping with the theme of this piece, is fear.

Anxiety of any sort carries easily via voice and is especially noticeable when voice is all you have, as in a phone conversation. What it attaches to or derives from, though, has to be revealed via conversation. My kids are quite forthright with me about what's up in their lives and what might be bothering them, so that part requires only a few questions from me. It doesn't matter whether the worrisome issue of the moment is emotional, physical, intellectual, financial, *ad infinitum* along the trajectory of possible human problems. The first thing I always want to say to them is "don't be afraid." That may seem on the face of it one of those "very easy to say, very hard to do" bromides we recur to when we can't think of anything better. But I want to insist that it is not. The first step in solving any problem is, I believe, "don't be afraid." The key, though, to the efficacy of that statement is to be able to use one's own voice, mine in this case, to communicate that state of mind efficiently and effectively, to actually instill it in the other, I mean. To do that, the first thing I need to do is not be afraid myself, and fear is quite naturally an instinctive reaction when someone you love is troubled or in trouble. So before I ever say "don't be afraid," to them or to anyone, whether I've known them my/their whole life or just met them, I have to be sure that I am cognizant of, and have at least tamped down if not come fully to terms with, my own fully natural fear in that moment. To say "don't be afraid" in a fear-ridden voice is futile if not counter-productive.

I have written repeatedly about my belief that genuine love for others is rooted necessarily in authentic self-love. To say "I love you" from a position where self-love is absent is therefore, I believe, also futile if not counter-productive. At worst it becomes a mask or a trope to hide

various kinds of abuse. So my advice has always been: to promote self-love, if you don't have it, find ways to foster it. One small step toward that end is to tell yourself over and over "I love you, [your name]" until it begins to sink in. I say that all the time. Here, today, I'm adding the second half of my equation for right living/loving/giving: "Don't be afraid, [your name]." If you are, tell yourself that over and over until you feel the settlement sinking in. Then and only then tell it to others, sharing your calm and courage as widely as possible.

There are, I know in every fiber of my being, having lived a full human life, many fearsome things in this world, things truly worthy of our fear. The value of teaching yourself not to be afraid of the more routine matters is that you will be able to identify these fearsome things more quickly and fear them appropriately. Fear is after all a natural and essential human instinct. The problem with contemporary culture—which most of us encounter not thoughtfully but via a daily news feed, including the weather report, that overloads stories with largely irrelevant fear-based discourses (political, religious, economic, environmental, you name it) to hold our attention—is that we burn out our fear circuits on ridiculous, fleeting, often pointless things—like mask-wearing, for example—leaving none left in there to deal with the really fearsome things, like dying, or more likely causing someone else to die, from a preventable infection.

And we are, even more sadly to me, of no use whatsoever to others who are feeling fear in the moment. So say "don't be afraid" to yourself as often and as sincerely as you can. When you know you aren't any longer afraid, say it to others who are. It is a loving gesture toward all parties. As the Youngbloods say, "you hold the key to love and fear/ all in your trembling hand." If you prefer the latter, the former will always be throttled off at the

source, your various “I love you” protestations just vacuous wind.

7.

*Come on, people now,
Smile on your brother;
Everybody get together,
Try to love one another right now.*

That is the oft-repeated refrain in the Youngbloods’ song, which makes it clear that they’re not talking about romantic or sexual or even filial love. It is communal love, encompassing “everybody” in a “brotherly” way [the sexism of which you’ll just have to forgive as an index to the song’s historical moment], under the umbrella of its “smile.” And it is best expressed “right now,” always right now, with all the “one another[s]” who happen to be there with you, sharing the moment.

And for godssake those of you who are lamenting, grieving, ranting or otherwise running amok about the temporary suspension of one of your way-down-the-list privileges (by comparison, e.g., to white, or male, or upper-middle class, which you remain fully eligible to indulge to your heart’s content), get a grip. Don’t be afraid to make a tiny sacrifice on behalf of the collective. And learn something! So that when you cross paths with me and my kind in the aftermath, you will recall your own momentary otherness and listen to our voices, carefully enough to hear that there is no reason for you to fear us. Once we get there, maybe we’ll have an outside chance at talking for real about love, the “song” we should all be learning how to sing, the best and maybe last antidote we have for “the way we die.”

The Hard Part of Playing Hard to Get

“I refuse to join any club that would have me as a member.”

Groucho Marx

1.

so you say

*you always
get what
you want
oh yay
and then
it's not what
you want
no yay
what?*

*well
go back
to go
and
don't want
what you
wantwant
want
what you don't*

I wrote this poem a year or so ago. I can't remember anything about what or who inspired it. I read it in my “fireside mini-readings” series on YouTube and it made me laugh. Maybe it's not a Groucho Marx quality joke,

but it gets at the same set of contradictions that seem to motivate so much social behavior in our culture, the want-want-wanting what you can't have and then the not-not-not wanting what you can, quite often in relation to the same "club," just at different points in the time-sequence. I'm pretty sure this has something complicated to do with self-esteem, both the under- and over-inflation of ego, insecurity and arrogance, but it might take me a while to figure that out, if I even can. So I'm just going to start, as usual, with what is most immediately on my mind today and see where it takes me.

2.

I woke up a little while ago with an image in my head of a theater audience, viewed from the front right corner, long rows of plush lounge seats receding upward, a balcony of them above, all full to the brim, maybe 500 people, all laughing hysterically. The caption for the image, which is how it appeared to me, was: "The Laughing Ape." At first I took this to mean that what might distinguish humans from their evolutionary-tree near-neighbors was laughter, something about the how and why of it maybe? So, as is my custom, I did a very minimal amount of cursory research, certainly not enough to claim even a smidgeon of expertise. But I found out what I wanted to find out, and, as is often the case, the way I dream/think/write lately, it sent me off on a circuitous path toward this thing that has been on my conscious mind lately.

But first: I discovered that all apes laugh. The physical expression of those laughs for most species is more like heavy, huffy breathing, given the different construction of the vocal organs/throat muscles (compared to us), lips open and upturned, teeth visible (like us.) Their laughter tends to arise, as it does for us, through social play or

physical stimulation (tickling, e.g.) It's possible that some apes know how to tell or respond to "jokes," but I found no research about that. Which means that laughter provoked by verbal stimulation may be a distinctly human behavior. That's potentially intriguing, but I am not an anthropologist, and I'm guessing in any case that there is only a very slight possibility for finding the ape equivalent of Groucho Marx. So I lost interest in that track.

I got quickly waylaid instead by what seem to be fundamentally different methods for resolving social tensions in two species closely related to us: chimps and bonobos. Both laugh as one means of reinforcing social connections. But for the bonobos, it is often a prelude to sexual intercourse, which is itself sometimes the preferred method for settling disputes even without laughter. Sex is in fact a routine part of their daily behavior pattern, fully separated in this mode from reproduction. Chimps on the other hand tend to privilege reproduction as the purpose for sex and often settle their social disputes with violence, both individually and collectively. As one researcher put it, bonobos prefer to "make love not war." That was one of the mantras of the 60s, my coming-of-age moment. And it was not uncommon among my generational peers to presume, as this researcher so blithely does, that sex and love are interchangeable, which they are not, of course. There was plenty of sex in that era. And plenty of war. So I don't want to make some superficial and stupid argument that more sex, for us, would lead to less war. Sex is often for humans itself a form of violence. Widespread and unbridled rape, for example, often accompanies war, thus the expression "rape and pillage," as if these two are distinct but intimate partners in the mode of aggression preferred by humans (almost exclusively male) to settle large-scale disputes, seeking to inflict as much trauma as possible in the process. So, clearly, that is a logical dead end.

What I did find out, though, which I didn't previously know, is that bonobo societies are matriarchal and chimp societies are patriarchal, both to the extreme. So it might be more accurate to say that female bonobos, who manage the social dynamic, prefer to use sex to make love not war, and they use it broadly, almost indiscriminately, as circumstances require. Male chimps on the other hand, who dominate their social units, prefer to use violence to make war not love, and they are quite possessive of the females under their dominion. They also sometimes go to actual war with neighboring groups of chimps. These battles can be savage, lots of pillaging. Whether they also rape while they pillage, like human males, I don't know. I'm sure I could find out if any research had been done on that, too; but, again, this was not my concern here.

I am already fully on board with the belief that patriarchal systems are profoundly destructive and dysfunctional. Read today's news or the whole of Western history. QED. Many Indigenous cultures, I know from some recent reading pertaining to climate change, are matriarchally structured, or are at least less vehemently patriarchal, and almost across the board they rarely pillage the earth, though external threats from hostile groups sometimes provoke violence. That's a significant upgrade I'd be more than willing to support by turning in the currency of my male privilege. But unless most men were also willing to do that, nothing much would change. It would be like my believing that by recycling my waste, when no one else was, I could reverse climate change. I do recycle my waste and have to the extent possible turned in the currency of my male privilege. But the climate is still out-of-control changing and the cultural matrix remains vehemently patriarchal. Just watch Fox News for an hour or so in the evening, or read the Republican platform (where "legitimate political

discourse” includes killing, maiming, hanging and defecating in public places), or go to a local school board meeting in any conservative community in the country to see the manic, reactionary “wars” being mounted (good word there)—against teachers, books, knowledge in general—to retain the privileges that attach to patriarchy (particularly White heteronormative patriarchy.) The fact that many of these arguments are being made by women tells you it’s not enough to change the gender of the voice. If that voice is compelled to operate, form identity, and achieve prominence in a patriarchal culture, chances are it will either vigorously support the systemic structures of male privilege or be compelled to resist them from the far fringes, still entirely within the political and rhetorical paradigms that the system has created to perpetuate itself.

To that point: One of the obvious indices of the radical cultural transformation that has occurred over the last 60 years is the dramatic rise of women socially, culturally, professionally, all of it. But systemic change remains elusive. Our body-politic can’t even pass the Equal Rights Amendment initially put forward in the early 1970s! I’ll take poetry as one example because I know a lot about it. When I started college in the mid-60s you could count the number of prominent female poets you’d likely encounter in your course work on one or both of your hands, depending on how far back you wanted to go. And the number of prominent, i.e. famous, female poets in the contemporary marketplace was equally miniscule. Within just a few years, by the time I graduated, the balance had begun to shift on an exponential curve, such that, by the 1990s, at least by my remembered experience (anecdotal of course, not “scientifically researched”) women were not just prominent in large numbers, many were at the top of the hierarchy, as famous and influential as the top-tier men, I mean. But did the overall culture—in this case vis-à-vis either the small/university-press marketplace or the

academy, the primary sites for the propagation of poetry these days—change dramatically, that is, become gynocentric, in the ways, for example, that power was understood and exercised, more bonobo than chimp? I would say not. The long-established matrix for marketing and curating poetry and for credentialing poets remained largely patriarchal. It was the given system within which women needed to operate to become famous and influential, which often meant adopting or adapting to patriarchal values, at least as those manifest in the available “means of production,” specifically our “fame”-oriented culture, our book-fetishistic marketplace, and the hidebound hierarchies for determining status/parceling out power within the academy.

The exponential increase in the number of MFA programs—from just a few when the ERA was initially forwarded in 1971, the year I started grad school, to pretty much everywhere by the time I retired 47 years later—certainly created ample opportunities for women not only to enter but to control the general apparatus of such programs. But, again, changes at the level of demographics did not lead to transformative changes at the systemic level. The Iowa workshop model, with its peculiarly patriarchal way of marshalling authority, remains pretty much the standard. The status markers that establish the pecking order in such programs are the same as in other fields dominated by men, as are the status markers that establish the pecking order in the wider professional culture of poets. The only cohorts of consequence that seemed to me to elude that contradiction were in the Black female community and in the LGBTQ community. I could detail some examples and speculate about some of the reasons for that, but I’m sure you could figure them out for yourself pretty quickly, if you care about poetry and race/gender/sexual identity in this country. Again, though, this is not primarily what I

want to get to here, merely a contextual prologue for something much smaller and more focused.

3.

What I've been thinking about (consciously) for the last week or so, after watching a couple of "relationship" movies a friend recommended, is the role of conflict in romantic/sexual relationships in our culture. Both of these movies followed a familiar pattern: (1) a romance (in one case evolving, in the other established) that was rife with bickering/arguing/fighting (in one case fostered by a profound cultural difference, in the other by a mix of temperamental differences); is (2) impacted by an extreme crisis (in one case integral to the relationship, and inevitable, in the other externally imposed, by happenstance) that somehow made all of that conflict seem secondary, even irrelevant; resulting in (3) an apparently equitable resolution.

This is, of course, a common plot in the vehicles the American entertainment industry tends to proffer. We see countless examples of conflict, sometimes overtly physical, as a prelude to either lovemaking or happy-ever-afterness. But why, I wonder? Why not tell stories about relationships that are settled, peaceful, mutually supportive, ones in which crises are handled cooperatively and with aplomb, ones for which a dramatic resolution is not required? I suppose one possible answer is that such stories are boring to us, culturally at least if not genetically. Just read Aristotle's *Poetics* and you see the type of plot-dynamics that even then, 2500 years ago, had already become endemic to Western literature: agonistic, violent, conflictual, sexually aberrant or dysfunctional, etc. I have no idea how or why this might be related to my "laughing ape" dream I started with, and the contrast I just set up is

not exactly congruous with the chimp vs. bonobo paradigm I describe, but it led me to the basic question I now have in mind (and ensconced in my title): Why do men and women in relationships so often “play hard to get?”

Playing hard to get seems to come highly recommended as a strategy to enhance one’s chances of romantic success in the many movies and books organized around narratives of this sort. One set of terms applies primarily to females. The traditional assumption has been that if a potential female partner is “easy to get” sexually, she won’t be perceived (by many men and even many women) as having enduring value, though the short-term value might be significant, of course. She’s the club who seems to be too eager to have you as a member. Bonobos would not do well in this economy of sexuality. The fact that we use the term “easy” as a slur against women who are sexually available without much resistance is index to this valence of the term. The further fact that the same slur is rarely applied to men gets at one aspect of the dysfunctional power-dynamic that is organized by patriarchal systems: The male position is privileged in terms of non-stigmatized access to sex. Which most often means in practice that men can (and are often encouraged to) “sleep around,” a way to gain credence for sexual prowess, and women are encouraged (in some cultures required) to remain chaste. Add a willingness to fight off any competing males and you have a version of the alpha-male chimp. Which is patriarchy in a nutshell. I understand, of course, that this dynamic is much more nuanced now than it was when I was growing up in the 1950s and 60s. But I’d still argue that at the systems level, despite the nuances, patriarchy has merely morphed, not changed in any structural way.

So the currency that organizes the feminine version of “hard to get” is quite often sex itself, the act, I mean. And withholding it as long as possible, or at least using it strategically, is key. In this scenario, the man becomes the ardent pursuer, willing to overcome whatever barriers impede his access, i.e., “to fight for me,” often literally, a common relationship trope, at least for my generation. This gives women who are “hard to get” considerable leverage in intimate relationships. See Aristophanes’ *Lysistrata*, for example, where Greek women band together to end the Peloponnesian Wars by denying their men access to sex; a strategy that works pretty well for Lysistrata and her friends. And does most often still, except, of course, with men who decide to override the culturally-agreed-upon boundaries with violent or predatory behavior to take what they want when they want it, the rape part again.

This is not to say that men won’t or don’t play “hard to get,” too. A friend of mine was telling me about some marketing research she had seen that sought to reduce gender stereotypes to their most basic, iconic tropes in order to promote sales. One of the tropes for what women seemed to want in men, this research indicated, had something to do with motorcycles. I know, I know, this seems ludicrously simplistic. But the cultural cliché it embodies is not, if you think about it. A man on his motorcycle is almost by definition one who is hard to get, at least if you want an equal and balanced partnership. He already has his “main squeeze” between his legs, the motorcycle, his primary “mount,” and his female companion will just be along for the ride, on the back seat, holding on from behind.

I recall a little encounter pertinent to this that I witnessed waiting in line at a bank back in Pittsburgh to cash a check (must have been pretty long ago, when people still went

into banks and still used checks!) A burly, faded-blue-jeaned, sleeveless-vested, bristly-bearded, droopy-bellied man about 40 was in front of me. He had ridden in on a big, shiny Harley that was parked prominently, I mean show-offy prominently, in front. The young female teller smiled and said “nice bike.” His reply was not, “Hey, like to take a ride with me?” It was, “Yeah, I just saw a guy staring at it like he was going to ‘cream his jeans.’” Nuf said there about the hard-to-getness, and the simultaneous hardness-to-get, of the motorcycle as a masculine cultural trope! There is a similar trope for the way incarcerated males appeal to women. Can’t get much harder to get than that, though I doubt using images of men behind bars would be a very effective marketing campaign. In other words, men who are “hard to get” are often as appealing to women as “hard to get” women are to men, each regulated by a different set of cultural tropes.

4.

That takes care of at least part of the “hard” part of the cliché. But what about the “playing” part, which suggests that while some of this may (though I doubt it) be hard-wired in biologically, social convention is primarily what promotes the charade, whether the “playing” implies a game or a masquerade. I watch a lot of nature documentaries and the mating habits of all kinds of creatures—from insects to mammals—include a pre-coital ritual that often affords control over the selection process to the female. I have seen examples of violent overrides by rogue males, what would be the rough equivalent of rape, but they are largely ineffectual. Young male sharks, for example, sometimes use sneak attacks on females to try to get their genes aboard, but they are way too small to do that overpoweringly, and they run off as quickly as

possible afterwards. Same with various kinds of ungulates and primates.

But I have never seen an example of one or the other party establishing their hard-to-get ritual as a permanent condition in their relationship(s). The “courtship” either works, and mating ensues, or it doesn’t and both parties simply head off in search of another more agreeable potential partner. All of which seems reasonable and healthy to me, this brief, hard-wired “play” sequence that precedes mating, in some cases a once-in-a-lifetime event, in some an annually repeated event with new partners, in some an annual re-bonding ritual with a lifelong partner, etc., etc., both parties ultimately satisfied with their choice and, seemingly, with one another.

Many human relationships follow a similar dynamic, though which side “plays” the hard-to-get part varies from case to case (further suggesting to me that the “game” is less hard-wired and more cultural/temperamental than in other species), until some settlement is reached: togetherness or moving on. What intrigues me are those cases in which the “playing” is not prelude, but the game itself. This seems to me to be gender-neutral: Both men and women will withhold their full approval of a partner forever (for control’s sake); or pursue an endless series of partners, moving on as soon as approval has been granted (for conquest’s sake.) Most simply, if I can’t have you, I want you; as soon as I can, I don’t.

But why would human beings behave in such counterproductive ways when it comes to one of the more important elements in ensuring their happiness; i.e., invest so much of their time and energy in a potential partner who is hard to get, and when success is at hand, drop it like a hot potato? That’s where the Groucho Marx joke comes in. Like every great joke, what it “means” is

immediately self-evident. How to explain it is another matter altogether. I can attest to that because I've been trying to do that for the last half hour or so without much satisfaction. It all seems to have something to do with an exaggerated perception of one's own self-worth, plus or minus, but it's not a simple matter (to me at least) to separate the insecurity part (I'm not good enough) from the arrogance part (I'm too good.)

5.

I have been working on this essay for about a week, without much satisfaction, and was thinking yesterday about just canning it. It's so maddeningly desultory and banal, even by my loose standards. So I decided I'd just finish it off quickly, set it aside for a while, and see later whether there was anything worth saving. When I left off last night, I typed this list of what I wanted to cover quickly today to conclude the work: "need for external validation," "withholding," and "control," which are pretty routine features of and reasons for Marx's club-joining paradox.

Even if I worked all of that out, though, it just felt too obvious and boring to be worth reading. As in this hypothetical version, say, which I just made up:

Humans, like all apes, are social creatures who pursue, sometimes insatiably so, relationships that provide various kinds of external validation. If you have a deep need for such validation, you may have a tendency to gravitate toward those who withhold it as a means of control. You get hooked in and keep trying, trying, trying, to join that club, to no avail. Then, if/when it works out, you withdraw your application. By the same token, if you happen upon

a healthier potential partner who offers validation freely and upfront, you just don't trust them, or assume they must not have very high standards, so you refuse to join the club. If you want to break the cycle, see my poem for instructions.

I could turn that paragraph into an essay or even a book and it wouldn't say much more about this dynamic than Marx's joke and my poem do. Both sides lose: The pursuer never gets what they want, to be perceived as "good enough." The pursued never gets what they want, to be with someone "good enough." Stopping is not easy, on either side, as is always the case with dysfunctional behavior that has become addictive. That's the hard part of playing hard to get. Who doesn't already know all of that? Which is why I wanted to ditch this piece.

But right before I went to bed a very dark shadow passed hauntingly through me. I knew then that there was something much deeper and more personal at stake in this for me, something this whole essay has been deflecting and avoiding with its weird, often pointless twists and turns and its mundane insights. Something true I couldn't see or was unwilling to admit. Something of consequence that actually, in that moment, scared me.

So I asked my brain to dream me up a way forward toward whatever that might be. So I'd know. And it did, with a series of dream-scenes that were deeply, deeply depressing. I woke up at four quite shaken and wrote about what I remembered. The dream took place in a very large house, transpiring scene by scene in various rooms, in each of which, sometimes among others, were my wife Carol [who passed away 7 years ago, if you are reading this essay out of sequence] and myself. She appeared more like a holographic version of herself, unpredictably more or less spectral. In every room, I

somehow felt/knew that it was up to me to provide all the energy necessary to keep her from evaporating away, and scene by scene I was unable to muster any energy at all, none, total inertia, absolute zero, which I was aware of and experienced as a devastating personal failure, leaving me both paralyzed and disconsolate. The only parts of the dream I'll narrate here are the final two scenes and my response to them. Here's that part of what I wrote this morning:

In the next to last scene, I was seated at a small glass table, like the one I use when I Zoom, head hung down. All of a sudden the table simply collapsed to the floor. Just then Carol walked in. She sees the fallen table and knows, as I know she has all along, that there is a dark void in me that I've been trying not very successfully to hide. I know in every fiber of my being I have failed her not just in that moment, but forever. I'm simply not alive enough to keep her from leaving. She then became semi-transparent, left the scene the way she entered, and never returned.

Jump-cut to the final scene, in a large living room, long couch facing a wall adorned with an arrangement of pictures and artwork that are living-room typical. At one end of the couch is Carol's brother, at the other her younger sister, reminiscing about Carol. He asks her casually if she is now "on the verge of understanding and writing about the why of it all." I wander in and sit down between them saying, equally casually, that when she finishes with that, be sure to send it to me. I'd like to know. Her brother says that we should take down the pictures on the opposite wall and replace them with big wooden letters that spell out "AGAPE," as in the Greek term for the highest love. There is some

inane discussion about how to do that without damaging the wallpaper. Then I woke up, utterly bereft.

I've had any number of dreams in which Carol is still here, back from the dead, sometimes vividly here, sometimes vulnerably, but always self-sustainingly. I am usually both delighted and anxious, enjoying the time I get with her as best I can. When I wake up she disappears, and I feel what I feel right now, just blank, empty. I've used the word "despair" to name it before, but it's not quite that. It is more a nothing, a void, like no feeling at all. The dream I just woke from is the first one in which I felt exactly like that all through the dream, too, knowing she was going to leave, that it was because of my inability to animate her adequately, and that it would happen not when but before I woke up.

As I sit here right now typing, I'm afraid I may feel this way forever, just an empty shell sitting alone on that couch in that typical living room staring at a bunch of wooden letters someone bought at Michael's to spell out AGAPE, and the word will look as silly and empty as this description of it sounds. All these books I've written in the meantime about love in its various forms similarly silly and empty, futile gestures to hide from myself the reality that I can't and never could keep Carol from leaving.

Today I chose the word "bereft" to describe that state of being, "utterly bereft," I said. It's actually the first word I turned to in the first note I wrote to describe to a friend how I felt the day after Carol died. I don't think I had ever used that word before in my life, let alone felt what it

named. It is such an odd, archaic-sounding word. Even I was surprised when it came up. But it seemed fit. I have of course felt it many times since. But never so deeply and persistently as I did in those rooms in that dream or right now as I sit here typing. I am stunned that after all the extremities of my feelings over the last 7 years (the anniversary of Carol's death was 2 days ago, always a stressful day), there are emotional depths I have not yet plumbed. I just Googled the word "bereft" to find its etymological roots. Most immediately, it is, of course, the past participle of "bereave," that sense of overwhelming loss one feels in deep grief. More remotely, though, there is this: "from Old English *beræfian* 'to deprive of, take away by violence, seize, rob,' from *be-* + *ræfian*, 'rob, plunder' . . ." Kind of like being pillaged and raped from the inside out. By yourself. That's what I felt when I woke up. And still do. I suspect it will change me in ways I cannot even begin to imagine right now.

Oddly, I feel quite placid as I write this. It is almost a relief. In the very first piece I wrote after Carol died, an essay called "Coming to Terms," I use as my epigraph this quote from John Berryman's *Dream Songs* (#40):

I'm scared a lonely.
I'm scared a only one thing, which is me . . .

I have not been "scared a lonely" for a long time. I'm just built temperamentally to tolerate, even enjoy solitude. But maybe for the first time in my life, I'm thinking, I might finally not be "scared a . . . me," my own head, how it has a mind of its own and, among other unpredictable things, will sometimes force me to go to places I wish I didn't have to go, as it did last night.

I said in the conclusion to *This Fall*, the first book I wrote after Carol passed:

I had a hard July this year, in my body first, but then in my head, which is more crucial to me now: It was “reality” again, right there, when the next layer down of it starts to work its way up through what you were certain was already rock bottom, becoming faintly visible, not frightening solely in itself, but more by what it hints toward, that there are likely many more such layers deeper and deeper down, waiting for you to wear through to them. And you know you will. Scary, sobering.
(182)

I have in the meantime worn through to more and more layers deeper and deeper down, many of them “scary, sobering.” Finally, last June, as I explain in “I’m into Somethin’ Good,” I decided to try to get to the bottom level once and for all. I quit pretty much everything I was doing—all my volunteer positions, all my manic making activities, even playing my guitar—and set myself to the task of confronting and addressing what remained of the trauma from that loss. I’ve been working assiduously at that ever since. I started writing *In Dreams* . . . last fall, these essays that document what I hope are the latter stages of this process, and then around year’s end started what has turned out to be a chaotic bunch of new poems, doing some kind of work I can’t quite fathom right now. So I figured I was getting close. What last night’s dreams did was force me the rest of the way down, to that bottom, the abyss, where I was compelled simply to witness and accept the depths of my abject failure not just with and for Carol, but as a human being, a life-force, forever, all of it, all at once. If there is a layer lower than that, I don’t think I will be capable of waking up from it.

6.

I said in “Don’t Be Afraid” that there are many fearsome things in this world. So don’t get so distracted by the ones that don’t matter that you can’t see the ones that do. This is one that does. I had expected this to be a simple, playful essay about a mode of self-esteem that is founded in self-love, which makes all the “hard to get” games ultimately look inanely self-defeating. I have spent a lot of time and energy these last seven years working to achieve a state of affairs in my head and in my life that is founded on a healthy self-love. I thought I was there, or at least close. I said further, in the same essay, that resisting and overcoming externally incited fears is equally essential for a good life, the “don’t be afraid” mantra. I had worked on that, too, and felt I was there, or at least close. What I hadn’t fully calculated, though, was this primal fear of myself, which I had to reach the last layer down to recognize. From the state of blank bereftness that saturates me today, one I will have to inhabit for as long as it takes or lasts, I hope I will ultimately be freed from the most deleterious kind of fear of all, the one that still rears up when all the other fears are corralled, being “scared a only one thing, which is me.” That’s the hard part of playing hard to get with yourself. And I see now that this is the single sentence all the rest of the essay had to be written to get to.

Escaping from a habit of hard-to-getness in external relationships is hard. Escaping from a habit of hard-to-getness with your own self is way harder. If I can do that, become someone who actually *wants* to join the one club that most wants *me* as a member, and not be scared by what I might find when I get to the first meeting, well, I’m not sure what the result will be. Maybe some form of happiness I can right now only guess the shape of.

“Scared a only one thing, which is me . . .” was among the first phrases I used in the very first piece I wrote after Carol passed, trying to fathom the grief that overwhelmed me. I’m hoping that “I might finally not be ‘scared a . . . me”” will be among the last phrases I write in this process. As to “the why of it all?” It’s going to take someone way smarter than I am to “understand and write about” that. I’ve got a dozen books under my belt and not a whisper of the “why” to show for it. Maybe Carol’s sister will succeed. Maybe it’s only one sentence. If she writes it, I hope she will share it with me. I’d really like to know.

Coda

It was the end of a very long day!

Phil Connors

I thought this essay was done. I thought the long process of “coming to terms” with what I’ve lost was, if not done, at least entering a steady-state of mindful, almost pleasant, to be honest, bereftness. I thought I might finally be able to stop writing, caught up in these mighty waves that rise up twice a year or so and force me either to stand up on my board and ride or get swept under. I’m tired and want to come ashore. I thought I might even be able to unremember my dreams, like most people, let them do their urgent work in the dark, beyond my ken, so I can live in the everyday-normal light. I just needed to decide what to do with this essay, which is so maddeningly unkept even I’m embarrassed by it, and that takes a lot these days. Last night I settled it all in my head, planned to give it a once-over this morning before I posted it to my

website. That is, after all, what I do now: I write and I post. Almost like “love and marriage,” “can’t have one without the other.” It takes both now to relieve the almost unbearable pressure I feel in my head while I’m riding those waves.

I sometimes act, in my head, as if my website is at the crossroads of the world, Grand Central Station, Tiananmen Square, Mecca. I know of course it is as far into the hinterlands as the little town I grew up in, Forest City, so aptly named for someone like me who spends a part of every day in some forest or another thinking up all this stuff that, I also know, finds only a few very special “ears to hear.” It’s a wonderfully Sisyphean project for someone like me to undertake at this late stage of my life.

I always admired William Butler Yeats. He is the only poet I know who did his very best work as an elder. Most poets flare up in their 20s and flicker out in their 40s or 50s. If you don’t believe me, check it out. Had Yeats died at 40 he’d be a minor figure in our anthologies, if he got in at all. He did his best work after he turned 60. During my most fallow years, between 45 and 65, all I wrote were my two scholarly books—nice books that I’m proud of, don’t get me wrong, one even won a national award; but “revenge” books I wrote solely to get promoted from associate professor to full professor, so I could get paid closer to what I thought I was worth, in a department that had gone fully haywire, enamored by the mindless allure of late-stage postmodernism, with its loony book-as-iconism, its book-as-status-symbolism, the book-as-penisism, or motorcycleism, or whatever the equivalent of that might be for all the women who wanted and got what their books earned them in the patriarchy of the academy, same as the men who preceded them, their bikes parked out front, thinking someone like me would “cream his jeans” looking at them. Idiotic, the whole thing idiotic. I

saw all those motorcycles, parked mine, nice bikes, and walked away. I've read a lot of great books. I could count on my two hands (and maybe have fingers left over) the ones written by full professors.

Yes, during those mostly fallow years, I kept thinking of Yeats, that maybe when I hit my 60s it would all kick in again. And astonishingly it did. Unfortunately, it took the most traumatic event of my life to kick it in. In the 7 years since Carol died, I've written a dozen books. I sometimes feel like one of those people you read about who gets their head literally kicked in, by a boot or a rock or something, and wakes up being able to play jazz piano or speak fluent French, two things I've actually tried to learn how to do during the pandemic without much durable success.

Okay, you might say, but these books are no Yeats. I know that. I know poets and poetry inside out, believe me. I've read with deep engagement 1000s of poets and 10s of 1000s of poems across the ages and from around the world. I can tell a great poet from a good poet from a crap-run-of-the-mill poet in a minute or two, by reading a few poems, sometimes just one. I am not Yeats. But I am not crap-run-of-the-mill either. The fact that maybe two dozen people know anything about who I am and what I've done is, I believe, not a matter of quality but of mechanics. I simply will not engage with the available "means of production" in the current marketplace. I did that with the two books it took to get me promoted because I had to. It was the only way, I knew, they would "count." I don't need them to count any longer. I can count them all by myself.

Part of my sometimes belligerent recalcitrance in this regard is temperamental, part is ideological, and part is in fact moral. That latter term may seem out of place in this

context. If you know me, you get why I use it. If you don't, I honestly don't care. And that, this not-caring, is to some extent a moral stance, too. I have worked very hard to free myself from the allure of/need for external validation in this area. My fantasy is that maybe 20 or 50 years from now, after I'm gone, after the currently antediluvian "means of production" and the patriarchy that sustains it in the arts/academy is gone, someone will stumble across this mass of material and think: WTF! Who is this guy and why did he do all of this? And whoever that is will introduce me to the world. I won't be here, of course, and will not, I assure you, care one way or the other, if there is in fact a someplace we end up in after this where "caring" is still an option.

But all of this, which just poured out on the screen unbeckoned as soon as I put my fingers on the keyboard this morning, another installment of my beautiful, unrelenting, life-giving rage, has nothing to do with what I sat down to write about, which is a dream I had last night, a dream similar to the one I reported on above, the one that left me bereft, which I still am, which I'm now getting more used to, which I may even come to like as a foundational state of being.

Last night's dream took place in the home I grew up in. My whole family was there. I was about 10, wearing those stiff, dark blue Wrangler jeans my mother used to buy at the S&F clothing store on the corner up the street from our house. We were all in the living room, what we called the TV room. Someone out of the frame of the dream was there telling us that we kids needed to learn how to write addresses on little slips of paper, so we wouldn't lose touch with one another down the line. Everyone but me seemed to take to the task willingly. I started to write the first address and became quite morose. I couldn't continue. My father took my pen, one with black ink, and

gave me another, with blue ink. To me, this made it all the worse. I couldn't write anything at all with that pen. I became more and more morose, angry and depressed really, kind of like the "paralyzed and disconsolate" state I fell into in the dream in that other house, with Carol and her family. It was as if a slip of paper of this sort was the kiss of death, and I wanted no part of it.

Everyone got more and more irritated with me, and I got more and more recalcitrant. Finally, I went upstairs to my bedroom and lay on the bed staring blankly at the ceiling. It was a Sunday and I wondered why there was no football on. I wondered why everyone had to move to a new address, why I had to write it down on a tiny strip of paper to keep in my wallet, when all I wanted was to be me together with them. What a waste. The people you love most leave and there's not a goddamn thing you can do about it. And it's not always death that takes them away; often it's time, it's inattention, it's the lifelessness of life that wears away day after day until simple togetherness, the daily taken-for-grantedness of everyday love, the kind of love you don't have to think about or write books about or work so hard to remember, is gone and buried, not always underground but often by layers and layers of the silt the lifelessness of life leaves behind as it washes past over and over. And all you want is to be whole with them again, thoughtlessly alone together with them again.

I can't say I was capable of thinking all of that back then, but it's what I was thinking in the dream. Then my two brothers came into the room, Pat, who now lives and Pennsylvania (I have his address on a slip of paper, of course) and Joe, who passed away about a year and a half ago after a long battle with ALS (I have his address on the tip of my tongue: If there happens to be a heaven, he's the one person I've known that I'm certain will be there.

He was so kind, and, miraculously, he actually “got” me, the way I am really, didn’t just receive everything I make, he loved it, truly loved it, and the real me that made it all, and he told me about it, with enthusiasm, the greatest of human gifts, not just the love, which is something, but the telling, with genuine enthusiasm, which makes it everything.) They both sat down on the bed with me. Joe put his hand on my shin and just said, “Let’s go out and play.” And that’s what we did, all I ever really wanted to do with anyone, just go out and play.

All this writing, from those horrid strips of paper I refused to fill out that say over and over again “You are so far away I can’t go out and play with you;” to the two books I wrote with my “I’ll show you how easy it is do what you do, thinking you’re so great, just so you’ll pay me closer to what I’m worth doing the things I actually value” tight-lipped smile; to the dozen books I’ve written lately, which, well, I’m not sure what they’re for. Maybe to keep me alive. Or to bring me back to life. Or maybe they are just a way for me to “go out and play” when no one else is around to go out and play with. A form of remote playing-with. Yes, that’s what I’ll call them from now on. A form of remote playing-with. If you have played with me through even one of my books, and then told me about it, you already know what a good time I had with you. Because I told you back, then actually re-read whatever that book was as if you were with me here.

I spent my adult life as an academic. I thought I would find tons of smart colleagues to play with in that neighborhood. I didn’t. Maybe it was me, maybe it was them, maybe it was the time or the culture. Doesn’t matter. I did though find tons of smart young people to play with, those bright faces and minds who came into “my room” day after day, year after year, and basically

said, hopefully, as if it might actually happen, if we were all lucky enough: “Let’s go out and play.”

I’m tired now of writing. Going over and over, over the same terrain. It’s exhausting and, don’t forget, I now feel bereft, which is a surprisingly hard position to write from. I said above that I hope someone smarter than I am might someday “understand and write about the why of it all.” I even said it might be just one sentence. It is: Go up to the room of someone you love (in any of the myriad ways we can love one another), even if it’s just yourself, and say “Let’s go out and play.”

Closure

Prefatory Note:

This essay is a very late addition to the book, nearly a year (an eternity for me) after I started it; one that became a perfect, if improbable, capstone, once the dramatic dream that “closes” it arrived to tie it all together.

June 6, 2022

(the fourth anniversary of my move to Olympia)

1.

*You're wonderin' now, what to do,
now you know, this is the end.*

The Specials

I enjoyed a most remarkable walk today, out at Woodard Bay, my favorite place. I almost said “took,” but that word is inappropriate, even impertinent, for some walks, which involve a lot of receiving and giving but never taking. Even “giving” and “receiving” do the unfortunate things that words often do, separating what is really one thing into two seemingly discrete parts. These two in particular are always one when they occur in a loving relationship, which is what the forest was kind enough to invite me into this morning. And Woodard Bay? You might be thinking, if you read my work, how could any walk in this

place be remarkable—someone who has been there hundreds of times over the last 4 years?

I will try to explain all of that, but given the way my meandery head works now, it may take some time because this remarkable walk actually had its inception about 10 days ago and has been evolving in regular increments towards today's denouement in the meantime. I wish I could tell you all of this at once, as I so often wish now when I sit down to write about things that are both singular and synthetic in my head, overriding all the rules of grammar and narrative, those slaves of temporal sequence we cannot evade, so captivated are we in their thrall when we want to tell a story. But language just won't allow for that, so I'll have to build it, as always, in bits and pieces, words that make sentences, sentences that make sections, sections that make an essay, taking all the time it takes to make it all, stringing out the last 10 days like a wagon train, even if, in my head, they feel compressed into an instant, all together, this remarkable walk. So, let me begin, as is my custom, with what just happened to me this morning. Then I'll work back over as much I can remember of its context, in whatever order seems to make most sense along the way.

I woke up so happy today. It was sunny, blue sky full of fluffy clouds ferried along on a stiff breeze. A bit cool, but given how inordinately cold and wet this spring has been, what I saw through my bedroom window looked like a heavenly hint of what I hope will become a most fulsome summer. I knew immediately that today was a Woodard Bay day, the best place for the best days. So, after tea and tai chi, my morning routine, off I went. The second I entered the forest—about 50 yards down the entry path, a sharp left, the spot you see me at on the cover of *First, Summer*—I felt enveloped in a welcoming aura of selfless love. If you think that sentence sounds wildly overblown

or sloppily sentimental, stop reading right now. I mean it, right now, go away, for your own sake, because it only gets “worse” from here, that same phrase recurring over and over along the way. You will not be pleased. Take your time if you want. I’ll wait . . .

. . . Okay, now that I’m here with friendly ears: “I felt enveloped in a welcoming aura of selfless love.” This is, you know if you are a citizen of the forest, the everyday economy of such communities, so unlike the ones we humans, at least most contemporary Americans, create and are compelled to endure, alienated both from our natural habitat and from one another. That may in fact be why “civilized” cultures feel such an urge to colonize, enslave and destroy nature, unable to tolerate the deep shame we feel about our own dystopic, anti-communal cultures the second we enter one that is not like that, this forest today, say. Indigenous peoples aren’t typically afflicted by this sickness of soul, so feel quite at home in such places, as I did today.

In any case, one of the strange things that happens for me on walks of this specific sort is that all of a sudden many trees that seemed previously unreachably off the path are right there, path-side, next to me, reaching out and inviting me to reach back. I’m quite sure they don’t move around day to day, so it must be a perceptual thing, for me and for them, a sense of intimacy, which always makes farther seem closer. I try to be cognizant of boundaries in all of my relationships, including those with trees, which communicate quite clearly the degree to which they are ready or eager to accept a gaze or a touch. Today, tree after tree was saying “yes” to me. And I said “yes” back. It was thrilling. I won’t mention all of those interactions, which would take forever, just one, the big one.

There is a monumentally huge big-leaf maple, wide as my driveway, taller than most of the buildings in downtown Olympia, about three-fourths of the way around the main circuit of this walk. It is breathtaking, regal, with one outward-reaching “branch” bigger than almost any tree I saw on my walks at Boyce Park back in Pittsburgh. I so admire it, revere it even, this scion of the forest with a wisdom hundreds of years in the making. It is set about 20 feet off to the left of the path, a distance that usually seems impassible, not just because of the undergrowth but because of the stolid reticence of this tree, noticing everything but never beckoning. Today there was for some reason an open path right up to the base of that tree, and an express invitation from it to come and join it for a few celebratory seconds of mutual contact. So I did. Maybe it took all of my many walk-bys for it not to notice me—as I said, I’m quite sure it notices everything—but to trust me, opening a way into the community it anchors and oversees. Our greeting took maybe 30 seconds, no big deal, just “hi” and “hi.” But it meant the world to me. That tree has seen me hundreds of times, and now, finally, reached out to meet me, willing to give-receive with me any time at all now. And by “meet me,” I mean exactly what I said above: enveloped in a welcoming aura of selfless love.

2.

Wild nights - wild nights!
Were I with thee
Wild nights should be
Our luxury!

Emily Dickinson

I never listen to music when I walk in the forest. But today I did. I just got a set of wireless earbuds I wanted to try out. Almost offhandedly, I picked the album of songs I composed and recorded based on some of Emily Dickinson's poems. In retrospect, I see it was almost an inevitable choice, in that my experience of being in the company of Emily Dickinson, when my head is right, is exactly the one I felt in the forest today. Several years ago, as I explain in *This Fall*, I suddenly knew that she and I were "on the same page" when it came to the most consequential human matters, those pertaining to intimacy and love especially, two themes that may seem quite removed from her poetic sphere most of the time, but that are everywhere in it, its "context," much like the last 10 days are the context for my walk today, if you just listen long enough with open ears, either speaking or singing her poems, each one more a synthetic sonic field, a lucid aura, than a laboriously constructed puzzle of gnomic words. You have to "get" her poems the way you "get" a joke. In an email exchange with a friend, discussing this experience of "getting" a joke or a poem and especially another person, she described that flash of sudden understanding, nothing to everything all at once, as an "instant, joyful shock." Exactly! Experiencing that moment with anyone, including Emily Dickinson, may require many installments of preliminary "work," some of them challenging. But until you reach the point where the whole is illuminated suddenly in its all-at-onceness you haven't "gotten" there; the way today's walk suddenly illuminated all the thinking I've been doing over the last 10 days, many separate layers or stages all coalescing: an instant joyful shock.

I was talking with another friend a few days ago about time, the ways in which we are culturally habituated to imagine its forward-oriented passage, a behind-the-scenes indoctrination that is so hard to find a way out of even

when you realize how inane and dysfunctional it is. I talked for a while about the differences between Newton and Einstein in that regard, the fundamentally contrary ways they orchestrate space *vis-a-vis* time; about weird and amazing St. Augustine trying to parse out past, present and future nearly two millennia ago; about the highly contested current trope of the “frozen river” of spacetime that inflects so many of the maddeningly simplistic arguments among contemporary physicists about temporality, and about my own much more amicable ways of construing this foundational matrix for human experience. I’ve written about this often and variously over the years. My bottom line is always and simply that time must be just as strange and arcane as quantum theorists now tell us space is. The right minds just haven’t taken the time to think about it rightly.

I ended up talking with my friend about those special moments in life, like today’s walk for me, like any moment when I feel truly sane in this loony world (or is it vice-versa?), when that rigorously parsed out “sentence” of time—fixed past behind, a static noun; negotiable present here, a fleeting verb; empty future ahead, just beyond a vague conjunction—suddenly collapses to a singularity, the way they say that under certain circumstance, like a near-death experience, a whole life can “flash before our eyes,” an instant, joyful shock, our finally “getting” it. Here’s the last paragraph from the essay portion of *This Fall*, which describes one such experience of this beautiful conundrum:

I said last spring I was the luckiest man in the world for the 32 years I got to spend with [my wife Carol, who had passed earlier that year]. And then I wasn't. Now I know I still am. "What's not there and what is" was how I divided things up back then. Now it what's not there and still is. Time is a

delusion, our conventional ways of orchestrating it, all that coming and going, then and gone, perpetual sequence, silly. It's all there, now, everything, everything now. I know that, here, now, the top of the world, this great green field [the culminating point for our favorite walk together], sun so bright, blue sky, my arms raised to the heavens, all the leaves down, the elephants [from a poem I had been discussing] settling down for winter, dreaming their dreams, or mine: "Love everything," they're saying. Yes. Love. Everything. (157)

Spacetime is not a "frozen river," not an endless sequence of equal seconds metered off by a clock, not a scarce, inimical resource scourging us forward, not a life sentence or a life *of* sentences that we are compelled simply complete or to endure. It is malleable, friendly, a wide open field in which we can play our gentlest and sanest games together. It is, above all, I have come to believe, a vital, generative expression of love that inspires the whole universe, breathing life into time and vice-versa. And, at certain perfect moments, when we are both here and there and everywhere at once, we understand that all the dimensions of time are always all there altogether all at once for us, too.

When I got to the bay I realized that today was one of those rare ultra-king-tide days, the water having receded all the way out past the remnants of the long-abandoned lumber-dumping railroad trestle that is usually 30-50 yards away from shore, with 8-15 feet of water around it, unapproachable by foot. Today, the pathway out was not only waterless, which it sometimes is but too mucky to walk through, but *terra firma*, several feet above water. So I walked out there, into and among the many telephone-pole-sized timbers that provide its foundation, barnacles a foot thick on some of them, until that matrix became too

mazy to pass through without a lot of bodily contortions. The signage on shore says that many 1000s of bats come to roost there and pup around this time of year, running back and forth in great hordes to Olympia at dawn and dusk. I've never been out there at either dawn or dusk, the opening/closing times of the parking lot. And I couldn't see them hanging out under the dark rail deck today, either, 20 feet overhead, though they may have been up there sleeping.

My way back to the car was walkabout-wonderful, a meandery meet-and-greet with many of my favorite Woodard Bay entities, the bald eagle I see from time to time, circling slowly overhead today, like a little boat afloat on the big blue sky on its way to nowhere in particular, the way I was on the ground below; the majestic, ancient crab tree (a rare, maybe unique tree in these woods, which have no such understory trees, just huge aerial overlords and vast savannas of ground-bound ferns), its 50 foot wide umbrella of branches extending all the way to the ground all around, so much so that, this time of year, leafed out, you have to already know the few little portals through which you can enter that magical canopy, so quiet, dry when it's raining, and peacefully private. At the base of the tree is the arrangement of five soccer-ball sized stones I carried up from the shore last summer, to mark this special spot. When I turned to leave that day I could see that they looked like an angel, head, midriff, lower body, two wings, perfect. They are now sinking into the earth a bit, getting settled more permanently, like they intend to stay, part of the landscape, much to my delight.

On the path back to the car, I stopped briefly at the two wild rose bushes right at the turn as you leave the bay area and start heading back through the forest, flush now with their delicate, pink, single-layer blooms, more like floppy

hats than the fluffed-up-petticoat-type roses we cultivate in town. Then the partially bark-free cedar, the trunk underwood fully exposed for its first 15 feet or so. I have no idea how this happened, though I have seen documentaries in which Indigenous people strip cedar bark in early spring, when it is lifted a bit from the trunk and slippery from all the leaf-feeding water pouring up and down beneath it, bark they use to weave things together. The exposed wood is glass-smooth, with one portion a series of rows of raised bumps, like Braille sentences, all so beautiful you can't help but run your hand over it. Likewise for the huge, many-faceted boulder alongside the forest path about halfway around the loop, the only one anywhere in that portion of the woods, probably an afterthought of a great glacier eons ago, which on some summer days catches the sunlight at just the right angle, like a huge diamond, utterly mesmerizing.

On the final stretch of the path, I met a mother with two young children just heading in, the girl about 5 years older than the boy, such a happy-looking trio who all smiled and said hi to me, reminding me of my own family 30 or so years ago. In the main lot I said hello and commented in passing on the loveliness of the day to a man looking at the signage like this was his first visit. He asked me a question and we ended up having a five-minute conversation about the charms of this place. He was especially excited about the bats that roost down under the abandoned railway trestle, marooned now in the middle of the bay I told him, and the rare prospect today of seeing that up close. His wife was sitting in the car. When we parted he said he thought they would stay for a walk, which they had been trying to decide. So I did my bit to share at least the possibility that they, too, might be enveloped in the welcoming aura of selfless love that this generous place offers, at least from time to time, to anyone open to receive-give it.

3.

*Sitting here in limbo waiting for the tide to flow;
Sitting here in limbo, knowing that I have to go.
Well, they're putting up resistance,
But I know my faith will lead me on.*

Jimmy Cliff

About 10 days ago, in the midst of a Zoom conversation with that same friend, we started talking offhandedly about online dating practices, can't remember why. It seemed at the moment an utterly innocuous set of exchanges, animated by her vague suggestion that this might be a possible alternative for one or the other of us. I told her that about 3 years ago, at the suggestion of another friend who met his now-wife that way, I "joined" one of these sites briefly. I had no photo or profile prepared, so I just put in my first name and age and started scrolling through the photos of the women roughly in my age bracket. I did this for maybe 20 minutes figuring/hoping I'd get to the end of the pool. I started going faster and faster to reach that goal, must have seen many hundreds of these images. Instead of being uplifted by this deep pool of potential partners, it was depressing to me, imagining a culture like ours that produces (and I mean that in the same sense that capitalism means it) this commodity as one expression of its profound dysfunction in relation to love, intimacy, and community. There could have been many more 1000s of images in this pool; maybe it was endless, new ones arriving faster than anyone could scroll. All of these lovely-looking people looking for love, or at least some semblance of it, in, I'm sure, a comparably endless sea of men like me, setting

forth to sink-swim with them, which made it doubly depressing to me. I signed off and went to sleep. By the next morning, I had generated several inquiries, based solely on my name and age, which I found triply depressing. I closed my account, having managed to make it through about half a day in that arena.

I told her that at least part of my incapacity to continue had to do with my feeling so vulnerable at that juncture in my life. It was almost intolerable, potentially debilitating, to imagine having to reject even one of these women or have any one of them reject me. So actually going on a “date” that might have that as an outcome was out of the question. This incapacity of mine felt vaguely like a weakness or failure—vulnerability often takes on that valence in our culture, at least for men—one I should be resilient enough to overcome, a source of the complementarily vague sense of shame American culture always induces in those who don’t quite fit the social norms, trying to compress and contain what are clearly endemic communal inequities into the tiny confines of isolated individuals, using such shame-blaming in all kinds of ways to avoid having to think about changing, god forbid, our shared dysfunctional systems.

I woke up the morning after our talk with a made-up-mind as crystal-clear as it ever gets for me, my unremembered dreams likely having worked all this out invisibly for me: Not only would I not take this initiative, not only was every last shred of shame vanquished, but I had, during that night, decided I was done entirely with all processes of trying actively to enlarge my social universe. I figured that whatever was going to happen was going to happen without my intervention, so why stress over it. I walked at Woodard Bay that day, too, sat for a while on a bench down at the point, all of this firming itself up finally, incontrovertibly. I was, I knew done, done, done

with all of that forced-social hocus-pocus. Aloneness looked from that vantage point as beautiful as the scene I was gazing on, all that sun-spangled water, indomitable greenery burgeoning at its fringes, nest-building birds flying to and fro, endless blue skies fruitful with clouds. It was exactly where and how I wanted to live now, fully socialized in this community that welcomed me.

A few days later I was having another conversation with this friend about self-change and, for reasons I can't remember, she started talking about inner resistance, the kind that arises for cultural, social, psychological or temperamental reasons and inhibits personal progress toward change. Because we had already been speaking in the discourse of physics, I began talking about resistance in an electrical sense, specifically the sorts of conductors that put up more or less resistance to the passage of electrons from point A to point B, the hows and whys of that. The best among these are the "precious" metals, silver and gold especially, (with copper right up there, fortunately, or we wouldn't be able to afford to wire our homes!). In any case, my fundamental argument was that if you want to diminish or overcome internal resistance, spend a few bucks to upgrade on the periodic table of self-inquiry.

I've been thinking in the meantime about how this term might apply to my current transition, thus the lines from Jimmy Cliff's song, how perceived inadequacies in relation to cultural norms generate that vague sense of shame, one that puts up a lot of resistance not only to progress, but even to any awareness that there's a problem, a lot like limbo, which in the Catholic tradition is where unbaptized innocents, especially children, are sent to spend eternity, a fairly nice place, they say, no fire and brimstone, but not heaven, of which those there remain fully unaware. What a cruel and stupid concept

that is! My sitting on the bench at the point at Woodard Bay that morning felt in the moment like finally getting out of limbo, some more intelligent higher power finally realizing that withholding heaven was a pretty creepy thing to do. Except in this case, I was both the penalized innocent and the higher power who released him! That's my connection to the "faith" part of Cliff's argument. And since then, I have led myself on.

4.

I say, a pressure drop, oh pressure
Oh yeah, pressure drop, a drop on you
I say, a pressure drop, oh pressure
Oh yeah, pressure drop, a drop on you

Toots and the Maytals

To fully contextualize the magnitude of this moment of liberation, I see now that I need to go back about 50 years, the last time I felt something of this sort, to set an even broader context. Sorry, I know I promised only a 10-day window. But sometimes, when you finally "get" how time works, right now and 10 days and fifty years are, as I said, sitting right there on top of one another, all one!

So: Right after I graduated from college in 1971, generally adrift, waiting for a draft notice I was certain was coming given my lottery number, and that I knew I wouldn't accede to, surely ruining, perhaps ending, my life, I moved to Pittsburgh and, among many other unfocused things, decided to take several graduate courses at Carnegie-Mellon University, one on Shakespeare, one on then-current theories of teaching, one on contemporary linguistics, all in an effort to decide if that's how I wanted

to spend my life, if I was still to have one going forward. It was a dreadful year, utterly life-draining. I couldn't find the inner resources to make a commitment to anything. There was, yes, a part of me with a vague sense that teaching English was a possibility, someday, another part that thought about becoming a psychological counselor, another part that just wanted to ditch the whole arena of intellectual work and professional cultures in general, take a "real" job. All year I just kept spinning my wheels and becoming more and more depressed. I was not, by an extraordinary miracle of numbers, drafted into the army. So I never had to make that fateful decision. But the expectation of it had so exhausted me that I couldn't get focused on any possible future.

I was at the end of my rope/hope when the spring term ended, my courses over. After my last class, I walked out to Forbes Avenue to wait for the 67 bus to take me home to Point Breeze. It was a gorgeous day, sunny and warm, blue sky, just perfect. I sat up on the high wall in front of CMU administrative building, and felt suddenly as free-spirited as I'd ever been, as if all the pressures of my whole life had just been lifted. In that moment, with an endless smile on my face, I decided firmly, finally, incontrovertibly, with a completely clear mind, that I was done with English lit and teaching and the academy. I mean done, done, with all of it, done. I vowed that the next day I would start to look for that real job, initially in a hardware store, I thought, the family business I grew up in and for which I was very well-credentialed. I felt light as a feather on the bus ride home. When I got there I found a letter waiting for me in the mail. It contained an offer of a full graduate fellowship to study English. It came so late in the recruitment season that I had already dismissed it as an option. I was stunned and vexed.

What to do about this, this free ride to pursue what I had spent years already preparing for, which had just been erased by the ecstatic state of utter inner freedom I was luxuriating in at that moment? Well, here's what I did: I thought about it for a few hours and concluded that the intersection of these two possible fates was not accidental, that this was a moment in my life at which destiny—I mean actual, real, extrinsically imposed destiny—was taking a hand, the way it does for Humphrey Bogart at the end of *Casablanca* for example, letting Ilsa go and walking off with Louis. I knew with certainty, my Catholic background kicking in, that I was in that moment being “called” back to the path I had just decided so conclusively to abandon. I could say no, of course. That was I knew a genuine option, one I could choose without penalty, always is when one is “called.” But in order for me to live a fully worthy life, in some spiritual sense, I was being asked, politely, to say yes. Which I did, prefiguring the fifty years of my life that have intervened since then. I was confident that this was if not the only, or even the “right” path, it was the “good” path, the one destiny was beckoning me to head down, the way I would make my life matter to others. Any doubts I had about all of this, and they persisted for about 10 years, were gradually erased by a series of almost miraculous interventions in my career, which, given my intellectual truculence and aversion to authority should have ended catastrophically at least three times. Each time, fate again intervened in the most remarkable ways. And I stayed on that path forever.

A couple of years ago on one of my song-making binges, I wrote a song called “And I Had It All.” Here are the lines that are pertinent to all of this, which I'm sure no one would ever deduce:

*Well, life has its own ideas,
What you're supposed to be.
Doesn't seem to matter,
Whether you agree.*

*You hear a soft voice calling
From a path you didn't see.
Then someone else's life unwinds
So unexpectedly.
It's hard to say if you got lost
Or were just set free.*

Sometimes, getting lost and being set free are one and the same, lost-free, like the give-receive I felt today at Woodard Bay. And sooner or later you have to live your life as if it's someone else's, and on behalf of someone else, in order to make it fully your own. That's what I concluded and that's what I did.

As to the importance in this process of that brief interlude of radical freedom I felt on that wall and on the bus ride home? Well, in retrospect, I see it as absolutely crucial, an essential clearing-of-the-field, creating an openness for what destiny promises in order for it to find a firm footing. Fate was not telling me to abandon the path I was on. It was telling me to commit to it, take it, for real, not the half-assed way I had been wandering around on or near it. Do it or quit it, put up or shut up, no in-between. Graduate study is, of course, a for-real enterprise, a commitment to an extended future, a promise of dedicated work over the long-term, "professional" not meandery. I conclude that song this way:

*I'm happy now,
I listened to that call,
Gave back what I thought I wanted,
And I had it all.*

Everything of value in my life—my jobs, my wife, my children, my writing, my leisurely retirement, all of it—evanesced on the lifeline that emerged from that moment, fully imagining, creating in a way, the future that awaited me as it flowed amicably my way.

5.

*You can get it if you really want
You can get it if you really want
You can get it if you really want
But you must try, try and try
Try and try, you'll succeed at last*

Jimmy Cliff

So back to Woodard Bay, sitting on that bench at the point, utterly clear-minded about giving up and giving in, though I didn't quite know yet exactly which was which, as it pertained to my ongoingly solitary life. It was there I remembered that the last time I felt exactly what I was feeling then was that day on the wall at CMU, almost exactly 50 years ago. It has taken me now over a week to figure out how that previous experience applies to what I'm trying to figure out now.

Here's what I've come to: Being alone is not, obviously, a "career path" or the absence of one. As I say in the epilogue to *This Fall*:

That last one [learning how to be alone, the third item on my checklist for my sabbatical], well, I certainly attended all the classes and turned in all my work on time, only to find out, finally, that

wasn't even a real course. Alone, I know now, is not something you learn. It's something you do, bit by bit, day by day, just like everything else of value and importance in life. You can't fake it and you can't make it go away just because it's hard or came along unscriptedly. (160-61)

In other words, it is life, not school. Which is to say that “aleness” can be a calling like any other, something not just to get better at coping with, but to dwell more deeply into, to learn enough about to be able to teach it, even if it's only to yourself. So while that moment might look at first quite different from the one 50 years ago, it was in fact structurally the same, with the same message: Quit fooling around, doing what you're doing with your “aleness” half-heartedly, wishy-washy, wondering, whining, allowing all those deleterious forms of vague-shame resistances—again, cultural, social, psychological, temperamental—to impede your progress. Commit yourself to the enterprise professionally, shut the hell up and just do it. Or do it and just shut the hell up, two sides of the same coin.

In my original story, destiny told me in no uncertain terms that I was supposed to be an English professor, so get on with that, which I did, almost instantly understanding the gravity of that message and acceding to its clear imperative. In my Woodard Bay story, the same dynamic applied. If the universe had wanted me to abandon my solitude, to give up on aleness, there would have been someone sitting on my porch when I came home. Or a nice note in my mailbox. Or at least a vaguely friendly email. I am attentive enough to notice that there wasn't, none of them. So instead of looking for a way out, I needed to find the right way in, like I do with the canopy of that crab tree at Woodard Bay. No one gets an offer of a full fellowship to study aleness, of course.

But the retirement account I accrued by becoming a professor is the equivalent of that, all the funds I will need to “study professionally” in my now specialist field.

As soon as I understood all of that, which has taken over a week, my conductive wiring got an instant upgrade, from aluminum, maybe, which is pretty bad, to silver, the best, eliminating most of the stupid resistance that was impeding my progress. Keeping at it for a while might be the equivalent of lowering the temperature around my wiring. Conductivity increases as temperature decreases and becomes almost resistance-less at absolute zero. Just by coincidence I’ve been rereading my book *Living Hidden* this week. In the book’s third essay—“I-identity”—I describe the sense, two years ago now, that my was life heading “down to zero” along a long parabolic curve. I write later in the book, and again in “Memory Is a Kind of Accomplishment, about William Carlos Williams’ poem “The Descent,” a similar trajectory depicted there. The closer and closer I’ve gotten to that destination in the meantime, the less resistance I’m encountering in acceding to my new “destiny.”

At Woodard Bay that day I think my wires got as close to absolute zero as is possible in the human universe, where the current surges on its own initiative, almost no external energy needed, full power for peanuts. Destiny always wins, or should if we’re actually paying attention to its calls. Now, as it pertains to the primary mechanisms our current culture proffers for pursuing social relationships, I am finally done, done, done—with the preferred “machines,” of course, all those online robots, but more importantly for me with the insecurity and shame that they induce in those of us less-skilled at operating them, the vague sense that because we are not loved, we must be unlovable, that because no one ever touches us in an intimate way, we must be untouchable, those and all the

other lies our dysfunctional culture keeps implying via its advertising, media, and entertainment. Done. All of that replaced by what I just decided to call a “self-kindness,” which has love and intimacy built right into, without resistance so no need for a repeated external fill-up.

6.

*People say I'm crazy,
I got diamonds on the souls of my shoes.
Well, that's one way
to lose these walking blues.*

Paul Simon

This past week for my family Zoom my sister sent out a long playlist of Paul Simon’s songs, asking us to choose a current favorite. As soon as I started this one, “Diamonds on the Souls of Her Shoes” from his *Graceland* album, with the incredible back-ups from Ladysmith Black Mambazo, I knew it was my choice. The song opens with one possible description of the kind of aloneness I’ve been writing about:

*He's a poor boy
Empty as a pocket
Empty as a pocket with nothing to lose.*

I like the expression “empty as a pocket.” There are times you are poor money-wise, times you are poor friend-wise, times you are poor love-wise. Once a pocket is empty, there is as a matter of fact nothing left for that pocket to lose. But also, as a figurative matter of fact in that image, you still have a pocket, an enclosed empty space that is promissory by definition, creating the reservoir for a

possible refill. As my examples above illustrate, an almost overwhelming sense of freedom arises when you finally realize that your pocket is empty. Completely, everything gone. And there's an almost simultaneous sense of exhilaration about the prospect of filling it up again, this time not haphazardly or thoughtlessly, but with vision and purpose. The song then narrates a long and often unintelligible relationship the "poor boy" has with "a rich girl" who has "diamonds on the soles of her shoes." By the end of the song, by some strange process of transmutation, that boy, who started off with "ordinary shoes," to match his empty pocket, somehow ends up with diamonds on his own shoes, too, losing his walking blues.

In the second essay in *Living Hidden*, "He Tells Her Their Story," I document the moment, when I was four or so, sitting disconsolately on the back steps at home on Depot Street, that I recognized and then decided to conserve, actually committed to as a lifelong promise, the androgynous spirit I, like everyone, was born with, which has served as the foundation for my becoming and remaining a "creative individual:" male and female living amicably, synthetically, in loving communion with one another, not out there but in here, enveloping each other in the very same welcoming aura of selfless love that I felt in the forest this morning. The "she" in Simon's song is much like the "she" I became aware of in that moment 70 years ago, the Ur-moment in my life when I simultaneously felt empty and full of everything.

The "she" I "married" in that moment was, I see now, the "rich girl" with diamonds on the soles of her shoes, who over time has made my "poor boy" equally rich, diamonds on the soles of his shoes. If she told her story, it would be exactly the same one, with the roles reversed. There are no walking blues when you have diamond-

soled shoes, which never wear out. I am so happy, grateful, lucky, to have met her so early in my life, and then to have met Carol, who surely had diamonds on the soles of her shoes, and Emily Dickinson, whose poems I heard myself singing this morning, with her, in loving communion, diamond-soled too. Or diamond-souled, all of them. Including me. There is nothing showy about diamonds on the soles of your shoes; no one outside of your most intimate company, those who share the moments when you both put your feet up, or take your shoes off together, will ever see them. Which makes them all the more beautiful. And useful in relieving the walking blues that so often empty our pockets, in fear or grief or loneliness, as we make our way, feeling lost, along life's path.

Lately when I pray I've taken to asking that I and those I love "will be found." Initially these foundnesses had specific aspects to them, actual outcomes I had in mind. More recently the term is gestural, generic, empty of specifics, premised on a faithful hope—much like that magical "thing with feathers" Emily Dickinson describes in her great poem about "Hope"—that whatever goodness enspirits the universe, from the tiniest particle to the farthest galaxies, will help us all to "find" our proper place and role in the grand scheme of things, contributing to and being enveloped in its welcoming aura of selfless love.

To be found is wonderful, whether it is by the culture at large, a collective recognition of our intrinsic worth; by family and friends who stand by no matter the weather; by more casual friends who reach out to us amicably from time to time for no other reason than genuine care; by a true lover, so rare in the human universe, in my case once-in-lifetime, precious beyond measure. But the greatest gift of all, I am coming to understand, is to find yourself. I have been fortunate to have experienced it so

frequently throughout my life, at intersections like the ones on that porch in Forest City 70 years ago, or on the wall at CMU 50 years ago, or on the bench at Woodard Bay last week; but also in the tiny everyday ways we all reach out to ourselves and somehow find someone reaching back, someone worthy of our touch who touches us back lovingly. It takes thinking to precipitate such moments, some paying attention to notice them, and some committed work to bring them to fruition. But when they happen, when the last tear of what's left clears a space for the next tear of what's found, there are suddenly more than enough diamonds right there at hand for us to spread everywhere, even on the soles of our shoes, where only those who most love us, including ourselves, will ever see them.

7.

*I can see clearly now the rain is gone
I can see all obstacles in my way
Here is that rainbow I've been praying for
It's gonna be a bright (bright)
Bright (bright) sunshiny day*

Johnny Nash

A few days after my transformative moment at Woodard Bay, a friend and former colleague from my days at Pitt, now teaching at the University of Virginia, stopped by with his new wife, who has family up on Bainbridge Island about 60 miles north of here, for a walk and lunch. What a wonderful reunion that was, my first visitor from my Pittsburgh-based past. A few months ago, he asked me to join his class via Zoom to talk with the students about the first book I wrote after Carol passed, *This Fall*, my

keystone book, which he was teaching in a course on memoir. I had such a blast with those young people, who were so kind and generous and receptive to me and my work.

A month or so after that, my sister-in-law sent me a link that came up in her Google feed to an article in the UVA campus newspaper written by one of the young women in that group. She had lost her mother devastatingly just 6 months before my visit. I had no idea about any of that when I met the group, but I remembered her quite vividly, upper-middle-left square on my Zoom screen, not so much for what she said, but for the intensity of her presence, her attentiveness, which often communicates much more than words. I recall, after one of her questions, asking her simply if she “liked the book,” a question I rarely ask because it shifts the focus to me and kind of prescribes the response: Few people are likely to say no. But for some reason, I felt a kinship with her and just wanted to know her honest opinion, which I knew I would get. She said “yes.”

In her article, she describes the salutary impact both my book and my visit had for her, calling attention to my mantra that, however few readers I have, I am always thrilled when one of my books reaches the one right person at the right moment, its *raison d’être* I believe, which seemed to be the case here. She concludes this way:

Kameen’s positivity and radiance made me feel hopeful for the future. Before reading his book, the future seemed more bleak and uncertain to me. He talks about his journey of rediscovery and finding himself after his wife’s passing. I haven’t embarked on this journey yet — it still feels a bit too early for

me – at the same time, however, I also feel like I have the potential to do so.

His book touched me. It's not everyday when I feel like I can personally connect with the content of a course so deeply – as a result, it has made the learning process much more gratifying. However, in this particular case, it's not medieval English texts that I'm learning about – instead, I'm learning more about myself.

I was stunned. No one, I mean ever, has attributed “radiance” to me. And to be instrumental in generating some hope in someone disconsolate over a grave loss is beyond compare in the range of my aspirations. In that moment, I knew I and my book had “found” her, and that I and my book had also been “found.” And, because she is inseparable from those two, I knew Carol had been “found” as well. This changed my life, maybe more than it changed hers, helping me also, I now see, redeem my own “bleak and uncertain” into “hopeful.” It’s possible that everything that has happened recently is a result of this simple interaction. My friend had not seen the piece, so was interested in finding this out, a way for him, too, to understand the sometimes invisible but dramatic impact of his work.

Most days I like to wear at least one ring. I have an assortment of wedding rings to choose from: the one I put on when I married Carol, the one that replaced it about 20 years later when my ring finger got too large for it, and a couple from my uncle Joe Carrigg’s estate, one marked “1900,” so most likely his father’s, one a delicate braiding of gold that may have been his. I most often avoid putting one on my left ring finger, given its cultural symbolism. I’ll

try them on until one fits just right on that day on one of my other fingers, not too tight, so I can slide it off when I want, not too loose, so it won't fall off while I'm walking, all of which varies from day to day and season to season. Last week, the only one that fit perfectly anywhere was my second wedding ring on my left ring finger. I've worn it there comfortably every day since and will continue doing so as long as I can. It will, I know, be read by most women as a gesture that I'm still irrevocably devoted to Carol, long passed now, the love of my life. Like most of the ways others interpret (I mean misread) me and my public gestures, that is only partially true. There were long stretches while we were married that I didn't wear a ring, the period "between" rings when my first one didn't fit and we couldn't quite afford a second one; the long summers when I did heavy-duty outdoor work at one or another of our homes, the kind that would damage a ring or the finger to which it was attached; or when I was doing woodworking, building things, same issue. I never during those interims felt the slightest twinge of guilt about this. I was married to Carol and that was simply foundational to my being and my life. When you need a ring to remember that, or gesture that to others, I think it's a problem.

So now, what does this ring do? Well, first of all, it will be off-putting to any woman who won't invest the time or energy getting to know me because she believes I'm already "taken" in the way she is now looking to "take" someone. I have no problem with that at all, a sort of efficient weeding-out device. Second of all, it remains a gesture to Carol, who did take the time and energy not only to get to know me, but to marry me. I honestly believe that if I had been wearing a wedding ring when I met her, she either wouldn't have noticed or wouldn't have been deterred, figuring I was interesting enough to get to know and love even if I wasn't available that way.

It's possible I may still meet people willing to make that investment, and risk, just to enjoy my company. But most importantly, to me, it is a symbol to remind me that last week I found myself again, the way I did almost 70 years ago on the top step of that back porch in Pennsylvania, bonded two to one, male and female, my dual identity, as it is everyone's at that age, and can be forever if they want; and then again, over and over, throughout the course of our amazing life, me finding me, on a sunlit wall or a long walk, receive-giving everything that matters, from the inside out and from outside in, past and future fully present, right here, right now, in their all-at-onceness, enveloping us in a welcoming aura of selfless love.

I'll end with a poem I wrote a little more than a year ago, on Valentine's Day, which seems as if it is pertinent to all this:

think

what it might mean

today

*to say
out loud*

I love you

*if you are alone
walking in the woods
among winter trees
their svelte delicate arms
outreaching
so openly*

*they will smile
understanding*

*never say
I love you
back
knowing
you will know
that everything they know
about love
is in words
that cannot be heard*

*except
we will be here
when you come back
tomorrow
lovingly
by yourself
with us
another ordinary day*

*you may say
I love you
all day long
to children
the glossy wings
of those words
gliding perfectly
through the crystalline air
a bright white wedge
dissecting the bluest of skies
swooping
to a soft
landing
in the greenest grass
that grows*

*in that wide field
at the top of the hill
where you always end
your imagined walks
with them
together*

*and you may
say them
smilingly
to any passerby
on the street
who will assume
a lunacy
of loneliness
or the out-of-tuneness
of Jesus
sounding loose
even stupid
so barren there
in the open air
when they cast
eyes askance
and walk past
at an obtuse angle
as if they cannot hear
or nod smilingly
to say
silently
safely
thank you
even if I can't now
know for sure
or say
that I love you too*

*be wary though
with those
who barely
know you
out there
in the marketplace
of giving and taking
wanting and needing
where those three words
are a worrisome
currency*

*care there
is imperative
say I love you
even beneath your breath
and those who overhear
will tighten
recoil slightly
eyes dipping
tiny invisible anxieties
gripping the corners
of their lips
tipping them
down*

*but always
and I mean always
in the lush hidden chambers
of your own heart
where you speak to yourself
ceaselessly*

*say I love you
over and over
an endless loop
as if those are*

*the only three words
you still remember*

will ever need

to hear

or to think

Closing Closure

Part One: June 19, 2022

*I'm goin' where the sun keeps shinin'
Through the pourin' rain,
Goin' where the weather suits my clothes,
Bankin' off of the Northeast winds,
Sailin' on a summer breeze,
And skippin' over the ocean like a stone.*

Harry Nilsson

This morning I finally completed a full draft of this essay. I was certain it, and the book it closes, were done, aside from my chronic proofreading and tinkering, of course. I should know better. No matter how “finished” an essay or book seems to me, it always at this stage has a previously hidden “chapter” it is waiting to divulge. While I was taking a bath today, I listened to one of my favorite “cover” albums, “My Blue Heaven,” an assortment of mostly Big Band era songs—my favorite genre—I recorded a couple of years ago. It is so soft, so gentle, so sweet. To me, it is so “me.” Not the mes that everyone else meets and knows in public arenas, the personae that have been bent and folded and stapled by all the cultural and social forces that bend and fold and staple everyone: family, church, school, work, etc. I like that guy most of the time, and many others do as well. But he is not me.

A few days ago, the friend I've been conversing with throughout here said she went back and listened to one of the CDs I sent her a while ago. What she noticed this time was how different my singing voice is from my

speaking voice, so “gentle and sweet” by comparison, she said. I’ve written a number of times that I have never sung in front of anyone except Carol. There are reasons for that. One is the sense of vulnerability I feel in that mode, what is genuinely and truly in my heart being given voice, that most sensitive and expressive extension of my inner world. So, when I record my singing I am always alone. I sing and listen, sing and listen, until all my everyday voices, the ones everyone else knows, are quieted enough to let that other voice begin to emerge. While I’m singing with that voice I feel fully free, like I hardly exist as an embodied person any longer, just a completely relaxed presence that issues forth its inner truth via those vibrations, a resistanceless conduit for what I most deeply feel—for others to hear, yes, if they have ears for it, but even more so for myself, so I can hear it, over and over, each time as if it’s the first. It is magical, the ultimate reflexive process, what’s most pressing in my heart at that moment expressed so the rest of me can come to know what’s true about it by listening to my own voice singing it back to me, a perfect hermeneutic circle.

Very few others, I know, are going to listen to that voice quite that way, being more concerned with the quality of the performance (which is not professional by any means) or the degree to which it matches or doesn’t their preexistent musical tastes (and the audience for the kind of music I most prefer, the kind that suits both my voice and my inner spirit, is very small these days.) My brother Joe was the first one who did listen that way, from the very first CD I sent him, seven years ago when I started all of this, just enthralled. He said what he heard made him know and love me more. I was so grateful for that, and his saying it made me know and love him more, too. He was in the early stages of what turned out to be a long and devastating battle with ALS, which he lost last year. I must have sent him 30 CDs in that interim, original albums

with songs I wrote myself, dozens of cover albums of every conceivable type of music. He loved them all. And told me about it. With enthusiasm. With gratitude. Just amazing. What he considered my gifts to him turned out to be his much more consequential gifts to me.

It is so hard, often painful, not to be seen in this world. To do that for someone else, to see them, to know them, even once, let alone 30 times, can be life-altering. When my friend said what she said the other day, I was deeply moved and similarly grateful. I will say again what I've said multiple times: If you want to know the inner me, the me I am almost incapable of revealing socially, in the presence of others, for temperamental reasons, yes, but also for all the obvious cultural reasons I'm writing about in this essay, listen to me sing, I mean really listen, not to judge how "good" it is, not to hear just what you prefer to hear, but to hear me, the real me, the one who longs and loves. If, like my brother, you come to love me more on that basis, I will sound more and more like that when we talk. And in time, if you listen well and long enough, my real voice, that sweet and gentle one, my singing voice, may someday arise calmly and confidently in your presence, as it did for no one else but Carol until she passed.

Part Two: June 20, 5:34 AM

*Already I've reached mountain peaks
And I've just begun to climb.
I'll get over you by clinging to
Those healing hands of time.*

Willie Nelson

One of the wonderful things about life is that no matter how high we climb, and I've done some of that, the summit is always ineluctably up there, vanishingly tantalizing. Most often, the one we see turns out to be a false one; and the real one may simply be a figment we imagine to keep time alive, so it will arrive at just the right moments to lend its healing hands when obstacles seem insuperable. I sometimes feel sorry for those climbers who spend so much money and energy to reach the summit of Mount Everest, and then get there. What I wonder is left for them after that, nothing higher on this earth left to climb toward?

I just woke from a most gorgeous dream. I was living in a second-floor apartment that overlooked the sea. I mean the sea was right there 25 feet beneath the large back window I was standing at, which was wide open, maybe 10 feet by 10 feet, more like a porch I guess than a window. You could jump from that spot into 20 feet of water crystal clear enough to see everything right down to the sea floor. At that moment many thousands of small torpedo-shaped fish were swimming about, like a very loose "bait ball," each one about 6 inches long. I was thinking it might be a perfect place for a whale to come and feed, though I never in my wildest dreams imagined that one might happen by. Right then a huge whale, black with white streaks, breached, rising up right in front of me, inches from my face. It was thirty feet out of the water at the apex of its leap, maybe a third of its body still submerged. For a few seconds its eye was looking directly into mine, into me, all the way, all the way to my soul it seemed, which was visible to it through something like the crystal-clear water it has just leapt from. And I was looking back, same way, same effect. It was breathtaking, both of us stunned but without a shred of fear.

I'm going to assume that this dream (the first worthily memorable one I've had in weeks) has some connection to what I was writing last night, that paragraph about being seen, which I left hanging, almost like that whale, in mid-air, unable to come up with a good "closure" for this essay on closure. If there is such a connection, it is the first time in my life, as best I can recall, that my writing produced a vivid dream entirely on its own, without my asking, rather than vice-versa. So let's just say this dream has something to do with seeing and being seen, certainly a plausible, even a likely reading of it. What might that be? I guess that depends on whether you imagine yourself as the one waiting at the window or as the whale, both of which are seeing and being seen, the former a routine experience and broadly representative, the latter extraordinary, almost unique.

I do not have an either/or kind of mind, as you know if you read my work. So I'm not going to either/or this one either. And I'll skip all the tortuous intermediate steps that will likely get me lost in Jesuitical mazes in any case trying to parse out an argument. My bottom line, clunky as it might be, is this: Sometimes, most often I suppose, we're the one standing at the window waiting/hoping to be seen. Then suddenly, unexpectedly, astonishingly, out of the blue, a huge whale rises up out of nowhere to see us, who we are, where we live, all of it, truly, and we are stunned by the beauty of that moment. This may happen only very rarely in our lifetime of waiting. But when it does everything changes. We may also, from time to time, be that whale, rising up out of the blue to see, to truly see, outside-in, someone waiting at their window hoping against hope to be seen, stunning them by the beauty of that moment. This we can do, I truly believe, any time we want with whomever is near us, though we generally don't. And sometimes we are both, the waiter and the whale, our inner self seeing itself again, both in here and out

there, as if for the first time, stunned by the beauty of that moment. These latter special moments, in my experience, tend to arise serendipitously, like the ones I describe above, though I'm quite sure we can increase their frequency by slowing down and paying full attention to what is right in front of us, calling us. The wonderful thing about all these permutations is that the one seeing is also always being seen, truly and deeply, either self and other, or self and self, two becoming one, similarly stunned into communion by the beauty of that moment.

So if you're standing by that window waiting, don't feel forsaken; a whale may well be on the way to leap up and see you. Maybe it's me. In the meantime, while you're waiting, when you can, just be the damn whale for godssake, for as many others as you can. Go out and look for someone waiting at a window and leap up to see them. It's not that hard. Others are sending out clear signals all the time about how best to see them truly. Pay attention. Believe them. The rewards will be immense for both of you. When you get into that habit, it becomes much easier to wait by your own window patiently, happily alone and full of hope. And it's far more likely that the whale you're waiting for will happen by, even if it's that other you who truly yearns to know who you are and where you live, leaping up to see you eye to eye, the real you, the one you most want to be seen. And maybe, if you get to know one another really, really well, it will even hang around for a while (as it always does for me when I'm alone in my sunroom, mouth to microphone) to sing you a beautiful song in its sweet, gentle voice, and to listen to your sweet gentle voice singing back, time coming to a full stop for both of you, momentarily enveloped in a mutually welcoming aura of selfless love.

Postscript

This essay, which founded the final talk I gave in advance of my retirement from the University of Pittsburgh, may seem on its surface to have little to do with dreams. The word itself never appears in the text. I include it here as a postscript for two reasons. First of all, the attitude toward time that I explain and advocate is foundational for the general dream-state I inhabit as often and for as long as possible while I'm awake as a fully animated presence in this beautiful world we get to visit, here and now, for our post-big-bang nano-second. Thinking of time as a friend extending a hand to welcome us into the future is as close as I'm ever likely to get at understanding, in an embodied way, the Aboriginal concept of the Dreamtime or what a child's mind might mean by "Life is but a dream."

Basically, if you want to spend more time in this world, forget about implanting your brain's memories on a server somewhere; live fully the time you are gifted. When you do, it is possible to feel that you are living forever in every moment that passes. Secondly, I want this "speech" (and it is available in my own voice on my website, paulkameen.com) to be the last thing someone will "hear" me saying if they read all the prose I've written, the ten or so books of it. So I plan to attach this piece as an addendum to whatever one stands at the end of that line, which right now is this one, *In Dreams . . .* If I write another one, I'll remove it here and move it over there. Or, more accurately, I'll remove it from the "there" that my newer "here" creates as it evanesces, just the way time does that, so generously and amicably, for us, moment by moment, if only we let it.

All the Time in the World

*(a talk delivered in March 2016
at the annual Composition Program Awards Event
at the University of Pittsburgh)*

I want to talk to you today, all of you young people especially, finishing up degrees, at the onset of new careers, such an exciting moment, I want to talk to you today, about time, what you will be doing with it, what you will make of it, the next 20 minutes, the next 20 years, no matter, it's all the same. I've been mesmerized by the mysterious experience of time in my own life, in life itself, since I was a kid. I don't know why, or at least don't remember how I got started thinking about this almost infinitely malleable matrix that formats the paths we have to navigate a way along while we're here. But I've returned to that conundrum quite regularly over the years, to read about it, write about it, again and again. I'll be talking briefly about some of my work along these lines, but I chose this theme today for a much more practical reason.

As you may have noticed, in our culture, the academic culture, everyone always seems short on time, acts and feels as if there is just never enough of it, any of it all sometimes, hectic, harried, stressed. We rush by each other with perfunctory salutations, or none at all, leaning forward, almost jogging, books clutched to our sides, we complain about how can I possibly do all of this and this, you can't be serious about adding that to my this, and, sit with you for a cup of coffee, well, maybe next month, oh, wait, I forgot, I'm busy then, how about next term, or next year, I am so busy, busy, busy. Even answering an email

sometimes seems more than many people can spare the time for, or, if they do, the recipient may wish they hadn't. For example, on the very day I got the request from Annette to give this talk, I got an email, out of the blue, the kind we often get. It was in my queue just above Annette's, so I read it in its sequence, as I generally do. This young person was asking for some advice and help in the application process for our Hot Metal Bridge program. I responded normally, appropriately, took maybe 5 minutes, tops. I got a long reply, which opened this way:

Dear Paul,

Thank you for your prompt response and for offering your time as a resource. I'm also grateful for the sensitivity and kindness with which you communicate in the previous email; post-bacc and grad apps have been stressful and I'm constantly finding myself frustrated at condescending and/or robotic responses from a variety of well-established academics [a long elision here where he/she told me about his/her work, life, etc. . .] Thank you again for offering your services and for being so down-to-earth!

How to feel about this? Yes, I'm so great, I took 5 minutes of my precious time to offer a bit of help? No, I felt shame, on behalf of a profession, my profession, that has gone so awry. Why? Because at least some people actually took the time to respond, the overtone of their message being: I will use this time grudgingly to make it clear to you that I am too busy to spend any of it with you.

You may hear your mentors talking that way, other faculty you encounter, here, elsewhere, colleagues at conferences, your own peers even, and you think, I guess

I must be too busy, too, yes, yes, yes, I am, of course I am, just like them, no, no, no I can't talk now, maybe, well, someday, not now, can't you see how I'm rushing to get, Ok, where was I heading, I don't remember, you distracted me . . .

I'm going to open with my conclusion, as baldly stated as possible, the one I hope to get to through what I say today, just so you know exactly where I'm headed with all of this: That way of talking, that way of acting is, I believe in every fiber of my being, so stupid, a self-induced delusion rooted in hubris that syphons off any joy we might rightfully take from our work before we even get to feel it, and it is absolutely not true. Me, you, anyone, everyone in this business, we have all the time in the world, or should, because, in the general scheme of human labor, I'd be hard pressed to name another profession, now or ever, in which its practitioners have more direct control over their time than ours. That kind of control is an extraordinary luxury in relation to work-for-pay both in historical terms and in our current culture. Yes, we have a lot to do: reading, thinking, writing, talking, the very things that our love of which drew us here to do, the things we would be trying mightily to find time for if we were compelled to make our living in another line of work. So why not enjoy them. OK, that's my conclusion. And, if you're still with me, the tonal low point of this talk, I promise. Now I can take the rest of my time up here having some fun.

And what better way to do that, for me, than to talk about Coleridge, who is, as those of you who know me know, really, not just one of my favorite authors but one of my all-time favorite people. I wish I could have known him, hung around with him, I bet he was a blast. I'm going to focus on one of my favorite Coleridgean enterprises, those multiple "Essays on the Principles of Method,"

scattered through the little journal he founded and published in 1809 and 1810 called *The Friend*. What a sweet title!

You might be thinking right now, Coleridge, Samuel Taylor Coleridge? He's not such not a great vehicle to try to ride to your conclusion on the wise use of time. He hardly ever finished anything, all that laudanum-induced laxity and frantic, failed thinking, which is what everyone keeps saying about him. I saw an example of exactly that attitude toward him while I was preparing for this talk. So this guy is describing how Coleridge handled *The Friend* and says, kind of dismissively, that, well, like so much else in his work, he just couldn't keep up with the production schedule; that in the two years he published *The Friend*, it came out only "intermittently," 28 issues in all. But think about this: Coleridge didn't just edit and publish and distribute the journal, he produced its content! So, let's say you decide to start a journal, get it out there, and, of course, write the articles in it. And you can only do that 28 times in two years. I'm sure everyone here, and the man writing that sentence, could do way better than that.

Actually, I never heard of the man who was writing that sentence, but I can say with what I believe is some confidence, that with this one little "incomplete" on Coleridge's transcript, one of many, many others, he achieved more than that writer has or will in his entire lifetime. So what else didn't he finish: "Kubla Khan," what a slacker, "Christabel", slouch, the *Biographia's* second volume, loser. And here's the thing, when Coleridge describes himself in one of his letters he says "I am indolence, capable of energies." In other words, Coleridge did all of this stuff, tons more than I ever was able to do, and he had all the time in the world, enough to feel he was actually lazy. That's my kind of guy: "Hey, Sam, got time for a cup of coffee some day?" "Sure, Paul.

Let's go right now." And it wouldn't be some 10-minute stand-up, chug it, and run job. No, two hours, a *tour de force*, a ramble around Xanadu, an afternoon to remember. That's the guy I want to work with. He has all the time in the world. And so do I.

I encountered these essays on method for the first time when I was an undergraduate, in a book I bought called *The Portable Coleridge*, a pretty good group of excerpts from the series, enough to get the drift of his overall argument. I was a physics major at the time, reading a lot about method, Bacon, Descartes, Sartre, anyone I could find who wrote about it specifically. I thought that among them—no weaklings there, to be sure—Coleridge was the staunchest, the most interesting. About 15 years later, in the early 1980s, I came back to those pieces for another look and ended up writing a long essay of my own, an essay on time, on the way rhetorical structures pre-orchestrated temporality, inverting its stereotypically forward-oriented vector, when we spoke, wrote, the very future we forethought, but hadn't yet materialized in any words, all of its multiple possibilities, like an array of alternate universes waiting to see which will be enacted, flashing back toward us, as we took our time down one of the possible paths we had opened. I had such a good time writing that essay. One of my all-time personal favorites. By which I mean, I couldn't get it published anywhere back then. Too long, too strange, too something. So I put it away, in my private stash. About 20 years later, Byron Hawk asked me if I had any essays he hadn't seen, so I sent it to him. About five years later, via a related set of connections, that he initiated, it ended up online in *Enculturation*, 25 years after I wrote it. I love that essay for many reasons, above all its patience. It had all the time in the world to wait for the world to have time for it. And I love Coleridge's essays for helping me to think about time in this way, not as inimical, a never-enoughness,

always flogging us forward, but as a friend, wending gently back to walk with us toward whatever it is we came here to do.

They are pertinent to my theme today, these essays, because Coleridge says this straight out at the conclusion of the final essay:

From the indemonstrable flows the sap, that circulates through every branch and spray of demonstration. To this principle we referred the choice of the final object, the control over time . . .

I remember getting to that sentence and thinking “what the hell are you talking about?” You mention time offhandedly here and there, sure, I noticed that, but the whole series, the final object, about time, control over time? No way. So I went back and re-read the essays through this lens and, *voilà*, yes, Coleridge was right and I was wrong (big surprise): That was the theme, but it was entirely subterranean, everywhere in it, down below, though, like Alph the sacred river running through Kubla Kahn’s measureless caverns down to a sunless sea. The cool thing is, you would never know that if you just read them through once. But you can’t miss it if you read them twice. And that is precisely the nature of the sort of circuit that Coleridge believed got opened up when a thoughtful speaker uttered the first word. The end was forecast in a way, but even the speaker couldn’t know it yet. And then, there it is, revealing itself just as the circuit closes, and the whole thing preceding it gets recomputed under its aegis.

I know I’m nearing the end of my allotted time here today, so I’m going to tease out only one of Coleridge’s sentences—after such a long build-up, just one sentence, maybe a letdown to you. But it is such a great sentence.

And, atypically for Coleridge, it's a very short one. I recall vividly my first reading of it. It's maybe halfway through the series, and he starts: "In wonder (Greek word), says Aristotle, does philosophy begin; " So I get that far in the sentence and being an eager and speculative reader, and seizing on the freedom Coleridge promotes by construing the character of his rhetorical space as "forethoughtful," I'm zipping ahead, imagining how it will go, where he will say philosophy ends, and in my head I hear: "in wisdom, no, no, in knowledge, no, no, in serenity, no, no, in truth," all the bromides I could generate, I suppose. But that's now how it ends. It ends this way: "and in astoundment (Greek word), says Plato, does all true philosophy finish." So, in wonder does philosophy begin and in astoundment does it finish.

What a downer, I thought. I know that astoundment is not identical with wonder, but maybe it's wonder times two, wonder with a couple of smiley-face emojis after it, and I'm going through the whole of philosophy to get there. Huh? Almost immediately, though, I began to recalculate, to see what he meant. In that very sentence, for example, I, me reading it, started with wonder and ended in astoundment. And that shift opened a circuit for me to think in a new way about "philosophy," the subject of his sentence. For example: Let's say I read Parmenides, which, if you have read *Re-reading Poets* you know I did in college for the first time, with very minimal wonderment. Then, let's say, I read Heraclitus, a little before him; Plato, a little after, then Descartes, Kant, whatever. Then I read Parmenides again. Whoa! I didn't notice that the first time around, which is actually what happened with me. That's already wonder times way more than two.

Then, say, I read Heidegger and Derrida and come back again. Wow, I see it, astounding, but it's only ground floor

astounding. So, say, I read Graham Harman and Timothy Morton and come back again. Now that is astoundment, full blown. Parmenides, those horses taking the young man to the “ends of his mind” out there into the ether where he meets the goddess who tells him the cryptic secrets of Being, capital B. Yes, that’s astoundment. Maybe it took me 50 years to take the whole path, my path, not Coleridge’s, just mine, to migrate across the universe from wonderment to astoundment, which is not wonder times two but wonder times a million. And that’s just with philosophy, as I said, the grammatical subject of his sentence. What I love most about that sentence is you can substitute almost anything you want in that subject position, and it’s all still true: Everything of value in life begins in wonder, finishes in astoundment.

All the great paths I have traversed, simultaneously, over those same 50 years, because that’s how parallel universes operate in the temporal spaces we inhabit here, they have been just like that, opening a way, calling me in, not to hurry, not to get there, but to be here, to do this, to live now. Everything I cherished, I have encountered on those paths, my multifaceted way, through this beautiful, beautiful world, the sentences, the poems, the classes, the courses, everything I took my time to read, write, my family, my morning walks, even you, if you have taken the time to be with me, has made itself present, manifestly, first through my wonderment, and, then after a second, a day, a year, a decade, or, now, these 3 score+ years into my life, it has rendered me astounded. Some of those circuits in my life are now closed, and I am on the verge of closing others. I am so happy, relieved, grateful that I had all the time in the world for them.

You have all the time in the world, too, believe me, that is true. Care for yourself and for those around you. Be kindly whenever and as much you can, and when you

can't, be polite. Listen whenever and as much as you can, and when the need to speak arises, as it will, speak up with passion and care on behalf of what matters most to you. The work will get done much more quickly, more quietly, so much less drama, if you do, I guarantee it. And you will be much the happier in the doing, your time here so much sweeter, and the time others spend in your company sweeter as well.

Our field is ensconced pretty much at the center of that academic galaxy we call "the humanities." We are closing out its dedicated year here almost as I speak. We all, every one of us, every day, need to remember that at the root of that word is a human, and it's not just some inscrutable concept; it's a me and a you and that passerby over there, struggling maybe, glancing our way, hoping we might walk over, that guy behind the email, trying, those dozens, then hundreds, then thousands of good young people who pay to spend their time with us, whose lives we are changing, even if only slightly, every day, for better or for worse. Humans. So be one. Be as great as you want to be along the way. Yes, be as great as you want to be along the way. But if you don't take the time, all the time in the world, which I am telling you is what you have, to also be good, to do some good with and for those fellow travelers who cross your path here, which is what we humans are made for and called toward, don't ever say you learned anything of consequence from me.

Paul is the author of numerous books of poetry, personal essays, and scholarship available in multiple formats at online booksellers and at paulkameen.com

Poetry:

light/waves (2022)
first: my newer tiny poems from (t)here (2022)
slights: my new tiny poems from here not there (2021)
In the Dark (2016)
Harvest Moon (2016)
Li Po-ems (2016)
Mornings After: Poems 1975-95
Beginning Was (1980)

Personal Essays:

In Dreams . . . (2022)
Living Hidden (2021)
Harvest (2020)
Spring Forward (2019)
The Imagination (2019)
A Mind of Winter (2019)
First, Summer (2018)
Last Spring (2018)
This Fall (2016)

Scholarship:

Re-reading Poets: The Life of the Author (2011)
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