

# Same Old, Same Old, so it was

Stories on South Stebbins Street

*A reflection of the changing times*



*The more things change, the more they  
long for the way things seemed to be.*

H. Kirk Rainer



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*CONSPIRANT COLONIES*

*TO END AN EAGLE*


*COURAGE IN THE CRUSH*

Note, that the stories, characters, and contents are my version of “creative nonfiction”.

I am deeply touched by the subject matter, each story representing some relation to (and in) my life, and the remarkably colorful and sometimes courageous folks represented in some way, alias, or archetype.

The cover design is purposed to look like red clay, a common soil in the area, and the image of a house and yard, taken from an actual photo of a key property on Stebbins Street; this image is converted to something similar to an ink-carving / woodcut my mother made years ago while taking an art class. I believe her design was a weathered woman working in a garden or field.

The two tones of yellow or gold in the cover illustration, text font and fill, are symbolic of hope—as with the rising of the sun, the emitting of light that often taken for granted, but can change one’s attitude amid figurative darkness as is often presented directly or indirectly in these Stories on Stebbins Street.



*The more things change, the more they  
are [not] the same; [sometimes things  
change forever].*

- Alphonse Karr (adapted)



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**South Stebbins Street** is located at the foot of Coldwater Mountain, the West-end of Calhoun County, Alabama. It is (or was) a working-class community, the sort of place that is weathering social and economic change as many towns that have *seen better days*.

Calhoun County is a profile case of post-industrialization; it is a place that flourished in heavy industry of iron and steel, a somewhat smaller Birmingham but significant—where, within the span of four or five decades, much of this commerce has ceased, left only the memories and vacant properties.

A key house on Stebbins is shown in part on the book cover, a modified photo of the street from Google. Houses dating back to the much earlier time align each narrow street, the whole of which connects at highway 202, center of Anniston, Oxford, leading to Highways 431, 78 and Interstate 20.

The stories are fact and fiction; memories and make-believe; the creative

*A story has no beginning or end: arbitrarily one chooses that moment of experience from which to look back or from which to look ahead.*

- Graham Greene, *End of the Affair*

license to add and augment time, place, and person. There are relationships and relations between/ among the stories, but the aim is that each story be its own, infusing what is needed for a short story, one event or episode in the series. All stories begin on Stebbins but

intentionally take us to other times and places not *too far from home*, a broad them, still within the realm that “It happens—it has...should or could”, for me and maybe you too.

*Stories have to be told or they die, and when they die, we can't remember who we are or why we're here.*

- Sue Monk Kidd

The stories are told in first-person: a nascent narrator, Howard, generally accepted among the folks—whatever role played—but having too little exposure to know everything about everyone, potentially *getting it* as it

goes, Howard intercedes, insight and introspection intermingled with dialogue around conflict, a problem or predicament in a broader context of changing, challenging time and places. Sincerely, he tries to be helpful before being *shown the door* if the door is even cracked, the encounter cordial, and the company and conversation welcomed.

There is some comfort or benefit in sharing problems, even and especially to a stranger or one less familiar, unknowing but potentially caring—at least at first.

There is no doubt that an unfamiliar or uninformed audience offers a *real sounding board* for airing laundry or even *letting it all hang out*, impulsive and impromptu, real, or imagined, storied or altogether, *a story*. For good or bad, Howard is such or at least appears so, the rest to be determined.

*There is no doubt fiction makes a better job of the truth.*

- Doris Lessing

Introductions followed by listening and sympathizing, are the beginning of a great story; one that offers more than the moment; perhaps a backstory, a love story, a tragedy, or a fable. There is love and there are lies, the two as inseparable as there is always more than one view, account and agenda, remembrance, recollection, and rumination.

*Every great love starts with a great story...*

- Nicholas Sparks

From the *happily-ever-after* to the ancient tales of the Brothers Grimm, stories and their tellers are among the anticipations and affections of child and child-like. The ideal story ends *good to go*, the bad one never to be told again. Somehow, the storyteller must find the richness in the poorness, a silver-lining in a skyline of dark clouds however seldom a breakthrough. Whether words or thoughts, the storyteller may leave more questions than answers but still, a story of (or about) yesterday may well stand tomorrow.

*Stories are memory aids, instruction manuals and moral compasses.*

- Aleks Krotoski,

Reminiscing on storytelling lends me to remember an uncle, Pete, his talent, and technique at delivering a story that, sometimes repeated, was always captivating—even in my experience as an adult! Where he acquired this art form I do not know. Perhaps his talent was from years of reading or others that passed this on, a legacy of ancient origin. No matter the origin but still my own desires to do the story right.

*There is something in storytelling...that demands the redemptive acts that what falls to at least be offered the chance to be restored.*

- Flannery O'Connor



**Yellowhammer Yelp** is the yearning of the state's bird, nostalgic and sentimental; one that calls out of the past, of what Stebbins and surrounding were like before, the supposed better times. This contrived creature's cry from yesteryears can tell of the seasons, growth, and decline, and much more as to people's lives, passions and pleasures, problems, and plights.

"Yellowhammer, what happened," I call, from which returns something, from the here to there, from real to the surreal, from the matter to the mystery, everywhere and everything in between.

This creature calls from long ago, say 200 years, the land was densely forested with clayish and sandy soils—full of rocks—and a mountain within site, Cheaha, Alabama's highest elevation, and the Creek Indian nation. It sounds that the

*[T]hey were bound, many of them, to these mountains with something longer and harder than nails or even chains.*

- Rick Bragg, *The Most They Ever Had*

land was rich in the material resources for iron that eventually led to a "closed" community, Woodstock, shortly after the "War of Northern Aggression".

Beyond the ironworks came decades of growth interrupted by climatic events and experiences such as *The Great Depression*, more war, and related changes to of the Army's presence, other economic and social changes. What was ceded as the vision of industrialists eventually became "the model city" complete with the state's first electrical public lighting, preparatory schools, a lavish resort, and a streetcar system.

Thus, there came several key changes:

**"White flight"** – *whites* moved from "the city" to county lending to the decline of the city schools, etc.

**De-industrialization** – textiles and metal works—the bedrock of the local economy—fall one by one, lending to the losses of *upper mobility*, a working wage and job security.

**Social norms, lifestyle** – the arrival-popularity of TV programming, network and cable and other media influencing society, decline of mores and norms.

Yellowhammer does not know it all, of course, and thus supposition and speculation, conjecture, and creativity. After all, a story but just enough truth to make it believable, maybe favorable, and more, preferable, over *the way it really was* or the always unreliable, "I remember when..."

A record of lesser account, the loss and lessons are at the core of significant changes to Coldwater Mountain and communities like it: the favor and flavor of folks.

The result(s) of key and the collection of changes are striking if the same bird could compare 1970 to the 21<sup>st</sup> century as it is to now. Many of the classic businesses have giving way or given out—some of which are featured on a social media, *the way it was, when, where and who*.

In the way of opportunity, not all is bleak or barren however; the Anniston Army Depot continues, the largest employers with perhaps the highest average income(s) and more, the automotive industry, most if not all international companies such as Honda and its suppliers.

*Every morning brings us news of the globe, and yet we are poor in noteworthy stories. This is because no event comes to us without being already shot through with explanation. The most extraordinary things... are related with the greatest accuracy, but the psychological connection of the event is not forced on the reader. It is left up to him to interpret things the way he understands them.*

- Walter Benjamin, *Illumination*

Even so, the decline continues, evidently pointing to broader and deeper causes and issues—the motivation for the *Stories of South Stebbins. Street*—lending to a general malaise, even melancholy, higher rates of physical, mental, emotional maladies coupled with all the attendant conditions from birth to death marriage and children, and other under the umbrella of life and living.

Can Howard help to rightfully record these “lesser accounts”, *without stepping on few toes* or worse, *missing the mark* altogether? How much can I really expect from Howard (or

Yellowhammer) to write a good story, content, and composition, that completes “the favor and flavor” sensitive to folks, their conditions, and circumstances? The answer to

*We hear [people] complain that Howard is not carrying his share of the load.*

- James Lewis, *Team-Based Project Management*

this crucial question is, “I do not know,” but nevertheless, I take on this project preferably with some measure of the courage to see things as they were and to follow in words accordingly.

**“Time makes everything,”** she whispers.

“Excuse me,” I say.

“Oh, I was just thinking, Howard,” she replies as her sullen expression changed to a stenciled smile.

“Yes mam; well, what did you have in mind,” I continue, looking for her ideas for reupholstering her chair. “What about the colors?”

“I don’t know. The more I look at it, the less I am favorable.... Maybe I should replace it like my daughter replaced her last husband,” she quips, cutting her eyes as what seems a signal that her daughter is in earshot.

“I’ll be damned if I’m-,” her daughter burst out, stammering into the room, an almost expected reaction.

“Too late girl, you’re already-,” she fires back with a wry expression, a sardonic smile, one of a series of seductions never to end well.

I was (am) vaguely aware of the story of this family, this mother and daughter. The mother herself had been married several times, suggesting this another example where *the apple falls close to the tree*, but still the mother persist in such remarks perhaps out of her own bitterness—basically because it pleases her. Nonetheless, the two are often heard bantering; the daughter defending her actions with or without her mom’s admission that she set a poor example and in this, often, *the seed is set*.

*Time makes everything mean and shabby and wrinkled. The tragedy of life [Howard] is not that the beautiful things die young, but that they grow old and mean.*

- Raymond Chandler, *Long Goodbye*

“Damn you and that shabby chair you park your fat-,” the daughter hisses.

“I call ‘em as I see ‘em,” she wails.

“It is a shame that an old woman like me can’t have a moment of peace. No, I got to deal with you and all your going-on. When ‘O Load will I get some relief,” she

moans, masquerading her mocking with a *paper-over* prayer, faux faith.

It was at this moment that I turn toward the front door, thinking that our conversation is done for the day. I knew they were at odds but the last thing I want is a brouhaha to bust out, more hellish hullabaloo, the saga of the latest in the series and so forth.

“Howard, don’t go,” she demands, “I’m sorry-,”

"Mam," I interrupt, "It is best that I-,"

"Sit-down and shut-up while I give it a thought," the daughter screams at me as though an addle boy.

Motioning me to come closer, the mother whispers ever so subtly: "She is really good, yah know. Anyway, you and I ain't done for the day."

"Sure," I reluctantly agree while finding my spot.

Drawing closer, she continues: "The tragedy of life, Howard, is that-,"

"Bullshit." the daughter shouts. "My life ain't a tragedy."

"I wasn't talking about you, girl—although it would apply," she charges.

Jumping to her feet, the girl stammers out as she did in; a fury that only a female can find, unleashing the lady for something too extreme to ever end. And while Stebbins has a way of repeating history, the folks 'round here can *change on a dime*, it seems; for within minutes of a brewing storm, the sun came out, and the mother and daughter are bound, bonding in their own way.

"I like that paisley, a real classic," the girl says, holding-up a swatch.

"It does stand the test of time," her momma comments, "though some things just have to be left behind, right my girl?"

Keeping her composure this time, the girl follows, "You would know momma."

No doubt that the daughter was inferring to their sorted family life in and out of church. Though the church had been a fundamental of their recent lives, the far past was, well, less churched and more suited to be left behind or, if forced, to speak of those times with prudence.



"Yeah, that old girl did some pretty ugly things," Wanda follows, referring to herself as though another. "No sense in going that way," she continues, having given the past more than due time in her mind. "Better to let those things lie," she continues, *putting it to bed*.

"Maybe you have..., but you can't speak for the rest of us," the girl presses. "I know what I've been told, what the other's say," referring most likely to her siblings, friends, and family. "He was a good man," she continues, not necessarily nailing down which man she means; the first, second, third or

fourth husband—let alone those she consorted with among and between them, lovers and the like, as “a loose woman”, bordering on “bitch”.

I knew little about it, married or not, but do remember her last husband. Yes, he was a mill man; one of the last I suppose reared in or around the mill life. Like her, he had been *around the horn* more than a couple of times. Anyone and everyone would always say, “He works hard.” *What is wrong with that*, I thought, but then there is always another world; dark and distant from anyone and everyone, maybe, that comes out of nowhere.

“Your daddy worked hard,” the woman whispers. “Why keep re-visiting this,” she murmurs, more a memory left to mellow as time can do. “Can’t we leave that behind and move on,” she pleads, a persona of self-pity.

“For the same reason that you can’t let my past go,” her girl insists (as though she is really asking rather than insisting, poised to incite another incident, incendiary, invective).

“Your daddy was so handsome when we dated, a real gentleman. He was hard, I know, but that don’t make him a heathen,” says she with suspense, secrets and other such *soft-speak* unsalable as *what really was*, is and will be.

With a look of dismay on her face, the girl speak back as one well studied.

*Hard times don’t last forever, hard people do.*

- Rehan Khan, *A Tudor Turk*

“But he was violent—an angry, bitter person,” likely repeated over some years.

“Everything becomes bad—old and unwanted, like this chair,” her mom screams, the sounds that *touch a nerve* and yet, ironically, are unnerving. She shifts in the chair, whether uneasy or uncomfortable, though she is right—at least about the chair—despite her delusions attributed wryly as dementia but understood as intentional, devious, and deceptive.

“There’s a difference between a bad thing and a bad person,” the girl tells mostly me, pausing afterward for the next line of defense of that undeniable, indefensible, yet defiant, the beguiled held blameless.

“But neither is it altogether bad. Age plays its part. People and things get old, shabby and wrinkled, and-,” momma declares, some signs of wisdom however sinister she be, daring, deceptive and devious.

"But people make choices," the girl rebuttals. "They choose to be bad, bitter and all that," she continues, her eyes cutting toward me.

"Your daddy didn't make many choices darling. Much of his life came from where he came," she offers. "Life on the Westside is tough—real tough—and if you don't get mad, it will be madder, mean and murderous."

The moment was mesmerizing; to witness someone telling the truth or at least as they see things, was much more than expected. After all, lies go to grave never to be revealed, resurrected, or resolved.

On the mantel above the once-fire place, was an old clock stopped at 11:30, surrounded by plastic flowers. An inscription on the based read,

"OUR LOVE FOREVER, FEBRUARY 07, 2006".

"Your clock stopped," I murmur, thinking aloud in a moment of uneasy silence, stillness.

"I know," she says. "It stopped the moment he passed," she explains "and in ain't be started since."



As tears well-up, the girl comes to her mother, "Yes momma, he was so...and still it shines."

"This is a beautiful clock," I add.

"Howard, it was a gift from our children on our anniversary," she tells me, a pleasantness and peace about her as not before.

Other memories flank the clock: several pictures of the family, the faces come and gone, and other memorabilia intermingled.

"You used to like the clock," she tells her mom.

"And I still do," she replies with a shaky voice.

"How did it get broken," I ask, some damage apparent.

"He broke it," the girl responds. "He-,"

"That ain't so," momma follows. "It was not him."

"Now mom, you know what-," she chides, "You told us-,"

"I know what I said, but I told you a story. "I was angry and took it out on him," momma confesses. "He didn't do a damned thing and matter-of-fact, he tried to fix it."

*Same Old Same Old, so it was*

"But mom-," the girl shouts, her emotions rising over one secret now undone.

"I was angry darling," she barks. "Can't a mom get angry too?"

"Mom, you lied to me. You told me-,"

"I know that—I know what I did and thinking back, I realized now that it was wrong for me to blame him."

"And you criticize me for the way that I treated my man," the daughter snaps, her reference to an ex-

*People who are two faced, usually forget which mask they are wearing at some point in their life.*

- Anthony T. Hincks

"I am two-faced," she shouts back, perhaps excusing herself; a declaration of what so many know but few voices, unwilling to face the wrath of waywardness. "We all have our ways—you too girl—so just stop now."

*How quickly the mood and moment changes, from bad to worse, better, and best and now, again, back to bedlam beneath contempt.*

The chair-recovering no longer of interest on either side, the urgency of my exit is once again on the fore. *How to leave gracefully*, I think, again! "Well, I'll be seeing you two-," I break-in the silence, the edge of storm, standing-up and shuttling for the door. "Thanks so much for-,"

"What's your hurry," she asks—without regard to the *lightning & thunder, dark clouds overhead*, and otherwise storm not uncommon for these parts.

What can you say or do in such matter, moment; perhaps another day for some but for others, too much? There are ups & downs, good and bad times, but then behavior that can crush one minute and calm the next. What to do now or at any time when the spirits rise and the souls fall but flight or fight, walk-out or stand-up. But this is not mine...?

"Your dad was not mean as I made him out to be, mamma whispers, perhaps wanting to set the record straight—or at least straighter!

She goes on to describe his moods, more from pain mostly due to several accidents and aging, which together, left him wrecked, worn-out and weary.

"He soldiered on," she continues, "stubborn as a mule."

"It must have been his love," her daughter offers, "that kept him going right-up to the end."

Love can heal but only if the one gives and the other gives back; it takes at least two. Here now, the girl is doing just that, though the bond between them is split and scared in places.

"That or your mom's fine cooking," I comment a small contribution.

"You're right about that Howard," the girl agrees in between sobs. "Momma knows how to cook."

Being honest is hard thing; and especially when it means admitting your wrongs, now or before. You never know what will happen when *the cat is let out of the bag*. As Wheatley so nails it, "Each of us is a different person in different places," and maybe different times too.



I do not know why her momma lied but folks lie all the time, no matter intentions. Call it what you want, but still, she is given a mammoth measure of grace, a deep devotion from at least one if not others too.

Momma tells me that she had come accustom to the "lumpy, rickety thing", the chair. "It is hard to part with it and hard to improve on it too."

There are things more important than furniture and, maybe, we all come to realize it more than once. The clock on the mantle remains as it was too and does not tick if the widow watches it. As to whether "time makes everything", this remains a question. Things get buried or covered-up and stay that way; but other times, things are uncovered and come rushing out—like the Ohatchee Dam when the locks open or Little River Canyon after a heavy rain; churning-up the slack, sometimes stagnant waters of silence and shame. In the long run *letting-it-out* is better, cat or no cat, than someone finding-it-out, calling-you-out or using it to use others.



**"All right then,"** she sneers. "I guess he'll be a grumpy old man till the day he dies," seemingly *writing-him-off*, a *has-been* at best.

"Now Sis, you can't say that about uncle. I know that he used to be happy and can be still *if the bottom doesn't fall out*," her brother suggests, the peacemaker of the family.

"Excuse me folks, but I'm looking for the man of the house," standing at an open door. "Who owns this place?"

"I am the man," she shouts, "What the Hell-,"

. "All right then," said the savage defiantly,

"I'm claiming the right to be unhappy."

- Aldous Huxley, *Brave New World*

"Calm down sis," he intervenes again, this time firm, insistent. "You can't talk like that and-,"

"I'll talk any way I damn please," she fires. "Now man, what do you want?"

*I was setback for a minute by her manner; first, that I interrupted their "discussion" and second, her present state, fury, and fight. It helps to know something about the person and for that, I would learn.* "I am Howard, here to-," I try to tell her.

This is hard place; it is (or was) mostly working class, an area of the county with all kinds of problems: first, industrial-water and environmental problems from a local fertilizer plant, once Monsanto and now Solutia; second, economic and social problems, a people that have seen better times and likely worst times ahead. Such times are true among once-industrial towns.

"All right then," he whispers, "that's a good girl."

Without so much as a breath, she blasts, "Where is that old cuss anyway? I got something waiting for him!"

And on that, the apparent uncle taps me in the soldier, a sign to let him by. *Funny*, I thought, *he looks sly for the kind that she describes.*

"You are looking for me," he speaks as he approaches here. "What can I do for you today—or am I too late," he continues, dismissing her comments and general dim view.

"Damn right, I am," she strikes.

*Is she a tiger, I think, or does she have a tiger by the tail?*

"She was just telling the man at the door that you are the property owner, that's all," her brother explains. "He asked who the property owner is," he continues, "This is Howard and-,"

"I know what she said," the uncle clarified. "No need to repeat it. I know this one," he continues, "and her ways."

"I didn't mean it," she shouts. "I said that-,"

"I know what you said and how you feel about me," the uncle replies. "I could hear the harangue from the back-house—never mind our neighbors. "

*Hmm, no one has something to say.* "Again, I am Howard and I'm with-,"

"I know who you are," he interrupts. "You're the appraiser."

"Well it looks like I'm going to have to find another place to-," the woman breaks-in, tears welling-up in her eyes, more of her ranting to come.

*On the face of it*, sympathy is not something she seeks. She wants to control at least her circumstances if not everyone else connected to it. She is finally fearful and, in this mode or mood, is decidedly defensive, *drawing a line* that she draws and then, draws again. *Am I presumptive to think these things are more than I have seen before?* No; she is an example of what happens to one convinced that everyone owes them something, always deserving more... and thus the *redrawing of lines* with a boundlessness that befuddles the best.

"To make more folks miserable," uncle said, *returning the fire*. "No need to take responsibility girl. The place is not sold and besides, how would you make-it on your own? You got nobody else and anyway-,"

"I've lived on my own before and I can do it again, the sooner the better," she barks. "I don't need you, uncle, or anyone!"

*The air filled sucked out of this place, it might be a good time to say goodbye*, I think, *and let them work this out while I wait or move on.*

"Now girl," her brother begins, breaking the silence. "You know that-,"

"Shut-up bubba," she barks again, "I know what I'm doing."

"Folks, I don't want to take too much of uncle's time, but-,"

"Hush your mouth," she orders. "We got a crisis, and you are part of it, Howard! You are not go-in anywhere 'til we get this done."

*A dark day*, I consider, *but not that unusual in my line of work.* My arrival is often with a level of expectation on one side or another, *a house divided* by

something other than Alabama and Auburn or any other religion, race, reason or not, that divides and sometimes conquers practically everyone; them, him, her and me, we're all divided and if love fails, what the hell can you do?

She is as many, those who did not leave us for the big city life or college. Who can manage a mortgage on their income, assuming they are employed and all? What is worse, some of the college kids come home deep in debt, a dilemma compounded by indefinite underemployment, delinquency and more. *Damned shame that the kids will not have the hopes of past generations*, is the thought her and there, and so much more now—more so to come.

"Howard is not the problem," uncle interrupts my thought. "I asked him here to do a job, plain and simple, and you're getting in the way girl."

"I don't know what I'm going to do," she shouts, a storm brewing.

Hesitant to say any more I say nothing, pretending to do something with my phone as folks do, a common distraction, deception. *Maybe I can....*

"It will be alright," her brother reassures once again.

"Bubba *don't go there!* I'm not a child."

*Damned if you do and damned if you....*, I think, just before she continues in what seems a sudden and radical change.

"I'm sorry brother...you're right. It will be okay."

Sure, the sun rises and the moon glows, but in the shadows of sun and moon is more darkness than a man cares to feel, much less live. There is a chill in the air that will not go away, a cold that languishes in the summer heat and humidity and, with each passing generation, is younger and stronger than I can remember. I am cold yet sweating. *Am I ill or just sick of this?*

"*The glass is half full,*" uncle continues. "Howard, what's next?"

"Well, I'll need to spend some time," and so I did just it, a job prevalent and predictable, sad, and sobering, but necessary. I would rather do my job under better terms but in these days, such is fewer and far between. Before foreclosures and repossessions, homeowners got in over their head; lost their jobs and insurance, fell sick or sullen, depressed, and disabled. Not all are this way, but a growing number are caught-up in consignments and co-signs, pay-day loan, lenders, and pawn shops. Those that work for the government do not appear affected—and that is a good thing I suppose. Some are holding on.

I know of others too; those that take advantage of times. Some might say, "I am just trying to make a living," and others, "If I don't...someone else will," but it is always corruption, petty crimes and more. Folks take advantage of folks and all the while are convinced that it is "all right then".

"I'd like to find the-," uncle begins stopping short, "but I doubt that it would do a bit of good. If I plucked the bastard up, another would come up just behind him," suggesting the worthlessness of him, her, them and it.

*"Mushrooms on cow paddies,"* bubba slurs with a smirk.

*"Oh, he doesn't know his ass from the whole in the ground."*

"I know my shit, sis!"

*Back to business,* I move to the next step: "I have some information for you uncle; that is, if you have a few minutes."

"I got all the time in the world. It's not as though I'm waiting for the next lotto or some other freebee," he remarks while easing my way.

"Is a final appraisal by Friday okay?"

"Take your time, Howard."

"Are you okay-," I continue.

"I'm older now, uglier every day. No, I am not okay, but Friday is."

"Friday sucks," I hear from the kitchen.

"It is hard to love her, that girl."

"I don't care," comes another cry, more powerful and painful—for all!

"I love your sister too, but sometimes I want to slap her and tell her, 'Grow up!'", uncle says to bubba with no real want for agreements.

"It's been done more than once," bubba says with a sigh.

"That's because her head is rock."

"No, it's because her heart is stone," bubba replies, his own omission.

Bubba means well—and takes it well too. He really cares about his sister—though she rebuffs and rebukes him. I cannot say how long this has been going on but can say that everybody and anyone has their limits and for bubba, this day may come sooner than later. Who knows when one decides that enough is enough, cuts and runs and says in southern fashion, "See you all later!"

Hearing the door close behind me was not the end however, as much to my dismay, *oh God, she is back.*

*Same Old Same Old, so it was*

"I want to know what's going on," she says, a subtle and sober tone *at the surface* though deeply disturbed full of fear, enraged to no end.

*Please get me out of this place*, I am thinking, when-

"You heard the conversation," I tell her, waiting for the next round, a TKO in two. "What else can I tell you?"

"Are we going to stay here or not," she swings a verbal punch to at least the midsection if not lower.

That is a matter that she must settle with uncle, of course.

"Do you know about me," she continues.

*The greater a child's terror, and the earlier it is experienced, the harder it becomes to develop a strong and healthy sense of self.*

- Nathaniel Branden, *6 Pillars of Self-Esteem*

*I knew enough to know that I do not want to know no more*, I think.

As it is, "I do not," accepting the limits of a line.

"I know what it's like to be homeless and I don't want to know it again," she says, more somber than sober. "It was terrible and terrifying," she explains, "and I was just twelve when it happened and I got-," her voice drifting to a stutter, then silence and more somber, sometimes sullen and sunk.

The moments to follow was nothing short of remarkable; not because of her story but rather her courage to speak of such things, traumatic as it was. I thought initially that, given all seen so far, she might be lying, bluffing her way into my sympathies.

"Later, folks said I had changed and might never be better again," she continues, withholding some of the more sensitive and sorted details.

*It is no wonder that she is the way she is*, I thought, attempting to conceive her experiences.

"Doctors said my body is okay, but my head is messed-up—while my heart is been molested along with the rest of me."

*Why bubba and uncle failed to mention this*, I cannot say for sure.

"Uncle knows most of it and bubba, some; but the two are vowed to silence, neither to speak of it. If brought up, they will likely shut it down," she says. "Sometimes silence shouts beyond the secrecy."

"Why are you telling me this," I ask apprehensively.

"You seem like a good person and I just need to say something."

I did not know whether to hold her or just comfort her with words. The father in me wanted to hold her and never let her go, to let her know that I cared about her and in some way was sorry for what I impulsively thought before. *Whatever I do or did would not be enough to cover the years.*

"Daddy left us, and mom had nothing—which is probably what killed her," she adds with satire. "My brother got older and I got meaner."

*And here you are, telling me why you hurt so much.*

Alright then, what happens now," inappropriate or insensitive it seems.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that your brother and uncle need you and you, them. Needing each other is so much more when each care about the other—as hard as caring, loving and being loved, is for those traumatized, scared and scarred."

"That's what they tell me, but maybe I can't or just don't want to," she follows. "I like drugs but then when those wear-off I am right back where I was before; sick, scared, and still scarred," the dilemma of so many. "I like the clouds, but I cannot make-it way up or out there, no air to breathe."

"But back on earth, what are we going to do now?"

"Well I really need to fix some dinner."

"What's cooking?"

"My bubba and uncle love egg salad *like no tomorrow*," she tells me, a smile forming. "It all starts with a good egg."

"What about chicken-,"

"Nah, I got no time for chicken."

"Alright then, I'll be seeing you."

*Wow, what you learn when you stop to listen. Yeah, it takes a good egg.*



**“Sudden change,”** I could hear under her breath.

“What was that” I say, thinking she is speaking to me.

“Oh, it’s my boy; sometimes I think I’ve created a monster,” she describes him. “He takes and he takes and-,”

“He never gives back,” I added impulsively.

“Yes Howard, as it is he does not respect me, never mind love me, and more, he tries to run my life all the time,” she describes with dismay and perhaps disgust whether about herself for *letting it happen* or for him, *out of control*.

*Nothing is [as] painful to the human mind as a great and sudden change.*

- Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein*

“I don’t mean to pry, but what is the ‘sudden change’ got to do with it?”

“Well it seems that he *changed overnight*; one day a considerate child and the next, *a monster*.”

“No *terrible-twos* I take it?”

“Oh, sure, but that was so much different than now.”

“Yeah, I get it,” guessing that her son is a teen or more.

“I guess it could be worse,” she remarks. “I know some folks that are so far removed from their children that, well, they couldn’t be at odds because they’re never together.”

I know too; all kinds of reasons that family gets *broken-up*, separated and torn apart whether emotional or social, sometimes, or forever. Her name does not matter for now but like many in this area, she (or they) is a family *hit hard*, relationships and all. I could go from house to house on Stebbins and find one story after another of divorce, separation, and *bad blood*—and the problems that emanate from the losses seldom recovered or resolved. The older generations despair as they watch their children’s lives come apart, their grandchildren sometimes lost indefinitely. The younger ones, not yet married, live without seriously considering marriage—seeing it for what it is—what it is not anymore—often from their own experience, causalities of this familial war, the *fraying of the social fabric*. Not to get preachy, “but the family is under attack and, where the family goes, so goes freedom. Yes, the family is the foundation of society, strength, and something more.”

"He was so sweet, once my little angel," she continues, interrupting my general thoughts, reflections of parenting, gains and losses, and the periodic sense of helplessness in such cases, "casualties".

"He hates his father, that's for sure," as one of many outcomes, causes or not, "but then he does not really know him, his dad."

"Have you heard from him, his father," I asked—once again speaking before thinking, this time about her ex-husband.

"He's a *dead-beat*", she charges, changing her whole tone and tenor. "My son deserves a better dad than he got," she blows *like foam* spewing from a can of coke, hot and shaken.



This is another bitter outcome, another marriage made-in-hell—no more, gone to hell. But in truth, the marriage was in a church with a covenant, a sacred promise. *Such is not uncommon; folks joined in a church and torn asunder in a court.* Just look at the number of single-parent families or the decline of marriage in general. I understand that our young folks are not marrying for several reasons but, all in all, marriage is on the decline.

"And he doesn't visit your son at all?"

"Oh, he's tried," she fires-back, "but be damned!"

"Do they want to see each other," is a question that I cannot ask, and she cannot answer, if the dad is a *deadbeat*, damned, and disgusted.

"He must pay what he owes," she cries, "for child-support. Then I might consider it," she follows, *laying down the law* as she sees it.

I could not help but notice that her son was peeking around the corner.

"Does he have any male relationships," I ask, perhaps *crossing the line* with what she perceives as a mark on her motherhood.

"He has his cousins—on my side—and a few friends in the neighborhood," but I won't let him see his dad or those pathetic people," she tells me with emphasis on his family, friends and all. "They're white trash."

*It is ironic that divorce is civil law and yet the outcome is often incivility—whether intended or not.* Who understands that civil law is steeped in the *interest of the state*—not the children, family, or any other social construct?



"Hey boy," I began, looking his way. "How are you?"

"Hi," is all he says before looking down and away.

"He's very shy these days," she remarks. "He used to be so social, never met a stranger, but now he is sly and sneaky—more like his dad than ever!"

"They go through phases," thinking of other children I have been around. It sometimes seems that one year they are *at the top of the world* and the next are *lost in the crowd*. Sudden change is common for young folks no matter that they deal with it subconsciously.

"He's probably hiding something," she continues. "Oh, he's so much like that bum that I can't stand it."

"He has become rebellious, has he?"

"You don't know the half of it," she says sharply, "It is like night and day."

"And how long have you been divorced," I asked reluctantly.

This was a very awkward conversation, and additionally such problems seem insolvable, her feelings intractable. I listened to some more as she explained how her husband lost his job at the mill and, when the unemployment ran-out, that they had nothing left but a meager savings. Knowing that they had some past association to the church, I inquire, "What about the church, the one you attended and were married at-,"

"I couldn't go to them forever and besides, they could not understand my decision, the divorce," she explains. "They're just a bunch of do-gooders."

Sometimes folks become disaffected with the church; their own sense of guilt or shame magnified in the presence of "do-gooders", still married and seemingly intact, content. Sometimes the divorced become disenchanted, losing their interest and even faith and convinced that they are cursed—even condemned by Christ if that were possible. *A damned shame, it is, this thing.*

But in fact, their church did not support or agree with the divorce; and though they had gone to this group for intervention, she had withdrawn from contact on account that they did not support her decision to divorce.

Sometimes the church and the civil law clash on these matters; the first holding to common law and the influence of the scriptures while civil law in a constant shift, seemingly *sliding down a slippery slope*. In fact, nothing has

been more harmful to the institution of marriage than divorce reforms instituted as no-fault, unilateral and the like, state to state.

"She has a plan," I learn, to tap into government assistance where child support or other means did not. And now, nearly a year after the divorce, the boy is changing evidently for the worse.

I have seen such again and again; a reminder of where marriage has gone and, with it, family, and then community. In an ideal condition, children would have both parents, but we do not live in an "ideal" society. Children are growing-up with a

*You cannot begin to understand the failure of marriage—or the living of these ideas, commitment, or covenant, without considering and factoring in the devaluing of fatherhood. The two are inextricably linked and dependent.*

- H. Kirk Rainer, *A Once and Always Father*

disconnected parent or parents while marriage and family falter in general. *Where is this going?*

I continued to listen to her speak but much of what she had to say seemed almost self-constructed (or destructive); that her decision to divorce did not produce the promises described by the state—and especially in the life of their child for which the court's referred to as euphemistically as "the best interest."

Eventually he did get *back on his feet* and resume child support but not without consequences such as two brief stays in jail with the usual attachments that make the overall matter worse than better. *Debtor's prison is not a thing of the past*; indeed, parents are jailed for child arrears, their children figuratively held at ransom while they settle with the state and contend with their own plight, a disparate parent. *This is the work of a thug, a thief, and a tyrant.*



Disavowed and remarried for a brief period—once of those so-called "rebound relationships", but the second marriage was a *sudden change*, too much for boy to accept and his mother to tolerate, love or not; less than two months, another divorce and the two once again, a single-parent home. Second marriages have even less chance than first marriages, *divorce begets divorce, and the beat goes on.*

She notes that during these two months, the boy asks her if he could live with his dad, but not surprising, she *shut that down*. “No, your father is unable to take care of himself let alone another; and besides, he does not want you,” she told him, all the while knowing that the back half of her reply was a lie, cruelly created to protect her and to punish him, them.

As he matured, the boy expressed increasing interest in living with his

*If children matter, than whom more to stand in the gap than their parents; yet sadly, the parents (or a parent) can ironically become the chief enemy for which the children may hold in contempt...rather than care.*

- H. Kirk Rainer, *A Once and Always Father*

father (I am told); that in spite of his father’s lifestyle being very meager, the interest grew as he identified more with men, males. After several attempts to halt his effort, she finally gave-in though she retained his legal residence and the consequential dependent assistance along with her own income.

Several years later, I received word that their son died while serving in the army in the Middle East; and while the details were sketchy, his remains had been returned stateside and that a military service was scheduled later that week. *At least he died with honor*, I thought.

Arriving at the ceremony, I was shocked to see them standing next to each other—consoling each other, it seemed from sight. Extended family and some former church members were also recognizable, similarly consoling as they expressed their sentiments, sympathy. *I was moved to see such love sorely missed or misplaced before, belated, but somehow rebirthed as something still.*

Stebbins Street is a working-class community that has *seen better days*. Mills and other manufacturing that was *the backbone* are all but gone, leaving only the government and low-paying service jobs to backfill the void. As the jobs left so too did the significant role of fathers. Such expectations and realizations have passed to a large extent, leaving many dependent on social services and other government programs. Civic and church organizations and agencies, once a primary source of support, have given way to the government that, simply put, *has deeper pockets* to address such problems—some of which

they ironically create and adversely contribute. *Who can really argue that divorce and child disparity is always in “the best interest” of anyone? Who?*

In the last moments of the service is an Irish folk song sang by a former classmate accompanied by a violin, a fiddle. At first it seemed anachronistic, an old tune of ancestry, but the appropriateness rose as the sadness of both words and sounds literally and emotionally resonated about us, with us each, concluding with the words:

*...Then may he play on his harp in peace,  
In a world such as heaven intended,  
For all the bitterness of man must cease,  
And every battle must be ended.*

**“Human, aren’t we,”** the preacher proclaims, nodding his head and looking upward, the heavens. A street-side saint, he is the sort that seem to be dying-off, *Hellfire*, and all that *damnation and eternal fire and brimstone*.

*We are all human, aren't we? Every human life is worth the same, and worth saving.*

- J.K. Rowling,  
*Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*

A convicted voice, one of a few that stop to listen, speaks up: “What’s the point of saying it when nothing will change?”

This saint is doing something that I have not seen in many years; he is *taking it to the folks*, shouting of spiritual things, *the end times at the end of days to the ends of the Earth*—or at least to the end of Stebbins Street. Not that this kind of ministry has not long been practiced and proven, but what is unusual is his choice, subject and street. *What does he expect from here except barking dogs or children getting into trouble?* But here he is beyond the walls and pews, the hearts of the rested and the restless, whatever their desires and destiny be, amid the passer-by, public and personal.

“There will be a judgment,” he follows, “and we are all part of it,” he exclaims, eyes steely and jaw stern. “Are you ready—ready for-,”

*Always questions, but seldom finally decided; “are you ready?”*

“Ready for what,” a woman standing next to me whispers.

“Ready” as presumably a good thing begs that question, “Ready for what?” There is the spiritual and the carnal, the sacred and the defiled or damned.

Further down to earth is life and living in times that leave many questions—and few answers—if folks really care. Authorities, appointed or apparent, refuse to answer...let alone address or acknowledge the problems. *What are they hiding...for in truth, they cannot be so blind or ignorant? Withholding the truth is the same thing, the power and politics of information and then thought, actions or inactions, surrendered, conditions or not*, I think and have thought, hard but not hardened in heart.

*Do we matter*, is the first deep doubt, followed by the question, “...and by whom, and for what,” I think while the preacher shouts. “You must be born again, so said Christ to the Roman who comes in the night.”

Sometimes I feel like we are living in Rome. *Give them bread and circus* and what else do they need, want or care? Life is no longer as precious; entanglements and then “the end”, least ways of an aging empire, over-extended. Why do we keep repeating the same mistakes, I never know?

“Millions of unborn have been needlessly killed,” he continues—a contentious matter of morality co-opted by the politic, the often described, “right to choose”, the selling of supposed, individual rights. “Believe me,” the preacher pounds one hand in another, “this does have dire consequences.”

*Wow, the old man is not holding back*, I think, as a few come and go, some remain entertained and others evangelized, elicited, enlightened.

“Abortion is but one of our many deep and disturbing social problems. Some are convinced that we should have *the right to choose*, regardless of objective facts, the arbitrary and abusive actions of the law,” the preacher pours on. “Remember that the same authority that can arbitrarily decide when life begins can similarly decide when life should end! What is presumed a freedom attains its true nature, punishment, and perdition, as time does tell.”

*It is a convincing possibility, the calculated cutting short the two ends of humanity, a somewhat “final solution.”*

“It is a dangerous thing, demagoguery,” the preacher shouts.

“Did he say that democracy is dangerous?”

“No, he said a ‘demagoguery’”, which means a rabble-rouser—like a dictator, but not as direct, dangerous.

“We have all gone astray...sheep...the shepherd,” the preacher punctuates in voice and word, *referring to Isaiah the prophet*, I think.

But some know the preacher, his life here on or near Stebbins Street. He is not ordained or formally educated, He is bold but not braggart, bigot, or bully. He is just ordinary, common folks like us who work hard and keeps a family.

“Are we superior, one peoples or another—*exceptional*, a so called ‘city on a hill’ or are we all just sinners, saved by grace. We are sinners!”

*If a mother can kill her own child -  
what is left for me to kill you and  
you to kill me - there is nothing  
between.*

- Mother Teresa

And it was this proposition that really pulled me toward his perspective; that the arbitrary decision that life occurs after conception has no merit in the face of science, let alone spirituality, the church. *Now that is a profound point*, I thought, *that such supreme decisions might just as well impose limits on life*

*Loyalty and obedience to wisdom and justice are fine; but it is still finer to defy arbitrary power, unjustly and cruelly used—not on behalf of ourselves, but on behalf of others more helpless.*

- Elizabeth Gaskell

*for any reason—or no reason at all!*  
Both the scriptures and science are not enough to offset laws that oppress humans unborn—or beyond.

“This may seem outlandish, that it could happen here, but I’m here to tell you that such atrocities are not strange

at all,” he follows. “It could not happen,” he adds, “but it is happening.” This “strange” is more than concept or consideration, then and now.

“Eugenics is the strange science,” the preacher explains, “...against the teachings that ‘all men are created equal’ or, more so, ‘that all have gone astray, each to his own way, without hope except for-,”

*Eugenics asserts that all men must be so stupid that they cannot manage their own affairs, and clever, that they can manage each other's.*

- G. K. Chesterton

There are some who will not believe. It is one thing to hold to the *sanctity of life* but another to accept

that such beliefs of superiority could have been hatched here—analogous to the Nazi’s notions of a superior Arian race or to any other race of such doctrine.

“I can’t believe he’s saying that” one says to another. “Is he a lunatic or a liar,” the other replies. “He is crazy,” still another says, suggests.

But is he a liar, a lunatic?

“Howard, what do you think,” someone asks me.

“I know you have questions and that one may disagree with the other,” the pastor says, “but this is no time to debate or deny the truth however painful and provocative it may be and is. Try and test this message.”

“What can we do,” is aired from one behind me. What should-,”

“But isn’t it about choice,” the woman murmurs again, for which I turn toward her and explain.

I think he is saying that the state has used this purpose, so called “individual choice”, as a ploy or promotion—a means to condition culture on the merits of rights and privileges, perhaps diverting their attention from the real purpose, the termination and devaluation of life.

“Do you think that they lie to us,” she asks in a sweet, childlike way.

“Mam, to say that they lie to us would be to presume that they respect truth,” the pastor punctuates. “Do you really think they do that?”

“But if we didn’t have legal abortion, I mean, *the procedure* would be dangerous and still, all those babies,” she continues.

“And who would take care of them—who would pay for it,” comes another voice from behind. “Most of them don’t care.”

After a moment of stillness, the pastor responds, “These are each and all good questions and certainly have been around for a long time without any consensus or conclusion. And so, what I’m saying is that such good questions do not have good or great answers.” On this, the pastor bends down, apparently to rest his aging body. “Some of you know me,” the preacher begins, “and you know that I do not have all the answers—all the good answers! But this message is neither about *good* or about *answers*, for what is *good* to some is not for others and, as to *answers*, the matter is more that of who, not what, provides answers,” he explains. “My message is again that those who arbitrarily decide when life begins can simply and similarly decide when life ends. How can it happen except by a tyrant defying both scripture and science?”



The more this old saint spoke, the more I thought; *it is not about our rights, independence or the practical ends of unwanted or even rape-related pregnancy, but is about morality versus the amoral, the abominable.*

One woman still looks doubtful, *the other* visibly disgusted as she turns to leave. It is a *hard pill to swallow*, I thought, watching the other depart. But who am I kidding, such pseudo-philosophy, when the point of it really comes down



to the denial of both science and spirituality; that *this legal decision* of decades ago is no more or no less than a *culling*

*My firm conviction is that if wide-spread Eugenic reforms are not adopted during the next hundred years or so, our Western Civilization is inevitably destined to such a slow and gradual decay as that which has been experienced in the past by every great ancient civilization. The size and the importance of the United States throws on you a special responsibility in your endeavors to safeguard the future of our race.*

- Leonard Darwin

*of the herd. Potentially it is not over, I think with a deep dread. As they did that...they can do this, and that makes them-.*

The pastor pulls from his pocket and crumpled-up piece of paper and, unfolding the apparently well-used parchment, he reads aloud: "Government is not reason, it is not eloquence — it is force. Like fire it is a dangerous servant and a fearful master; never for a moment should it be left to irresponsible action."

"These are the words of President Washington", he adds, "but I want to go further, closer to current times and these matters that should concern us all."

"You say more than enough," comes the now familiar voice behind me, "and I think you should stop," commands one who holds the preacher as intolerant, a bigot perhaps.

"Who are you?"

"It's not so much who I am as to what I am," the voice resounds. "I am a patriot, proud of my country, and-,"

"Let the pastor speak," comes another then another.

"But he has spoken," counters the self-described patriot, "more than enough. He hates our country—that is obvious—and that is it!"

Tension builds; *not just the voice of this one, but the others too; those that see differently but not indifferent*, I think.

"I got some dinner to make," the woman remarks as one of several who seem set on voicing a reason to go.

"My boy is serving," says another apparently bewildered more than anything. "I can't turn my back on *our boys*, our country," he argues.

Still another and then another goes, some in pairs while others alone, and still the question, “Human, aren’t we,” with no sense of good or even an answer –but only the stillness of the few that remain.

**“Bipolar, manic, or depressed,”** he murmurs.

“What ‘cycle’ is this “, I ask, overhearing the caregiver, counselor.

“Oh, it’s my girl, he responds. She is in another spell, I’m afraid.”

I had heard her, them, but did not know the details. What I know is that his daughter is not unusual; mental illness of one sort or another is everywhere starting with children, commonly ADHD, and ending with the elderly, the specifics, diagnosis, and degradation. *It seems like everyone has a story*, considering the cases I come across in passing, personal experience.

Her father tells me that she was diagnosed as a teen and continues without cure but only lessened by medication and hospitalization on occasion during such spells, ends of the spectrum of this sickness.

*At times, being bipolar can be an all-consuming challenge, requiring a lot of stamina and even more courage, so if you are living with this illness and functioning at all, it's something to be proud of, not ashamed of.*

*- Carrie Fisher, Wishful Drinking*

“Looks as though she is headed into a depression,” he says with a sentiment that says, “This is common, expected.” He follows, “I know the signs.”

“I guess you do,” is all I can say, knowing that her mother and possibly a distant relative had something similar,

the same as it sounds.

“Yeah, the changes are severe,” he continues the conversation. “In some ways they are a different person, a stranger of sort.”

I watch and listen as he tended her; something that, by now, is simply a way of life for him, for them. Knowing of his wife’s related death is reason enough to pause and take-in at least something of the struggle, both the stricken and the caregiver.

“Good to see you, Howard,” he says, extending his hand. “It’s been awhile.”

“Yes, it has,” I agree, surprised that he remembers me. “I am campaigning for-,”

Not another one,” he spouts light-heartedly. “You guys never stop,” he follows, cynical perhaps but more commonly accepted, regretted.

*Boy, do I hear this often?*

"I know, I know—your right, but I am just trying to do my civic duty, volunteering for-,"

"Sure, just doing your 'civic duty', he quips, a wry expression.

*It is encouraging to see that he has not lost his sense of humor.* In fact, his reaction is milder (as most folks just scoff and walk away or, at their door, simply say, "No thank you," and nod). What has happened is that most know of the empty promises, words without actions and the flagrant, even arrogant, attitudes and actions. Every once in while comes an exception, but most attend to so-called "constituents" or some collective as a tradition.

"Daddy, who's that," she screams.

"Just a campaigner," he yells back. "No need to care," he follows. "I'll be with you in a moment," he follows as an ongoing practice, caregiving.

She is bipolar (though I thought at first, she a *wild child* dealing with some addiction, hearsay, gossip).

"Daddy, I'll be right there," she screams back, a second later storming to the door.

"Who are you," she shouts with a big smile. "I don't think we've met. You are campaigning for who, what? Is this for...?"

At breakneck speed she reels off one after another comment, scattered and random, as though a precocious child or someone reeling from the effects of too much caffeine or something similar, mind manic.

She refers to past leaders, the present and her prediction of future ones, citing articles, facts, and myths—her apparent knowledge to no end, she seems endless, *a walking encyclopedia*. To put it plainly, she shows a side that I did not know possible but then, how much do I really about *the touched*?



"Whoa," her daddy finally shouts. "Howard is busy and doesn't have time to debate the issues girl. Let him go, please, and you and I will get on."

As though I really have a chance to get a word, the conversation ended as abruptly as it began. She flies out as she arrived, as a storm with a silver lining.

"I am sorry, Howard. She gets beside herself and cannot seem to stop or slow-down. Her mom had a similar sort of disposition, *the darkness*, so I'm used to it," he confesses as though I cannot see that too.

He explains that she is maniac, *high as a kite* untethered at times. Her behavior is "unpredictable" at least, and in moments, seems malevolent and malicious—as though she is possessed by an evil spirit.

"How long has she been-,"

"Howard, it happened in degrees, but she was first diagnosed two years ago, at 15. They say it will likely get worse—like her mother."

Maniac, she *blows through* school with a fury but falls into a funk and cannot do anything, night, and day. "The school system suggested a special program," he follows, "that addresses special needs for 'special persons'."

*If I cannot feel, if I can't move, if I can't think, and I can't care, then what conceivable point is there in living?*

- Kay Redfield Jamison, *An Unquiet Mind: A Memoir of Moods and Madness*

*It sounds hellacious*, not one but two immediate family stricken, bipolar.

"The school is trying," he adds. "She is a stellar student up until she-, "

"She turns," I finish.

"*On a dime*, Howard, *on a dime*."

Folks are usually open about spiritual things, the sacred. Believing as described in The Bible, they hold that illness can be caused by spirits, causing all manner of problems not the least being psychosis, mental or emotional illness. I know of afflicted; "possessed" who are *prayed over*, even exorcised. The results are mixed but if positive are deemed a miracle, but if nothing then nothing spoken, suggested beyond the sickness as it is, stays.

"Did you try," I follow, "the church, spiritual healing?"

"I thought about it and have talked to some, but no," on account of a bad experience with his wife; those that tried and moved-on, giving-up on her in his mind. "Some said it was the drugs, and others that she was wicked, even evil."

"And the physicians, the hospital,"

"That gets expensive; the costs *stack-up* and before you know it, you're *under water*, *swamped* with medical bills."

"I know you loved your wife," I follow, a consolation amid craziness.

"She was my life. I dearly miss her, the way she was then, before bipolar changed everything," a tear in his eye.

His wife died in a car accident. He was courageous, I recall, seemingly taking this loss in stride, her life better off than before, since.

"My fears have returned," he admits. "My fear is that she will be incurable, ending-up-," as sometimes happens, missing or even dead.

Several months passed when news arrived that she had disappeared, his words *came back* to me, his fears and foreboding of the worst, her missing and his loss, again.

*He said to them, "Go!" They came out and went into the pigs, and the whole herd rushed down the steep bank into the lake and died in the water.*

- Bible, Mark 8:32

"She lapsed into *the darkness* again," a family member said. "You know, the hole that you can't dig your way out of, but bless her heart," they said just days before she too was found, her body, just a few miles away.

Family and friends arrived at the funeral as expected. Attendees spoke openly about the positive, the precious girl and her pretty mother.

"I remember when....," some would begin, others to remember or imagine.

"She had so much....," another would follow or still another,

Folks spoke of the better, normal times, reserved in and respecting of him, his lot, and all that he endured with an everlasting love, incredible patience, and understanding, even longsuffering.

Bipolar, manic, or depressed impacts *the affected* and affiliations; sometimes severely, severing ties while resulting in enormous costs in all respects. I know little about it, admitting my own misconceptions and misunderstandings. Still, I must say these things because of my own experience.

You think you know a person—really know them—and boom, they change; practically and personally a stranger or—worst yet—malicious and malevolent. How much control, consciousness, and conscience, does a mentally ill person possess, the power to manage their moods? Are the causes only physical or is there some spirituality too? *All of this remains a mystery and yet I still marvel at the caregivers, those who make love real*, I conclude.

He and I crossed paths one more time, a year or so later. He looked good and seemed, well, like a different person really, his life now radically changed, *perhaps in some ways for the better*, I consider.

“Good to see again, Howard. Sorry about the outcome of your-,”

“Ah, no worries and besides, it was inevitable,” I quip. “Anyway, I am over that.... How are you doing?”

As before, his conversation was caring and candid, courageous, I hold. *No one knows—really understands—the experience then the caregiver; the one who is there to see it all with all the feelings, the ups and downs, highs and lows, lightness and darkness and all the grey in between; and more even for one related, the spouse, sister or mother, and here, the man.*

*Love is not enough. It takes courage to grab my father's demon, my own, or - God help me - my child's and strap it down and stop its mad jig; to sit in a row of white rooms filled with pills and clubbed dreamers and shout: stop smiling, shut up; shut up and stop laughing; you're sitting in hell. Stop preaching; stop weeping. You are a manic-depressive, always; your life is larger than most, unimaginable. You are blessed; just admit it and take the damn pill.*

- David Lovelace, *Scattershot: My Bipolar Family*

Rightfully, he held back on some things. There is darkness, anger, and resentment, at least a temptation but more often a reality, the natural reaction to life's hardships, traumatic and tragic, that test with trials too long and hard to imagine, let alone conceive.

I know that what you think, feel, and talk not always the same. The simple truth is that we hold back or protect our feelings, especially men, with preconceived and personal traits of *holding our own, keeping it together*. Call it pride, ego or something more redeeming, but the traits remain as a

way of coping, courage or not.

In the only few minutes of *catching up*, the conversation included some laughter too; a sense of humor that, until now, was never shown or known.

Ken Kesey, who wrote “One Flew over The Cuckoo’s Nest” says it right: “You can’t let the pain blot out the humor no more than the humor, the pain.”

When I am going through one of my own crises, however it compares with the monumental kind of this kind, I try to reflect on him, her and them, their

lives and living. It is then, in the shadow of their darkness, that I find needed support and wanted supplication on the premise that as others did it and do it, so too can I, can we. I do not always take this path but when I do, I am all the better for it, in and through it.

I have met more like them; others who endure great and grave hardships and still I think of them and ask of you: "Do you or did you care about anyone who is Bipolar, manic or depressed?"

*He does not have anything like wisdom of age or hindsight. He is a biased historian of self, an emotional revisionist. We all are, for the most part.*

- Marc Maron, *Attempting Normal*



**“Say goodbye,”** she whispered wistfully.

“We could see it coming,” one remarks regretfully, referring to yet another plant-manufacturer closing of the series, by now more a saga.

*Sure, things change, and better that folks flex and bend for the inevitable,* some consider—those that give a care one way or another, getting by.

*Surely you did not think it would always be there, just because it has been here for many years, perhaps from the beginning,* another thought and nagging question in such times, places.

A familiar story here and elsewhere, beginning in the late 60’s, the effects of de-industrialization produce decline to once-thriving economies of small and mid-sized towns and cities. As to the chief cause, globalization and multi-national corporations sought out the lowest labor costs and in turn, highest gains for capital, at the expense of economies in many once-thriving communities of this country and perhaps those like her.



“We just can’t compete,” says a former supervisor familiar with the situation.

“The cost of living in those place is so much less and then, no benefits,” he continues, having learned much following a lay-off and finally, termination with a modest severance package and pension that appears to be

*dying on the vine.*

“I am better-off then some, those too old to start over,” he adds, seemingly relieved by his prospects albeit less income, little or no benefits.

“The company trained me and generally was good to me until they busted the union,” another follows, “and that’s went things went all to Hell!”

Coupled with de-industrialization is the dismantling of organized labor. Look no further than the decline in unions, as a percent of employment, the intended reduction—even elimination—of “organized labor” that included some fears of subversion, the “Red Scare” and something called socialism.

“Unions are dinosaurs anyway,” another says, to imply that today’s workplace is without the once-need organizations, *a right to work state*.

“What’s your opinion on this, Howard,” someone asks me, “on this, the whole mess?”

*Deindustrialization that I have written about for 40 years left a good part of the American public behind.*

- Bruce Springsteen

“Well, I think that unions are other things that have some advantages but disadvantages too, more than the dues.” *Finally, folks need jobs and if unions are a showstopper, can I really be all-in on organized labor, I think. Can principles pay the bills?*

“I have family there,” and still more folks offer a word or more, implied or expressed fears—though the shock seems to be wearing-off as time passes, the plants shutdown and those places marked by shuttered buildings, security fences and larges stretches of land, barren and depleted. As plants and plans go (or went) the closings are followed with liquidation, the equipment sold-off or scraped and a once-operation is no more. As to this and that community, there is/are a monument to manufacturing, reminders of perhaps better times with a story now and then, but less so in the passing of time.

“Yeah, my grandad’s pension failed after-,” another begins, accepting that commitments and contracts seldom last whatever the “terms & conditions”.

“It’s bad enough that they leave but then we languish,” one old timer says in a tone matching verse.

I climb into my truck and head-down the old industrial highway, now seeing the signs and symbols, the symptoms of a death and decay. West Anniston, once the music of the manufacturer, is now a dirge; faltering and faint factories, weed-choked yards and uprooted rails, doors barred and windows broken, the structures gutted and rusty, an apocalyptic panoramic. Much is written on this matter, the economic and societal changes of offshoring and such, but nothing in my mind is more meaningful than witnessing it, seeing, and feeling it. These changes beget other changes such as store and other retail closures, shrinking populations, failing school systems, and rising addictions and its attendant problems. The helping hand of

*Same Old Same Old, so it was*

yesteryears economic potential—largely driven by manufacturing—has given sway to long, global arms that pluck local production one after another.

“Say goodbye,” to many things, not all the consequence of de-industrialization, but still much that is transforming this once *model city* into a food-desert, a crime-reddened community spotted by crack and condemned housing, declining public services, untenable debt, dismay and despair.

*These are areas that have been destroyed for quarterly profit. We are talking about environmentally destroyed, communities destroyed, human beings destroyed, families destroyed.*

- Chris Hedges Interview, Bill Moyer

developments amid the powerful and prestigious who deny it, denigrating the impacted by ignoring the matter.

“I won’t deny that the losses are...,” begins a politician or his press—those without *a dog in the fight*—“but the truth is that they lacked the skills and basic

*New ideas for reviving American manufacturing seem to appear every day. Many of these notions have merit, but most are built on a flawed premise...Unfortunately, U.S. industrial decline is a long-run phenomenon and will not be reversed by short-term fixes.*

- Louis D. Johnston, “History lessons: Understanding the decline in manufacturing”

I still believe in this community, the possibility that some of its glory remains and that economic opportunity is and will be there to sustain us; still, I know what I see and feel and what others are saying too—not just on Stebbins but across our states, those seriously and irreparably impacted by these

requirements to support ongoing operations; and while unfortunate, those impacted by the change must be willing and able to change, seek new opportunities and *get-on-with-life*.”

From this news report, the words of a congressman or similar, comes another carefully crafted,

“This week, the city reported that demolition of the mill property will begin next year and while there are no

further plans for the property, the project is considered a positive for the community concerned about the safety of the structure as well as known environmental issues from deposits of \_\_\_\_\_,”

I know of several industrial properties in the area with “environmental issues”, steel and iron works, a chemical fertilizer plant and then the military dating back to a chemical facility here and in the next city over. *Often it seems that such aftermath is merely glossed over, the land chorded-off, left idle for the locals to accept as-is, and again, get-on-with-life underwater or water under the bridge.*

De-industrialization is not a recent development; this decline began decades ago starting with heavy industry, iron and steel, followed by one after another of the dozen or so textile mills spanning from nearby Piedmont to Oxford, statewide from Florence, south toward Gulf Shores, and still more states up from Maine to Miami.

These changes are tragic, the potential and prospect gone, the elusive *American Dream*. But then decline began further back when mothers took on jobs and careers, often at great sacrifice to *the home* and family. Still more—and to *keep-up*—or just *keep your head above water*—folks took-on increasing debt beyond a mortgage and car to include credit card, medical and then college, payday loans and the like. Decline came and still it continues for places and times as Stebbins Street and peonage for the people.

“The bills keep coming but the means don’t,” I recall the words of one or another so many impacted by those and these times, outcomes.

What can I do to help? You listen to folks and try to be sympathetic but then finally your effort and energy turn to your own needs and wants—looking-out for you, your own. Some trust in spiritual power, prayer, and intercession, while others, drinking and drugs, easing the pressures and pains, staving-off despair, and depression for the moment but never long, forever.

“And you know the sun’s setting fast”, an Iris Dement song begins, “and just like they say nothing good ever last,” the tune rings true.

“This is our town,” one declares perhaps to remind the heart, roots, and relations. “Our folks came here way back-,” he adds, an ancestry of the names goes back a century or more.

“Go own and kiss it goodbye but hold on to lover cause your heart’s bound to die,” I faintly hear the next line of the song, her strong, sweet twang.

I hop back in my truck and head up the street passing the Goal Post, BAR-B-Q; one of the last independent, family-owned, it is a landmark on main street reminiscent of the drive-in's, the duck tales with gobs of grease and kind of things somewhat like "Happy Days". There is talk around town that it too is soon to close though somebody is interested in buying the neon kicker and post; both the local paper and then that Facebook account under the name, "Remember When...", that features the finer times and good times some of which appear in the comments beneath photos and subtitles.

One of my own Friday night ventures was a cemetery of all things; the one on Noble Street behind the bowling alley, a major make-out point for the, cooler kids I suppose—those with drives, dollars and dates.

All these places are still there, I think, but it's more the population that changes; more leaving than coming and fewer babies with young folks far less likely to marry and start families while word has it that my high-school has *gone downhill*.

Still, the refrain, "Go on and say goodbye to our town, to our town," prompts still more images if not memories; photos most often in the archives at the city library or city hall that gives light to the first city in Alabama to have electric, public lights.

"Still, it was a hard life," others admit, referring to the long hours and, going way back, the heat and air, saturated with particulate of one kind or another: coal dust, black ash, cotton fibers and *God knows what*, was ingested and digested—the effects lessening life, a good but hard life.

*Displaced workers, along with others who fear for their livelihood, are fertile ground in which to sow anti-immigrant sentiment, since angry and frustrated people often seek some target on which to blame their problems.*

- Robert Wald Sussman, *Myth of Race: The Troubling Persistence of an Unscientific Idea*

"Sure, it does beat being poor," destitute, dependent, and sometimes deeply in debt, as the costs and other consequences mount. But there is much more in the accounts, the aftermath, that causes and contributes to deep resentment and fears—and especially as often these jobs are offshored or go further south to

Mexico, as was more common in the 90's, the migration of money—not labor, the good but hard lives left behind.

“Ross Perot called it ‘the big sucking sound’,” referring to NAFTA and a presidential campaign about that time. The *money migration* moves again even as the *Maquiladoras* along the Rio Grande are *drying up*, their jobs going east to Asia, the Pacific Rim.

“Who or what is really at cause, responsible,” is a key question at *the root of the matter*. Some say, “It’s organized labor; they demanded higher wages,” while others say, “It’s the government,” implying that they allow companies to go global—perhaps “the plan” all along. Still others say, “Greed”, referring to all that receive dividends, capital gains, bonuses or any other rewards or remunerations. Most agree that they are selling America out, with growing income disparity and an ever-shrinking concentration of wealth.

Some folks supposedly blame other folks, Latinos, and foreign-nationals, prompting news’ reports—as though any prompting is necessary—of racism, supremacy, nationalism, more fears, and phobias. Similar sources of information go on to say that the outcome of the last presidential election was a backlash of this sort; folks fed-up from losing and losing-out, the *American Dream* slip-sliding away. The Southern Poverty Law Center deems some as *extremists* with emphasis on intolerance, ignorance, and insolence. Other media site this movement as responsible for mass-shootings and other calculated acts of aggression aimed to reassert some sort of supremacy.

*White supremacy is a greater threat than international terrorism right now.*

- “We Are Being Eaten from Within.’ Why America Is Losing the Battle against White Nationalist Terrorism”, Time magazine, August 8, 2019

“Say goodbye”, to our town and towns like ours. Say goodbye to commerce and not just Wall Street steeped in speculation. Say goodbye to the companies that built housing, commissaries, and medical facilities, and supported local communities, voluntarism and other contributions of charity and solidarity. Say goodbye to the way it was, fact and fantasy, resolutions and regrets, gladness, and sadness, wonder and wisdom and other pair of alternating, associated or analogous alliterations of Anniston and the like.

**“Our little town,”** he begins, “became more some years back, but somewhere along the way, it *turned south*’, and the signs and symptoms from Main Street to the back alley, from one household to another and all places in between, reflect neglect as what was is no more the same.

Today’s sad music on this score reminds me of Woody Guthrie and other folk artists that produced and performed songs of The Great Depression, the

*The world is filled with people who are no longer needed. And who try to make slaves of all of us. And they have their music and we have ours.... And without their music and ideological miscarriages to compare our songs of freedom to, we'd not have any opposite to compare music with --- and like the drifting wind, hitting against no obstacle, we'd never know its speed, its power....*

- Woody Guthrie

hard-times and soft-side of folks, the failures and the victories if just to endure. Woody Guthrie and later, Pete Seeger, supported such causes, the oppression of the working class and the real threat of Fascism and despots of a similar sort. They were true patriots, the kind that give more than a shit and still, take the heat, stigmatized as socialists or categorized as communists or another of the ‘isms deemed to be dangerous and deadly to freedom and

the things described as, “that which we stand for; “life, liberty...” and dreams.

The facts are that most simply do not care about *our little town* or any of such places as long as they steer clear of *a big boot, a long arm, or a heavy hand*. One has to be part of it, to sense the sting, the suffering and sacrifice; the pain and the punishment to stand for—and not pretend—something that matters to folks like you and me, not the masses or some institution without compassion or creed or groups groping for privilege because they’re special.

“That is how Empires Fall,” as another title of another artist, John Prine, *singing of what*, I think. Listening to the words and taking-in some interpretations, the theme of this one seems more about apathy; that when folks settle for convenience and comfort over care and constitution, what is left but the shouting and then much more than *our little town* comes crashing down around them—most made unaware of causes, the real reasons.

“Sure, I was kid in the depression,” and old man tells me. “Lord, what we had to go through just to make ends meet,” he continues, “and we didn’t know

what waste was. Out little town was littler; one drug store, two gas stations and three police officers—it was small.”

How hard times were, then more than ever—or at least to the present—and fewer living today remember those hard times.

“We didn’t know what poor was because we were all that way,” is a familiar statement, and that is a difference.



“When so many are suffering, sacrificing, it seems in some odd way to be easier, more acceptable,” you think. If not so many...but less so, then the hard times are “over there, not here”, the *dreams* and desires live and class struggle and *seven sins*, like envy and other abuses rise, prosper.

I doubt that defiance or dissidence would happen around here, in our little town or for that matter in any little town where community is strong, steadfast, but the big cities is another matter entirely. These rare but rapacious occurrences never end well for anyone; the folks suffer all the way around and in the end *might make right* and *the establishment* is unleashed, skin for skin call it a mob, labor union, a horde or herd against *the man*—even our military!

*What is going to happen to our little town*, I ponder as my truck thumps over a series of train crossings twixt track, spurs, and switches, *down the line* but barely distinct. *The whole complex is in slow decay, more for haunting dreams than anything else, a lasting reminder of what once was a center of commerce: invention, investment, industry and incomes*, the thought occurs.

“The railroad came generations ago,” I can faintly hear from some local historian; names such as Seaboard, connecting Atlanta to Birmingham... consolidations to today’s CSX and BNSF. *Sure, the trains still pass through, even Amtrak, but the volume is nothing as before. Some track is now trails going west to Piedmont and Georgia, named after a Creek Indian Chief Ladiga, seems promising*, the thought follows, *but it is not the same. Rails to trails* considered continuing the project to the west, toward Oxford, but as memory serves me, folks said “No” or something like that.



### *Same Old Same Old, so it was*

Our little town grew thanks in part to the military, both an Army Depot that remains and then Fort McClellan that closed in the mid-90's, part of BRAC. Tracks that crossed onto the fort partly to deliver coal *back in the day*, the facility still there, a few lumps of coal aging below. Meanwhile, the tracks at the Depot transport M-1 Abrams and other armor on flatbeds, coming in from who-knows-where and headed-out to Ohio for overhaul and refit.

Cotton is a crop still grown in small pockets around here. If you travel The LADIGA Trail for example, you will come across a patch that by September is white as snow. Keep going toward Sand Mountain and still much of the same, so while cotton is long since been king, it presses on without local mills as another step in the supply chain to bulk or finished goods.

"That cotton dust was bad to breath," somebody reflects who did it, was



there. "It caused my kin folk all kinds of problems," he adds, not to mention that they also smoked tobacco for most of the lives. "My Pa died of white lung," he continues, pressing the point, the same snow-like fiber that covered everything, containing anything in micro that the plant possessed. "And if

breathing it is not bad enough, try picking it all day long 'til your fingers bleed and back breaks," the same continues. "They say that the cotton gin use to be up toward Jacksonville and getting there from here (just eight miles away) was an all-day occasion, going, selling, and returning." It is not the only crop, but it remains much in the memories though fading as its dyed cotton in the sun. It was king, a boom, from the state's Black Belt to the foothills of the Appalachian along Sand Mountain still today.

How I speak of it, the past, is more of the manufacturing of textiles, not agriculture. While other segments, and specifically the auto industry, are abundant thanks to economic incentives not the least of which is the relatively low cost of living and thus, lower wages. No one can accurately attest that deindustrialization has left blight on the state economy, employment. The

losses of such significance as Birmingham, “Southern Pittsburg”, are at least offset by the gains of “Southern Detroit”. What I sense and what they speak of is more simply about our little town, and those like it, deeply and irreparably lessened by the losses of deindustrialization.

“There is no city too small for God”, some still say in the matter of the mine given out or the mill gone. Our little town still matters, if not to the powerful at least to the all-powerful. Even as *the faithful* remain, no one can deny the churches that are faltering, attendance and membership waning except for the charismatic kind that perform miracles, speak in tongues and do other things that may seem to keep *the word* alive. This trend is national too, the reasons of which another Alabamian, Thom S. Rainer, sums it up, stemming from cultural, generational, demographical, technological, and other changes. *Perhaps church decline would still be happening if deindustrialization had not happened, but I tend to think that the faithful and the factories are linked.*

“Howard, it is certainly a serious matter but a mystery too,” a deacon from one church describes churches. “Yes, most of the young folk move on to the big cities for work, the life, leaving the old and a fewer young to *fill the flock*.”

“There are several causes,” I reply. “It was inevitable, I suppose,” as things never stay the same whether for better or worse. But “the mystery” is more how long a church continues when the shouting is over, the “Amen” and “Praise Him” tween the stern sermon of repentance and salvation, the battle of the flesh, spiritual warfare and other matters of the church, lively or less so.

One whose stuff I read, Chris Hedges describes our culture in decline as well (however he views the church, Christianity). Nationalism is a religion too, he thinks; a reverence for and in the American way—not to be confused with patriotism. Whereas patriotism holds to possibilities to *be better than we are*, nationalism is more that “we are” already, agents of freedom and democracy. *As I get older and perhaps wiser, the relations between nationalism and faith are growing distant, the former just an idea or notion while the later far much more, the real hope of a future, uncompromised freedom, and peace.* And while

*Hope has a cost. Hope is not about comfortable or easy. Hope requires personal risk...Hope is action. Hope is doing something.*

- Chris Hedges

*Same Old Same Old, so it was*

churches and forts close, nationalism is growing, metastasizing like a cancer. I guess *war is a force that gives us meaning*, the title of one of his books, and we are an *empire of illusions*, still another....

Our little town is strong on the military (again, the once Army fort and the remaining depot, the largest employer in the area). On Memorial, Independence and Veterans Day, the main highway is flanked with flags and sometimes placards of those that served and *gave their last full measure*. The honoring of these and others is a good thing, but the prevailing and perpetuating wars are not, as James Madison and others warned us long ago. *How long can a nation continue warring before the false hope of nationalism comes home—any that are or were real patriots, long silenced or worse?*

Our little town is in fact littler now, and as things go, is becoming small in more ways than one. Department stores give way to pawn and consignment shops, local mom & pop stores to the discount box stores. Some areas are worse still, veritable food deserts, from drugstores to crack-houses, from thriving communities to condemned buildings and vacant lots.

Something else that is seen, sensed and substantial is this paradox of social media; that while friends are made on-line, much less is the possibility in person, *the real world*. I heard it called “atomization”, a loneliness ironically contracted in this age of information. *Sure, I got lots of friends on Facebook, but I will be damned if I will speak to them in person and, honestly, do not care to*, is a thought of some, this social ill. *No, I would rather hang-out with myself; just me and my computer, smart-phone, or smart-pad, behind my closed doors*

*Aristotle said that only two living entities are capable of complete solitude and complete separateness: God and beast. Because of this the most acute form of suffering for human beings is loneliness.*

- Chris Hedges,  
*War is a Force That Gives Us Meaning*

*and closed heart*, is more of this sense, sickness. “How lonely do we have to be,” depends on more than us, each—don’t you think? *Isolation* is not about descent, desertion, or a disregard for democracy abroad, but instead about ceasing to care about our community and culture, and more, our sacred commitments one to another. *I do not*

*want to be an isolationist, disregarding and even denying what is real however raw it may be, but then, what can I do about it?*

It is late in the evening though and I am tired, so I will say goodnight to our little town, anticipating the sun tomorrow, another day.

"It is, '**Ash grove**'," the pianist replies, her response obviously drawn

*...let this be my epitaph:*

**THE ONLY PROOF HE NEEDED**

**FOR THE EXISTENCE OF GOD**

**WAS MUSIC.**

- Kurt Vonnegut

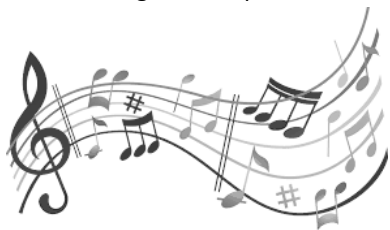
from decades of music, instrumental and voice accomplishments and even some of her own composition on inspiration. "It is Welsh, Howard," she continues, detailing some history, the meaning of it.

"I had no idea," is all I can say.

Ash trees grow in Alabama, the White and the Green Ash, but I am not too interested in that, but more the Welsh ballad (as I now know it to be). You see, this song came my way when raising the first of four children. Trying everything to get him on a regular sleeping pattern, the music included a collection of classic, soothing songs, "Ash Grove" as one that I remember well.

Songs and music are memorable and especially relevant when we match them to a key events or moment in our lives; the kind where/when at hearing..., thoughts and feelings turn to a point, a place or person. Any with some age and memory can hear an old favorite (or even a less than favored) and recall such, this sensation. Elvis brings tears to my grandmother, especially one of his spiritual recordings. *Boston* or *The Eagles* remind me of high school (though I never really cared for their music at the time), and "Ash Grove" reminds of the travails of a first-time parent trying to do the right thing with limited, irregular sleep and never enough time in the day. *Those were long*

*days, I think; that you never think will end and then one day do they do.*



Ash is a common wood for musical instruments. If I understand the lyrics or words of "Ash Grove", there is a dual meaning in reference, both the tree and

the instrument. In this thought, I hesitate to suggest this because the words may only be describing the harp music heard from or through a grove of Ash, but I don't think I gave the words any attention then, the soothing instrumentation enough to at draw us, the lull us to sleep, the parents if not the children.

There is that human tendency, that quality, to try to recall the good times, *the better angels* of some sorted and even sad times, *and music is a way*, I think. Music is, with some exceptions, poetry put to a melody; it excites and inspires us in some way from the moment to a lifetime. I may not even think twice about a song when I first hear it but later, at some key time, connect with it in way that may be as deep as thinking it is mine, I wrote it. Music goes back to the beginning when, later David sang and played The Psalms whether to mourn or to celebrate (good times), to laugh or to cry—or both—or whether to think, dance or just sing alone in unison, parts or drunken discord. *God gave music to man, our friend*, I am reminded.

*When and what was the first song I remember, I think*, considering the same eventual thought for my own children. Was it a song at church, possibly ‘Jesus Love Me’, or a nursery rhyme from friend or family, or some pop song from the “Top 40” blasting out over the local AM radio station or from my older sister’s record player, the room next door? *What is the first song that I can remember?* I think about this without answer, memory of that moment—but only silence as the next best thing to music.

*Silence and music are special though sometimes so-called music makes me appreciate silence more*, I think as the low decibels vibrating from a passing car travel down my spine, disrupting every functioning part of my body from my brain to bowels. *Surely not all music is, well, pleasing, but more punishing, painful.* The most audibly angry is Punk, Rap and Heave Metal.

But back to “Ash Grove”, the subject at hand, the memory of my life as a young parent of a very young child. The truth is that there are times when music and its memories take me away from thoughts and feelings of what is commonly called “the darkness” or otherwise, a sense that *the world is closing in on me*, reducing me to irrelevance, insignificance or by any other similar word, nothingness. Music is a cool water or breeze on a hot, humid day, simply said. What better way to lift one out of hard times or mad moments than music? Sure, music makes one mad but at least they have some sense—real or not—that their madness is justified by the movement, never mind the doubts of song, punk, funk, or junk. *This genre of grunge makes me mad but more because I can’t stand it, but oh well.*

Music is for everyone and everybody. Sure, different genres and genomes, different rhythms and rhymes and different preferences for different people;

*Where words fail, music speaks.*

- Hans Christian Anderson

but still, music is a gift for everyone at all times to all folk from the youngest to the oldest, the first verse to the last,

from the chants of old to the raps-ridiculous, there is at least one song for each throughout time and across every nation, America to the Axis, Alabama to Zimbabwe.

Back to “Ash Grove” (once again), the beginning words that describe *a green valley where streams meander*; yes, to take one to a pastoral place far the coal mines (of Wales) and all other places and peoples in an odd *place* to

*Music is the universal language of mankind.*

- Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

seek and find peace of mind or, in times of conflict, peace of any kind. But in the grove is a green valley with a refreshing stream and the time, the hour, of no

concern. It can (or could) be evening, *twilight*, or *noonday...in the dark shadows of the Ash grove*, but the meaning is more the place, not the time. *This place is eternal, always*, I believe.

Add to the words the rolling flow of the melody and the sounds of young voices and I drift back to my children from the first to the last, from one to another; their laughter and the playing, their crying and screaming, their sickness and health, their moments of wonder and their angelic expressions at sleep. Oh, how I miss those moments and the marvelous and miraculous sense of the experiences—even darkness—of parenting; for it is such times that we can be once again children too, tween the hours of caring and concern.

*The Ash grove, how graceful, how plainly ‘tis speaking, the wind through it playing has language for me. Whenever the light through its branches is breaking, a host of kind faces is gazing at me.*

“Who is gazing at you,” a voice asks me.

“Kind faces of those who care,” I tell *a voice*. “Yes, faces who love me and I them, the later of the two as mine to keep, to hold and to return when times are tough and *the darkness* looms,” I continue.

“Do you mean your children,” *a voice* again.

“Yes, but more than that, I mean all those with kind faces, a child-like quality of sincerity, honest and true,” I promptly return.

“But you cannot go back,” the voice commands. “You can never go back to the way you thought it was—the way you wanted it be,” continues a voice assured, absolute. *Time will not let me return*, I know, I know.

How to tell this voice what I sense, feel; that though I surely cannot go back—“home again”—I still hold the memories, if just a desire, a dream, from which comes some short fix, maybe more, against *the damn darkness*.

“Listen to the song, ‘Ash Grove,’” I say. “If you just listen to the song, or any song of such meaning to you, will you not know...to feel what I feel?”

*You can't go home again.*

- Thomas Wolfe

“Go on,” the voice follows. “Tell me what happens next?”

*The friends of my childhood are again before me, each step wakes a memory as free as I roam.*

“I don’t see your friends,” the voice says somberly.

“Would pictures help,” I respond sharply. “I have some pictures here, and they-,”

“Pictures of your friends nothing to me,” the voice returns, dismissing the images as memories best left to the blackness—not some relief from it.

“But I can hear their ‘soft whispers,’” as the song sounds, “and ‘rustle’ of memories as I remember them,” and I want to remember.

“You’re exaggerating,” the voice cautions, claims, a dream, a desire to *hope for the best* never mind *plan for the worst*. “Stop pretending,” comes a command that cuts to my core, my senses of what is right, righteous.

*The voice is right in reality*; we can never *go home* as it was—or even as we want or wanted it to be. I understand that time changes and that we change too and that, with all that I can conceive or conjure-up, we cannot go back.... But this impossibility is not my point, you see, but it my survival and sustainment, the power of the mind and heart to receive what God gave and gives us each, love, and to carry it with us when times get hard, dark and dreary. My point is that this music takes me to something and somewhere magical and mysterious—but above all, matters to me.



Some might say, “You’re just trying to cope,” while others may go further, playing therapist, suggesting some

*The most beautiful things are not associated with money; they are memories and moments, and if you do not celebrate those, they can pass you by.*

- Alek Wek

“support” to help *get me through* this, or that or another. But sometimes troubled or troubling times are not something we can *get through*, over; sometimes, trouble follows with all *the*

*darkness*, the dread, depression. Sometimes our minds and hearts kick-in to remind us that trouble is not everything but is something that sets, hard to overcome let alone face, but still, with kind faces it is less so.

“Try to look on the bright side,” another voice suggests.

“Hey, that is exactly what I mean, looking on the bright side,” but doing it with a memory of music, magic, and mystery. I look back as those *kind faces*,

*Dreams, if they're any good, are always a little bit crazy.*

- Ray Charles

certain that I was there whether half asleep or half in love or, as an often phrased, “half-full” or *bright side*, the “glass” of life, “empty” aside.

Was that moment of “Ash Grove” so special as to never leave it behind? No, but on a sad note, I was forced to depart *the grove* sooner than planned, some of the *kind faces* left to someone else except for those memories; and, as perhaps often considered, it is the absence that makes the music and its memory more cherished, wonderful and winsome.

That child of mine took on music in his older but still young life, some years later of this song, our experience. Much of what he did on this score might just stem from his own memories and even “Ash Grove” however remote the possibility. Still, he loves music today as I love the memory of then, that moment and rhythm, and a rhyme.

*I didn't want to kiss you goodbye — that was the trouble — I wanted to kiss you good night — and there's a lot of difference.*

- Ernest Hemingway

“Thank you for the title of that song.” I offer my deepest appreciation.

“Oh, you’re welcome,” she replies.

It is a beautiful song and to hear again is truly an awareness that it and they never left me, not really. *It was always there and will be always be there.*

"Can you play it," I ask, hoping for a moment of that moment, on which she responds,

"I can, Howard. Would you like to hear it again?"

*If I hear it then I will dream once again, so "Yes, please play Ash Grove."*

"Oh, you don't want to hear it, **'The long, terrible story'**", comes the comment, a voice from an older man who looks lost.

"Are you okay sir," I say, urged by something to say something.

"I'm not lost, just not sure," he replies smartly, sternly.

"And if you don't mind me asking, not sure about what?"

"Oh, it's the lady," he explains. "She is so hard to shop for."

"What's the occasion," I ask to suggest that I might be able to help, though I too have trouble in this area. *This is always a tough one.*

"Don't you know man, valentines are coming up and-,"

"What about flowers—it seems like a sure thing?"

"I've don't that in the past, roses and assortments, but she has these allergies you see, and-,

"And there's chocolate; that dark stuff is fabulous," I continue my short list—just before desperation kicks-in—still hopeful a certainty is certain.

"Been there, done that, and-,"

"Let me guess, she's-,"

"My wife is a diabetic and-,"

"But chocolate is not bad for diabetics," I pop-off, "especially dark chocolate." *Who in their right mind is going to turn down dark chocolate?*

"But she tells me more times than I can count that chocolate is not-,"

*And out of that hopeless attempt has come nearly all that we call human history—money, poverty, ambition, war, prostitution, classes, empires, slavery—the long terrible story of man trying to find something other than God which will make him happy.*

– C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*

"Maybe she has other reasons—for saying that" I stutter.

"Are you calling my wife a liar," he snaps back.

*Hmm, this guy is a grizzly one but at least he loves his wife—which is saying something considering what I see, hear and, yes, have experienced firsthand.*

No one who cares about their marriage will admit that it is easy, full of bliss and happiness. Marriage is a wonderful gift to humanity that, like other gifts, goes unappreciated and finally, undone.

And “happiness”, well, it is misleading. Yes, I have come to accept that; happiness is a moment at best but what is happiness really but a state of mind, a sense that everything is well, satisfying...for the moment.

“She’s a tough one,” the man says.

*What is the old saying: It takes one to know one?*

“I know, I know, you’re just trying to help,” he follows, a bit more considerate than before. “Ah, what’s your name anyway,” he follows.

“I am Howard,” I say while thinking *maybe after all he is just a sentimental fool like me.*

“She does struggle with her weight. She is not hour-glassed figured no more. The little princess has become a full-figured queen.”

*Who is...really, but beauty is more than skin deep?* “But she’s still your bride and you’re still her man.”

“You are right about that young man!”

“I’m not that young,” I said, almost *under my breath.*

“Well, you’re younger than me and, I consider that young.’

“Understand completely and-,”

“Do you?”

“I guess, yes, I do...I think I do.” I reply, still uneasy about my words.

The old man closes his eyes for a moment as though he is drifting off, but then asks, “What makes us happy, Howard?”

*Wow, this is getting deep.* I did not expect the conversation to go any further than a, “No thank you,” but here we are grappling with questions short of answers. *The old man is proving himself wise, I think.*

“Well,” pausing for a moment of my own, “maybe being happy is not the real matter,” I suggest, waiting for his remark.

“Maybe you’re right...not a good question.”

“I’m not saying it’s a bad question but am implying that *happiness* is so, well, situational. I mean, think of a child with a temperament that can *turn on a dime*; one minute he is *happy as a clam* and the next minute, *mad as a hornet.*”

“I got a grandson like that,” he remarks, “but then, I was like that too.”

“Yeah, me too,” I add with a smirk. “I was a little Hellion.”

"Howard the hellion," he remarks. "Well at least you're honest about it."

"Denying it is just not possible. Too many folks know the way I was," I continue. "And how they remind you of something you either can't—or don't want to remember." *But then again, kids are sometimes, well, very rambunctious. I suppose it best to get over it rather early than carry it into the later years—when the law has a say. As they say, "Get it out of your system."*

"Howard, you can't pretend that something didn't happen for long," he says, the sage coming out. "Truth has a way of 'coming out' given enough time."

*Well, we have reaffirmed that truth is timeless, and that happiness is not. What next, I thought. Hope is much more than happiness, I decide. I had rather have hope than happiness; the first about the future, the second merely a moment—a few minutes of passion and pleasure, pleasing or being pleased and then, boom, back to "salt min". I suppose King Solomon was right.*

"I hope that whatever I choose, it will please her," the old man says, sincerely, "Sometimes the disappointment is too much to bear."

"And you think it will, please...?"

"Hell no," he charges, his wit and wanting on the wane.

*Every man has his secret sorrows  
which the world knows not; and  
often we call a man cold when he is  
only sad.*

- Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

"Now there's hope then," I say while a slight grin arrives on his weathered face.

"There sure is, hope," he agrees, "but not happiness, I can you tell that,"

No one his age has anything to hide, not usually, unless it be some *skeleton in the closet* too frightening to take, too shameful to show. Some carry matters *to the grave* while others, more daring or determined, *let it all hang out*. There is no shame in taking risks—even falling flat on your face about love, but men are not always *heartless* or *cold-blooded*. Some men take lost love hard whether it was a mother, the most expected, or a wife and so-called "love". Failure is not forgotten, and the unfolding fears cause for *the cowboy to never return to the saddle*.

*Shame is a soul eating emotion.*

- Carl Gustav Jung

As it is, this fella impresses me as one who simply does not care what others think. Once he gets on *his high horse*, the ride is on, for you see, his wife is not with him anymore. She is alive but they are separated several years back, as he explains to my chagrin but then, a challenge to understand why he continues the courtship *come what did*.

"I didn't know, I really-,"

"I know that you didn't...," he interrupts. "I am ashamed of what happened, my heart broken," he laments. "It is a damn shame that I am so ashamed."

"She is a diabetic and not-,"

"Oh, she's all that and more," he replies, following with her multitude of health problems.

"As her health deteriorated, so did our finances. Medical benefits simply would not cover most costs and, well, I did not have the means one way or another to keep-up, the keep it all together."

"It is fair to say that *if you don't have your health than-*,"

"I don't know, though I've heard that *more times than I can shake a stick*."

But regardless of the truth or reality of the saying, the details of his story resonated with me; medical care has been *the headline*; financial problems and funding predicaments—as is frequently the cause for *deep* distress and debt—let alone family disparity.

"How have you made it, this far," commenting on what seems courage.

"Not in the most honorable way, Howard," he quips.

The separation, the parting, was understandably difficult. He loved his wife and wanted to be with her, always and forever, he tells me. He never imagined that this would happen but then it did, and then?

"I turned to alcohol for a while," he admits regrettably, "and finally had enough of that to realize that it always left me worse-off than before."

It is natural to seek an escape; something if just momentary to sooth us, soften the blows, help us forget our woe and feel something or someone.

"You wouldn't know it to look at me, but I was a handsome gent," he touts. "It was a gift I suppose; something that you're born with."

"Did you remarry," given what seems a prospect, possibility?

"Of course not," he retorts. "She was my only wife and my only wife she'll be."

"Look, I've probably already said too much, asked too many questions, but-,"

"What do you want to know, Howard," he asks genteelly.

Folks are testy when it comes to close relationships: family can be inseparable when challenged by outsiders while, at the same time, *waging war* within. To ask someone about their marriage is to invite a storm of indignation—as I have experienced previously. *It seems unreasonable to others but not unusual, as blood is thicker than water, while ironic that those closest to us are sometimes the most threatening, tumultuous.*

"You know that she became chronically ill and, honestly, it was not total bliss before that—not even our courtship," he tells me. "She was *no work of art*; more, a work in process if you know what I mean."

"But you loved her just the same and-,"

"I still do, Howard. Nothing will change my love for her—nothing! I know that it seems a contradiction," he continues, sensing my confusion. "But my deep feelings are probably more about *now*, and not what I had—or didn't have—before."

"You see in a *better light*?"

"Oh, worse than that," he replies. "I see it from a light that shines so bright as to leave no imperfections or impossibilities."

"It is a dream," I suggest, more a statement than a question.

"Yeah, a fantasy, a false hope, but this was my mistake,"

*Why do we play these mind-games, fooling ourselves? Is it because of the child that remains; the one that wants to play and pretend even when the background is too bitter and bile for the mature to manage?*

He laughs in the smallest but surest way; just a grin with some hesitant but accompanying giggle, more a sigh of relief than anything silly or comical.

"I was so close to *ending-it-all*, my long, terrible story," he continues his confession. "I was close, very close, so that I could see-,"

"That boy you are," I impulsively interrupt with my mind's voice.

"Howard, how did you know?"

"I could see him in you, your expression, your whole manner, shows you, that boy."

"That boy tells me that my life was not without hope; that who I was is somehow and somewhere who I am. He reminds me that happiness is just a moment, a sensation, but hope is so much more."

I know that you are thinking what I thought; that his notion of that boy is just the senility symptomatic of a long, terrible story. *But I have not the heart to doubt this source of hope*, I thought.

"I'll send some flowers, I think," he says.

"But I thought that-,"

"Oh sure, the flowers wither and maybe do little to make-up for time, but I want to do it anyway." he explains, taking a breath and smiling. "It makes me feel good!"

After helping him pick-out something with a card, I ask, "What's the address?"

"South Stebbins Street, at the foot of Coldwater Mountain," he replies. "That is where she lives."

"That should make her-,"

"Hopeful, I think," he finishes. "I hope, hopeful."

*In short, if youth is not quite right in its opinions, there is a strong probability that age is not much more so. Undying hope is co-ruler of the human bosom with infallible credulity. A man finds he has been wrong at every preceding stage of his career, only to deduce the astonishing conclusion that he is at last entirely right.*

- Robert Louis Stevenson



"It's simply '**Anger and hate**,'" she said, expressing her feelings toward those apparently responsible for the contaminated soils. "They're responsible and there's *no two-ways about it!*"

Her outcry is just one of many sounding-off about one of several environmental issues affecting the area; between a local fertilizer plant and several army installations, the county is seemingly fighting a losing war on contamination of the ground water and soil. For possibly several decades, these and other industry and military interests have seemingly been careless in the treatment and discharge of chemicals ranging from production by-products to munitions and related materials. Now, with the estimated magnitude of one

of the military fort closures, and the case of PCB disposal, the matters are nationally known.

*Anger is like flowing water; there is nothing wrong with it if you let it flow. Hate is like stagnant water; anger that you denied yourself the freedom to feel, the freedom to flow; water that you gathered in one place and left to forget. Stagnant water becomes dirty, stinky, disease-ridden, poisonous, [and] deadly; that is your hate.*

- C. Joy Bell C.

He is a biologist, this instructor giving a lecture at the county cooperative office. Having driven-up from Auburn, he was just here for the day, the primary purpose of delivering some subject matter for a master gardener's class at the Co-op.

"What do you mean", she interjects, "*no two-ways about it?*"

"Plainly speaking, they were aware of the risks at the time; and simply put: they should be held liable for all related affects including the costs for the clean-up, the remediation of the soils," the instructor explains. "I can't see it any other way given the information, data and circumstances."

The instructor is understood to not be a citizen by birth; in fact, he had been raised in Portugal and, after acquiring his education here, decided to stay as a teacher, now a tenured professor. Fluent in English though bearing his native dialect, he combines the knowledge and skill to deliver a compelling, captive message. What is more, the message could not have been more timely or relevant considering all that this community has endured in the wake of *the learning*—then litigation, a class-action led by a high-profile lawyer.

“How long do think it will take to recover, to restore our soils,” another question from one of the class.

“Hard to say,” he replies spontaneously, “but what I mean is that these cases can sometimes go on for years—longer even.”

“What, ten...twenty years, you think?”

“Again, I can’t say for sure. Consider for example the industrial properties along the south end of Noble Street—what was once the center of your heavy industry,” he begins. “Do you know why this land is not remediated or otherwise repurposed?”

A flurry of comments and questions follow suggesting that much of this area is simply dormant—potentially too costly to clean-up and therefore, left to rot in effect, a wasteland.



“It makes me mad as hell to even to think it,” an older fellow spouts-off over the others. “Don’t get me wrong,” he continues, “we depended on the companies—the bread and butter of our commerce—for years, but it shouldn’t be the way. It’s bad enough they up and took-off, leaving so many *high & dry*!”

“I know,” several say, their sentiment shared around the room.

“But to leave us like this—in dire straits—I mean. It isn’t bad enough these corporations closed-up shop but then to leave all this refuse behind; it just isn’t right or decent,” the older fellow bellow on. “What are we,” he begins again.

“I agree,” the faculty follows, “but this if often the plight when it comes to problems of this sort. Not that it helps but consider nearby Gadsden, where the old steel mill poses a similar blight. And then, the long-standing problems with the Coosa River, the discharge of industrial waste further upstream and-,”

“Damn, it’s bad all over,” the old fellow punctuates.

“And it is complicated,” he adds, “in that everyone has their agenda—everyone wants to win—which means that some lose and lose big.”

"Someone told me that the old Camp Sibert, there in Gadsden, left behind drums upon drums of chemical weapon waste," the old fellow bellows, evidently keen on these matters of contamination. "He said that you could go out there and still see the drums, decaying and all."



"Oh, the Corps of Engineers had a program to clean-," comes another in response.

"Yeah, he told me about that too," the old man scoffs. "It's probably just another crock of-,"

"I am vaguely familiar with that one, the instructor replies, "with over thirty thousand acres, I think it was (or is) potentially contaminated."

"You know that during The War, they did large, live maneuvers, don't you," someone else follows. "My daddy, who grew-up around there during that time, said he could smell the stuff. He remembers the odor, the order."

"I think the actual area impacted was much smaller," says another. "More like a few acres, not the thirty or more."

"Yeah, but the toxic area was over 300 acres or roughly one-tenth of the total camp," comes another, confident and calculated.

"Has anyone ever been on Canoe Creek," another asks. "Canoe Creek is interconnected to Camp Siber."

"Well, I really didn't expect this class to concentrate on this topic, but it seems that the concerns are worthy," the professor interjects again, though somewhat tongue and cheek. "On page 5 of your manual, you'll find-,"

"I don't dispute that effort have been made," the old fellow insists. "I mean I don't understand all the technical mumbo jumbo—the programs—let alone the legalities," he explains pausing to take a breath. "All I know is that good land has gone to waste and the consequences are ours," he says, solemn, surrendered. "Yeah, got-ta take the bad with the good I suppose—but sometimes it *boils my blood*."

"Although this doesn't necessarily matter now," the professor comes back, "I wonder if they had any real sense of the costs, the consequences."

There was a moment of silence, a stillness that came over the class that is perhaps a small sample of what not only this community, but many, have experienced. When such incidents or accidents finally come to a public forum there is little if any opportunity to recover what has been lost. Sure, there are potentially many sides to such matters, but in the whole mess of the outcome, one must wonder if behind it there is not some madness, some cruel intentions.

*The state* or government is not the only culprit but seems so often *be in bed* with a corporation or similar—the *left hand overlooking what the right hand is doing* or has done. If they, whoever “they” might be, have been careless and complicit in either committing or allowing such conduct than I not only am angry toward them (or it) but I hate them for what they’ve done—and undone.

Some deny or dispute such concerns—often using superlatives to discount the claims or to imply that environmental matters are largely hype or hidden agenda; but again, there are *many sides* but always the common denominator of money-denominated missions and motives that drive some to misdirect and others to be misdirected—all for “opportunity”.

*If the Bill of Rights contains no guarantee that a citizen shall be secure against lethal poisons distributed either by private individuals or by public officials, it is surely only because our forefathers, despite their considerable wisdom and foresight, could conceive of no such problem.*

- Rachel Carson

*We live in a world where unfortunately the distinction between true and false appears to become increasingly blurred by manipulation of facts, by exploitation of uncritical minds, and by the pollution of the language.*

- Arne Tiselius

*One hundred and fifty years ago, the monster began; this country had become a place of industry. Factories grew on the landscape like weeds. Trees fell, fields were up-ended, rivers blackened. The sky choked on smoke and ash, and the people did, too, spending their days coughing and itching, their eyes turned forever toward the ground. Villages grew into town, towns into cities. And people began to live on the earth rather than within it.*

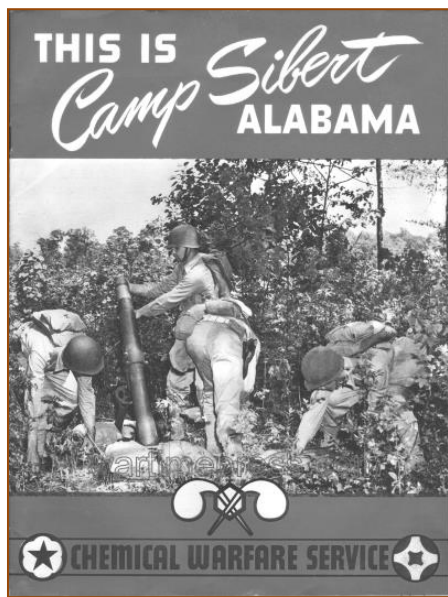
- Patrick Ness, *A Monster Calls*

*Same Old Same Old, so it was*

The old fellow and others in the class are sincerely concerned for the obvious reason, their lives and lifestyle. The professor, while speaking on a different subject, is willing to allow them to discuss this *sidebar* or otherwise



*vent* on a real and present concern. But either person(s) has no complete history or resolution, hoping that at least some can be remediated, the *mess* mitigated, the apparent remnants and ruin of that de-industrialized and demilitarized addressed if just a modicum of the energy and enterprise of that erected years back.



“This concludes this lecture and, while the intended subject has been covered, the concern on contamination has evidently not,” he summarizes. “I understand why you feel as you do, anger and hate, however much is understood from then till now.”

The facts sometimes covered-up as the deposits and dumps, an apparent purpose to avoid liability for what happened whether to it or to them, us.

“If it’s any consolation, your concerns go beyond the county and still further beyond our country—so

you are among many,” he announces, attempting to describe the international scale above the local but languishing problems. The simple truth *does not set us free* but in fact, enslaves us to effects of environmental abuses, clear cases of contamination, consequences. How and what we learn from this may not be

enough to resolve the problems but preferably will limit the reoccurrence while promoting remediation of soils still spoiled. As to the lasting effects, let the anger remain as conviction and the hate dissipate with each passing day, the natural course.

*But man is a part of nature, and his war against nature is inevitably a war against himself.*

- Rachel Carson

**“Seen it all”**,” she tells the older lady just leaving.

*I evidently walked in on some serious moment*, I think, judging from her state, her tears and tension.

“Hey,” I begin, extending my hand, “I’m the-,”

“You’re the appraiser,” she says spontaneously, her expression stunning, her smile, and lips

*For several years, I had been  
bored...literally seen it all....*

- Gillian Flynn, *Gone Girl*

“Yes, I am Howard-,”

“This is it,” she proclaims, extending her hands and making a slight bow, more a mockery or show. “What do you

think?” And before I can continue, her attention turns elsewhere just as quickly. *Am I inconveniencing her or what?*

“If I can just have few minutes to-,” I asks, offer.

“Oh right...yeah...sure, a few minutes—whatever you need, honey.”

Taking a breath, I nod.

“It was my late husband’s house,” she retorts, “before he killed-over and left it to me.”

*Hmm, any grief is gone*, I thought cynically, but such insensitively is expected, common in these days. *Too much hurt scars the heart—no soft spot left to love.*

*Good girls go to heaven, bad girls  
go everywhere.*

- Mae West

“If you don’t mind, I’ve got to-,”

“Oh fine, if it has to be done,” she agrees in some aspect before pivoting and plopping down on the couch as

though exhausted by the conversation, topic, or business not yet complete.

“Well Howard, let’s get on with it,” she continues, holding her arms out.

“Just to start, your full name is-,”

“You know my ‘full name’, fool.”

“Ah your husband is, ah, was-,”

“Please,” is all she says. “I did not take his name,” she explains, “it just wasn’t for me,” she adds with a scoff.

*She did not want his name*, again my mind meandering on things best left alone.

Perhaps reading my mind, she sings a bar or two from Linda Ronstadt's, "You're No Good"; a tune that she no doubt is familiar, perhaps to amuse some, confuse others, and sooth—if that is possible—no matter, but then she surprises me with,

"He was gentle, my man, but not ambitious," she explains. "I always told him that we needed *to get to the next level*; and to that , he would smile and remind me of what we already had, "the goodness," as he called it.

As she continues, I can see why they grew apart; a difference in expectations without compromise, at least for one if not both. Their lifestyle was always less than what she wanted and more than what he needed.

"He so angered me, embarrassing to be around," she admits. "My friends wondered why I put up with it for so long, and I would just say, 'love', or something similar—my little lie that left him hanging on, maybe hoping."

"I deserved more; a new SUV, a house *on the water*, and some other things like my friends," but he was satisfied on Stebbins, this old place around family, friends, and rednecks.

She did not have to remind me of the stigma of living on the west end. I may not have been raised here but am aware, *the talk of the town*, about "Where to live," and not. Rednecks and other profiles are common 'round here whereas those *liv-in in high cotton*, *high on the hog*, have their homes—at

*How can you tell me how much you miss me?*

*When the last time I saw you, you would not even kiss me  
That rich guy you have been seeing  
Must have put you down  
So welcome back baby  
To the poor side of town.*

- Johnny Rivers, "Poor Side of Town"

least one of several—on "the mountain", up yonder near the prep school where their kids go before taking off toward a limitless sky.

"What's wrong with wanting more," she asks as though desiring an answer. "I just want to be happy, comfortable—like everyone else."

"Now, a little more information," I press her, "and then I will inspect the-,"

"Inspect—hah," she scoffs. "I can sum it up in a few words."

"The inspection is necessary to-,"

"You're just like him, a gentleman," she says with a sneer.



*Same Old Same Old, so it was*

*What can I say to that, comparing me to her late husband whom she clearly did not respect him, let alone love?* Mind you, she is not excusing her words, her sentiments, but proud of them—in the worse sense. *She is amused by her anger.*

"He bought it," she answers, "before I came along."

"Hmm, okay," I stutter, my attention returning.

*Yeah, he "bought it", first the house and then life.* He was not that old when it ended. If I had not mentioned this already, her husband died recently; still, the shock of it does not seem to be hers.

"You don't care to talk about my man, do you," she follows, a shiftless question in more ways than one. "if it bothers you, well-,"

First, I did not know him; second, I am here for an appraisal; and third, her comments about him are, well, critical—and I simply do not want to hear or talk about it. Nevertheless, she presses me—call it "customer service".

"He was my husband," she howls, my sense of it more confusion, then consternation. *Can you believe her?*

"I loved him with all my heart," she cries.

"I'm sure you did, do," is all I can do, say.

"My friends call me a fool," she adds, her purpose for telling me unclear.

*Is she trying to set me up for something else?* "Okay then, can we continue," I offer, but still her cameo-confession continues.

*I am always saying "Glad to've met you" to somebody I am not at all glad I met. If you want to stay alive, you have to say that stuff, though.*

- J.D. Salinger, *Catcher in the Rye*

"He couldn't have died at a worse time," she wales, the drama rising.

*Did you have something to do with that,* I wonder, while offering the common condolence, "I am sorry for

your loss—it must be difficult for you right now?"

"He deserved it," she follows. "He was too young at heart to be a man and too old to-," she winks at me, "you know."

What do you say to that? *Should I say something to her or just be on my way and chalk this one off as "an interesting day"?*

"Isn't that right, Howard?"

"I suppose," choosing a less confronting response.

Ten minutes in her house was enough to realize that my purpose is pointless. There are perhaps other reasons for me to be here, much more than this step in the settling of their property, the business at hand.

"And he had trouble, you know, with-,"

As I began to feel a flame in more than my heart, there was a knock at the door.

"Excuse me," she whispers as though she is sharing something secret, seductive. "I'll be right back," she adds, keeping her eyes on me as she walks away, her figure swaying in tune with her whispers.

At the door, I could see two figures: one in business attire and the other in standard attire.

"We're officers...questions regarding...," I could overhear. "Yes mam, we are investigating the...,"

*Dear God, he prayed irreverently,  
was her blouse even legal?*

- Sheri Webber, *Dawn Rising*

"I'm afraid I cannot discuss this matter right now," she responds. As you can see, I have an important guest, the appraiser," she continues, turning her head once again toward me while opening the door further.

"Mam, we must...," the two continue with more exchange between them as she steps-out, closing the door behind her.

Have you ever been in a situation like this? How often do you see something as a reminder that you have not seen everything there is to see? *I suppose I should leave now out back door.* But then another voice that, as the figure enters, the older lady that I met at my arrival.

"It's Howard," she begins

"Yes, but where is," I ask, confused and

"I am the sister, and need to explain," she begins.

*What is going on*, I pretend, though realizing that anything is possible.

"My sister lets her mouth runaway," the older sister continues—as though she needed to tell me that. "It's a crying shame the way she treated her husband," she says, sighing but oddly enough, showing some relief. "Pardon my opinion, but my little sister is *way out there.*"

"She is, 'way out there'?"

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"She was too much for him to take-on and-," her sister explains.

"I think I understand, but-,"

"His first wife was a sweetheart, a gem," she adds, saying much more than I need or want to hear (though often what folks do when they need to talk or get something *off their chest*).

He married her sister right after his first died tragically. "*It's what you call*

*What I feel is that if one has got to have a murder happening in one's house, one might as well enjoy it, if you know what I mean.*

- Agatha Christie

*'a rebound marriage',*" I think.

Listening but still mindful of my own schedule, I return to the question, the matter at hand. "Where is she, your sister?"

"She's down at the police station, I'm guessing," she says, some added sorrow on her face. "You heard the conversation at the door?"

"Yes, I heard some of it," I admit, "but I wasn't privy to-,"

"She's a suspect for his apparent murder."

"No, not murder," I murmur. *My God, it is worse that I presumed.*

"With a recent change, the estate would have been all hers," she explains. "He was not well, but well enough. The house is less than half of it, the estate, as he has or had a sizeable inheritance," she tells me, the information obviously shared by her sister.

"What about the coroner, the medical report, and all?"

On which she explains that the autopsy determined he was poisoned.

*Men should think twice before making widowhood women's only path to power.*

- Gloria Steinem

"She intended to *cut-and-run* after acquiring the money," her sister continues, the plans fulfilled and her happiness, well, *gaining some traction*.

"Do you think you'll be subpoenaed, a witness," I ask.

"Yes, I'm afraid," she responds with regret, "but my sister needs help."

What can I say or, looking back, what could I say?

*She married him for the money..., a foregone conclusion.*

"My sister has always had emotional problems, fits of rage, confrontations with authority, even the law. She is and always has been that way."

"I see," I say without really seeing.

"She's had a few marriages and many more supposed lovers," the sister painfully punctuates. "We prayed for her and tried to get help, but you can't help someone who does not want real help. Oh, she *played the game* and *played us* too, but it was always just a game to her—nothing but games."

*I have known, know of such.*

"I know she's guilty—that's for sure. She not only did it but then she bragged about too. She told me, 'The worthless bastard deserves it!'"

"You mean she confessed?"

"That is another thing, confession. No, I mean she *popped-off*—told folks out right, without shame or regrets."

"But she must have known—,"

"She didn't care—she 'seen it all'".

*I have been quite put out of temper this morning and someone ought to die for it.*

- Susanna Clarke

*"Why does anyone commit murder?" he asked in a low voice.*

*...*

*"Three reasons," he said, holding up one finger, "Love," another finger, "Revenge," and finally, a third finger, "Profit..."*

- Susanna Clarke

**“This perverse cruelty,”** she remarks, “cannot go on,” and in her knowing is wisdom more than worry.

She is a stellar soul, spiritual and sacred; the kind that, as I learned, faced many fears, so much to wonder how she still loves, is loved.

“What’s the matter?”

“Oh, it’s you, Howard,” she says, startled, her face surprised. “I’m glad that you’re here,” she smiles, fixing herself as a lady will do.

This lady is a longtime resident on Stebbins Street. After *the war* they, she and her husband who is now deceased, moved from Sand Mountain. He came for a job at the mill and she served in the school system.

“And why are you glad,” I ask, attempting to match politeness.

“Well it’s more about your person, not your profession,” she answers.

“My person,” I repeat, though I think I understand.

“I don’t really appreciate attorneys per say, but I like you. That is what I mean by ‘your person’,” she explains. “I like your person.”

*Why is there ever this perverse cruelty in humankind that makes us hurt most those we love best?*

- Jacqueline Carey

I was not visiting her today for simply personal reasons. It does me well to know her but as an attorney, she is foremost a client, much a trusted soul.

formalities of my visit.

“But you know my feelings on this, Howard. You do see-,”

Accepting that my profession is *a necessary evil*, nevertheless, I understand your feelings, but I urge you to-,

“I understand your advice, but my feelings on this matter stand,” she insists. “Need I remind that I am the client, your customer?”

Have you ever heard, “It’s the 90 percent that give the others a bad name,”

*“The first thing we do; let’s kill all the lawyers.”*

- William Shakespeare, *Henry VI*

“I have drafted the-,” I begin, the

I ask as a pardon, attempting to *lighten the air?* I like to think that I’m part of the 10 percent notwithstanding the odds or, as in moments like this, the apparent

*feelings of a client.*

“Attorneys get a bad name—and for good reason—but I thought it is the figure as 99 percent....,” she quips, her wit very much intact.

“Okay, a few percentage points, but the point is-,”

“I know that your intentions are good, but this decision is not just about me,” she presses. “I have others to consider.”

“Mam, the documents,”

With the changes in her life, she is due for an update to her will—the reason for this call in the first place, but additionally, a visit from a great admirer. She is (was) a favorite teacher, English. *She is one that I look back on as better though hardly giving it a thought back in the day.* I suppose we each must grow-up to understand other adults, teachers, and parents, to see them as they are or were for good or bad, better, or worse.

“My family was, well, not the kind to show love,” she reflects as we review some details. “There was no love—matter of fact,” she continues, her tone sullen, face shadowed. “Oh sure, they would say, ‘I love you’, but that’s as far as it went. Actions do speak while words..., right?”

Grant it, this conversation is not on track but, given my admiration for her, it is something that I cannot lay aside. In this moment I am more her student and less an attorney—not the billable hours or the damned details.

“Oh, it was more than that; for words can in fact hurt deeper than actions,” she follows. “Words are difficult to forget when they’re repeated and finally lived-out,” she suggests with still

*Way out in the country tonight he could smell the pumpkins ripening toward the knife and the triangle eye and the singeing candle.*

- Ray Bradbury, *Dandelion Wine*

*If there’s going to be a story, don’t you think I’ve got as good a right as anyone to choose it?*

- Richard Adams, *Watership Down*

*So, we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past.*

- F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*

*Let men tremble to win the hand of woman, unless they win along with it the utmost passion of her heart!*

- Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*

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more sadness. "I don't know what I would have done had *my man* not been in my life to rescue me," she says breathing a sigh.

*I never saw this side of her, my boy, and teen years.*

"By 'man', you mean your husband-," I ask as more a courtesy, respect, than understanding. *My elders deserve this kind of consideration.*

"Of course," she remarks with a tone reflective of her teaching days.

"That's the only man in my life—at least in that way," Lisa adds as though I should know. *As I remember her, the teacher, she had a sometimes-clever sense of humor, playfulness with at least words if not more.*

*They made me see that the world was beautiful if you were beautiful, and that you couldn't get unless you gave. And you had to give without wanting to get.*

- T.H. White, *The Once and Future King*

It is refreshing to encounter this kind of commitment, this depth of love, loyalty, real love. *This kind of devotion seems to be dying with that generation and those coming up, largely unlearned*

*and what's worse, unloved.*

"It is encouraging that love remains," I reply, self-conscious of my words, diction, reverting to my distant past, *the school days*. In my line of work, where

*You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view... Until you climb inside of his skin and walk around in it.*

- Harper Lee, *To Kill a Mockingbird*

divorce is codified, the sad truth is that law firms make a mint on ending marriage with all that entails such a sacrifice, sometimes a sacred trust.

"He was not my *knight in shining armor*," she elaborates, "but neither was

*I a damsel in distress*. The fact is that we both had what is called 'baggage', but our love made all the difference in the world."

"Yeah, I'm familiar with that one, 'baggage'," exposed to this term more times than I could count. "You both had your problems, your words prior, but

*I think there's just one kind of folks: folks.*

- Harper Lee, *To Kill a Mockingbird*

found ways to work-it-out."

This is one of those experiences as in talking to an aging relative where you vacillate between the adult as I am and the child that I was; and because you don't see them that often, your mind

wants to revert back—perhaps way back so as to resume the relation as it last was or of a time more appreciated, even adored, knowing relations, respect.

“We were two imperfect people in an imperfect relationship,” she says with a subtle smile, “though he used to say that I was perfect just because-.”

“But then, we’re all imperfect—even attorneys,” I interject, my words of wit more than wisdom, folksy, and far from the law, the firm.

“Oh yeah,” she agrees, the subtle smile now a big grin and laugh, “and especially you attorneys.”

*How many times have I heard that one, expletives no exception?*

“My momma had all kinds of words for me; the kind that she would deny in the company of others, desperate to *keep-up appearances* of someone much

more than she ever was—or would be,” she recalls. “She could be especially mean, even cruel, but some say she was *raised that way*,” her voice dying off into a murmur, memories, and mysteries. “I can’t say for sure myself. In all my learning and teaching, I, I am a child to my mother, my sense of her ways forbidden except as thoughts and feelings.”

*I knew what she meant, one of the sacred styles of life for those such as parents, kin, and other folks informally immune of any indignation, indignities.*

Surely, you have had some similar

circumstances at one time or another; you know, the one’s that nobody else remembers or, if they even acknowledge your recollection, will say something as, “Yeah, there were those times,” or “You had to be thick-skinned,” or similar comments—but never a conversation or anything that might *open old wounds*.

*Naked and alone we came into exile. In her dark womb we did not know our mother's face; from the prison of her flesh have we come into the unspeakable and incommunicable prison of this earth.*

- Thomas Wolfe, *Look Homeward, Angel*

*“Fancy thinking the Beast was something you could hunt and kill! You knew, didn’t you? I’m part of you? Close, close, close! I’m the reason why it’s no go? Why things are what they are?”*

- William Golding, *Lord of the Flies*

*[From a] broken heart, you think you will die, but you just keep living, day after day after terrible, terrible day.*

- Charles Dickens, *Great Expectations*



"I have an idea," I said, attempting to shift the subject, sensing that she took it differently, perhaps my acceptance of her situation.

*What's the use you learning to do right when it's troublesome to do right and ain't no trouble to do wrong, and the wages is just the same?*

- Mark Twain, *Huckleberry Finn*

"No doubt, you do like the law, but the depth of her cuts and blows nearly destroyed me," she admits. "She was like night and day, all sunshine and stars in public but, behind closed doors, a

very wicked woman. The contrast was more than striking, beyond my ability to comprehend, to come to terms."

"Were you difficult, trouble," I spontaneously *spit-out* a practice of my profession I suppose despite knowing the answer before the question is asks.

*Human beings can be awful cruel to one another.*

- Mark Twain, *Huckleberry Finn*

"Not as much as the younger ones.

They learned from my mistakes, I

suppose, and gradually tried to *lay low*—when I wasn't protecting them from her, her ways."

"So, you stood between them and your momma?"

"I was more a momma to those two than momma was," she claims, her confession coming from a lifetime as a mother, more than once. "I had to grow-up fast, *take up the slack* and keep things in order."

*Among other things, you'll find that you're not the first person who was ever confused and frightened and even sickened by human behavior. You're by no means alone on that score, you'll be excited and stimulated to know. Many, many men have been just as troubled morally and spiritually as you are right now.*

- JD Salinger, *Catcher in the Rye*

There was much more to her story, the family, for which I purposely have left-out; the kind of *perverse cruelty* that makes you wonder why we have family for whom we should protect but often punish in ways that not only destroy their love but the prospect of love at all. Sure, I've heard it all, but with this teach of years ago, a rare case of compassion

*carried me home and then away to a better place.*

“Well, I certainly am thankful for what you taught me—or tried to,” I tell her before saying goodbye. “You truly love to teach.”

“Oh yes, though certain students really pushed me to the limits,” she reminds me. “It’s like that song back then, the one that,” she continues. “Oh, what was that song about limits?”

*You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view... Until you climb inside of his skin and walk around in it.*

- Harper Lee, *To Kill a Mockingbird*

“Was it ‘Take It to the Limit’ by the Eagles?”

“That’s it!!”

“And you liked it?”

“I suppose both,” she laughs, “depending on the day of the week.”

I do not generally speak with folks this way, my profession and age, but with her there is no need to *stick to the subject*. Given the passing of time and, for all things shared today about her, her past, what am I to do but mostly listen and learn, remembering some things while making-up the rest.

Whether I took some things to “the limit” or *towed the line*, I care more now than ever before because of her; once my teacher but now much more a person that continues to teach, the hard lessons of life. Still, all I can say at this moment is, “You’re as sharp as ever.”

“Yes, but sometimes I am *running against the win*,” she says with a giggle, referring to another hit from those times.

And still miles to go.

**“It’s just that,”** I hear from one in the group.

“He’s so weird,” another student follows.

“Who is weird,” I reluctantly ask, cutting into their space as I think, *they are speaking of me.*

*There is no such thing as a weird human being. It’s just that some people require more understanding than others.*

- Tom Robbins

“I wasn’t talking to you,” one pops-off with a look like, “Who are you?”

“My bad,” I snap back, half apologetic, heading toward the door.

It is a warm, sunny day, the Spring; the kind of weather that makes me want for the outdoors away from the classroom, students, and staff. *I would rather be at Balk Rock, Little River Canyon, or half dozen other places an hour or two away, a million miles.*

*That I even thought about the conversation, let alone inquired, is “my mistake”.* Such matters are not my concern, I thought further, while considering my age, my role as a teacher. *Does their opinion of me really matter?* But “weird” is not owned by youth alone. Adults use it too—often prematurely or without giving one another thought.

*How much weird is weird?* Life can be a little or a lot of *weird*. And still the statement or suggestion, (as shared among that group of teens) can imply a certain quality or notable trait—something positive or promising. But saying

*I am too wacky for most weirdos. Who am I to judge?*

- Tori Amos

someone is weird usually implies the opposite whether a mild case, “He’s not cool” to someone strange and peculiar, even frightening. A major case goes,

“Stay away from him,” not so much because he is dangerous but because his weirdness might rub-off on you. *After all, who wants to be weird?*

It is likely if not certain that we each have some quirks, flaws, peculiarities, idiosyncrasies, distinctions and even disorders that make us an *equation with two or more variables*; enigmatic, erred and even extreme if not evil for a select few. I know that some problems cannot be solved, that math problems can be difficult and that life is a mystery, but as a teacher I have a tendency to turn inward and really ponder things, ridiculous as it might be or is—and especially as I age.

“Good morning Howard,” another staff opens as we pass in the crowded hallway. “Are you alright?”

“Good morning,” I return, surprised that she even *gives me the time of day*. She is however one way to take my mind off this silliness and on to something far more satisfying. While realizing that when you hang with teens you begin to think and act like them, embarrassingly so; and sometimes, deeply insecure and self-conscious, under a veneer of confidence, I am prone to impulse and say to another group gathering, “Hey, don’t you have somewhere you’re supposed to be?” Not getting the desired effect to my question, and their answer if any, I realize what a dweeb I am. *I guess I am way weird, beyond help*, I can think. *Oh well, I was never a cool dude anyway—no matter my desires*.

*We are all a little weird and life's a little weird, and when we find someone whose weirdness is compatible with ours, we [try] join up with them...*

- Dr. Seuss

*“Yeah, well, you know, that’s just, like, your opinion, man.”*

- “The Big Lebowski”

I hate being *the heavy* but as the appointed *hall cop* for the day, it happens to be my duty subordinate only to the principal, vice-principal and probably most of the other staff. They, “you two”, slowly begin easing-on but not without a similar *look*—an expression that teen’s master before mid-term, their freshmen year to suggest “You’re weird,” or worse, getting in their space.

Not only is everyone weird but they are also annoyed: me, “you two” and everyone like you, me, and us. Hell, we are all annoyed about weirdness and the world in general! *It is always them, someone, or somebody—but not me*.

*The things that bug you the most have the potential to open you the most.*

- Alan Cohen

*But these are children*, I decide again, before recalling that “adults” are not that different, wanting for sameness...working ardently to hide our differences—the one’s that separates us from *the crowd* and single us out as odd, out of the norm--whatever? How many times could I think so of a faculty?

Men have their own collection of weirdness—so claims the other gender—but besides those common traits is that which goes deep and personal,

*Same Old Same Old, so it was*

potentially placing me all by myself, alone and likely lonely. *Am I all by myself? If yes, do I want to be by myself—without another or more? Do I like solitude?*

“It’s not that your kind is weird, but that you are weird,” I could almost hear from someone like her, the perfect persona as I prefer to place her,

*I do not even want you to nod,  
that's how much you annoy me.  
Just freeze and shut up.*

- Neal Stephenson, *Snow Crash*

perceive her. *She is perfect and I am...*

“Don’t lump me in with the others,” I might reply, presuming that that voice is presuming of me, Howard. If I am going to be weird, I at least want

to be weird, unusual, quirky, geeky, one of a kind—a real oddball.

“And don’t try to avoid your problem, Howard,” the voice follows. “Don’t try to justify this problem of weirdness as a group thing, your kind.”

“It’s just that some folks require more understanding than others,” I might tell myself. I believe that my beliefs are, well, *deep*—but not disturbing. “I am a complex and complicated soul,” I might continue to say leading into my self-described intelligence, talents, and skills. *Can I help it if some fail to*

*Innocence ends when one is  
stripped of the delusion that one  
likes oneself.*

- Joan Didion, *On Self-Respect*

*understand me or, worse, resent me for who they think I am—and am not?*

“I am not so into myself that I can’t be out of myself. I am introspective yet transcendent;” hence, I can say with all

certainly, “I am not weird, strange or dissimilar,” myself trustworthy as only I know me to be, right? “No, I am not *playing-dumb*, ‘in denial’, or an outright liar,” I say to any, all. I do not pretend to pretend, suffer from self-indulgence or aggrandizement, an overdone ego, arrogance, or pride or any other emotional, mental, or spiritual maladies that plague society and drive folks *crazy* in all directions. Nor am I perfect, innocent, *above it all*; but on the contrary, I *know my place* and seldom *cross-the-line* except in extreme circumstances, moments, and nothing more than then and now.

“Hey, didn’t I tell you two to-,” I repeat just before realizing it’s not the same “two” but two more. “Sorry, it’s just that-,” but before I can explain, they move on, their expressions as the two before and my reaction more of the same while wrangling with my weirdness supported by my mind in retreat.

She is gone, and this after no more than a casual “Good Morning,” followed by, “Are you alright?” *I guess it could be worse*, I consider as some relief. She could ask, “Why are you so weird,” as one way of hurting a guy; the question, more a statement and criticism, that either leaves one ashamed or angry—or both—when it comes.

I suppose that though she did not say anything of the sort, her sense is still, “He’s really weird.” *But then, does her*

*opinion matter* or is it just me, my sense of me, my doubts, doubting?

Whatever my sense, her opinion of me matters. She really bothers me.

To complicate the whole self-awareness—more obsession at times—is that my opinion of me changes. Yes, sometimes I feel *so low* about me while other times, “Hey, I’m alright,” while still more, perhaps the worst, is that I think, “You stink,” which may be right in several ways!

*Desire is half of life; indifference is half of death.*

- Kahlil Gibran, *Sand and Foam*

*But you can't get away from yourself. You can't decide not to see yourself anymore. You can't decide to turn off the noise in your head.*

- Jay Asher, *Thirteen Reasons Why*

Imagine if you never self-analyzed. Imagine if you never gave your actions and thoughts a second thought. What would your life really be if you, the one who should know the most about you, treated you as someone else, a stranger? *I guess there is some psychotic disorder for that.*

I suppose any out-of-body-experience must invariably return and, whatever the experience in the existential, make one more, nevertheless. I can see why folks sometimes prefer to leave the planet for at least a while if not more, whether abducted by aliens, drugged or hammered to the eyeballs or just lifted-up and out by some force. *Just get me out of here.*

*It isn't by getting out of the world that we become enlightened, but by getting into the world...by getting so tuned in that we can ride the waves of our existence and never get tossed because we become the waves.*

- Ken Kesey

On that, leaving this place, I sometimes hate my circumstances, what

life brings or doesn’t, and sometimes loathe myself in the midst of self-denial that says, “It’s not my fault,” or “I did nothing wrong,” or “I don’t deserve this,”

*Same Old Same Old, so it was*

whatever the matter, predicament or problem. The hardest thing to consider and accept is that I am the one responsible and sometimes at fault but sometimes false—not true to me.

Maybe “my problems” stem from the past; matters beyond my control,

*The way you think about yourself determines your reality. You are not being hurt by the way people think about you. Many of those people reflect how you think about yourself.*

- Shannon L. Alder

the passing of time, as in (or with) my folks and family, this community as its going, the economy and shrinking opportunity, the cost of everything compared with my static and thus declining income, the lost relationships and regrets...where I am versus where I

would have like to be.

Did I ever plan or believe that life would bring all this disappointment interrupted by despair? Maybe I expect more than should be expected, more than life can afford. Maybe I take things for granted, that *a vow* is a promise, a commitment—even a covenant. Maybe I put too much faith in others or had

*There are some things in this world you rely on, like a sure bet. And when they let you down, shifting from where you've carefully placed them, it shakes your faith, right where you stand.*

- Sarah Dessen, *Someone like You*

(have) too little faith to *stay the course*, *press-on* and otherwise *keep the faith* when the bow (bough) breaks, the water rushes in and presses me breathless, and the torrent takes me away to some place, perhaps deep and dark, that I never dreamt of going let alone knew

existed. *But this is life, the love, and the losses and all that is visible, or not.*

I suppose that I do it to me; that no matter how much I want to blame someone or something else—for whatever I consider or count as a wrong—it is after all I that wrangles with weird. It's just that blaming me means that finally I am accountable in some way whether as teacher to “the two” and many

*Being needed is a great thing.  
Maybe the great thing.*

- Stephen King, *End of Watch*

more, as a member of this community, family and friends, and to someone who stops and listens or has something to say, to share. They need me as I need

them—whoever “they” happen to be and whatever I think, of me or of them.

"Where do I go from here," I ask myself before the next class.

"Howard," I hear approaching behind me while turning to find her once more.

"What's going on," I say, stuttering with boyish excitement (or is it embarrassment?)

"Are you better," she follows. "You seemed weirded-out earlier and-,"

"Oh yeah, I guess I did seem, well, weirder than usual,"

She laughs and says, "But you're okay now?"

"Yeah, I guess so, but thanks for asking."

*Somehow, we'll find it. The balance between [that which] we wish to be and [that which] we need to be. But for now, we simply must be satisfied with who we are.*

- Brandon Sanderson, *The Hero of Ages*

"Hey, I was wondering if you're available tomorrow evening," she follows, while my heart rate rises with the anticipation of something spectacular and more to ward-off my weirdness, wrangling, worrisome ways.

"Sure, it's just that-,"



I am **“Barely understood,”** she stutters, her feelings long suppressed.

It is sad story that the most “important thoughts” seldom *go public* or even pass beyond the privacy of the mind, the heart. Maybe silence is a good thing,

but when is it not..., possibly wrong?

*That was one of the saddest things about people--their most important thoughts and feelings often went unspoken and barely understood.*

- Alexandra Adornetto, *Halo*

Can it be wrong for *silence* to hold or, if broken, to expose and be exposed, shedding light everywhere so that *skeletons fly out of the closet* and dirt thought discarded if at all, like the travel of light, everywhere before the blink of

an eye? Why is behind, “barely understood”; is it the message or the meaning?

You may asks, “How do you know of such *a story*? If nothing is ever said or exposed, than nothing is ever known and...”

Such a question is warranted; that if words go unspoken how would anyone know—or even care to know? But here, I had the opportunity to be with the person in the last hours of their life; to hear their confession and to record that words left to silence, regretfully, that are now known by someone if not the persons intended. Here is how it happened.

“You’re Howard,” her faint, fatigued voice.

“Yes,” I reply , taken by the moment, the circumstances, consternation.

“She is not good; I mean, she is weak and soon to go.”

“Has she said anything about-,” I follow, composed.

“No, not a thing—even with prodding—but you may-,”

“I have not spoke to her in quite a while,” I remark while realizing that her family or at least her daughter before me.

Her mother is near death, the one I had not seen in *quite a while* and now, finally, here I am to supposedly console her, them, us.

I am not a minister but only an layperson that has found ministry in the West Anniston area. From volunteer work in the jail ministry came situations like this one; almost always, one or more of those related to *the jailed* or they themselves having *served time*—like so many, its seems.

As crowded as our jails and prisons are these days, it’s no wonder that everyone—at least among the common folks—doesn’t spend some time

serving time. The whole matter is a sad commentary on our so-called “free society” yet the statistics continue, it seems, without resolution, even effort.

But our prison system is not the subject of my story, though I should say, has some association to this matter and the mother in particular. For that and for this, I press on.

This is moment that I can’t forget; to see the passing of a soul into eternity, and more, one who departs without having *made their peace*—or perhaps even wanting to before or now, *at death’s door*.

“Can I see her now?”

“Sure, but don’t expect much,” the daughter returns as she leads me down the hallway, dank and dark.

It is musty, even stifling, with a strong odor of medication and, morbid as it may be to say and be, death. Curtains and blinds were closed shutting out any rays of natural light that could be renewal or restoration. It is a dark place in more ways than one. The mother moans, the sounds barely audible, erratic and eerie, disconnected from her mind but determined in her heart.

“I love-,” she mumbles, “tell them...sorry for-,” she sounds, we hear.

“Is she coherent,” I asks, my back to her daughter.

“She’s in and out of consciousness,” she replies, “but what I hear is what your hearing. She’s not *making much sense*.”

“Mam, can you hear me,” I whisper, touching her hand.

She flinches as though she had been stuck, tender to touch.

“She’s been this way for a while,” the daughter explains. “She never did favor touching, so I don’t think much of it.”

*I am convinced that imprisonment is a way of pretending to solve the problem of crime. It does nothing for the victims of crime, but perpetuates the idea of retribution, thus maintaining the endless cycle of violence in our culture. It is a cruel and useless substitute for the elimination of those conditions-- poverty, unemployment, homelessness, desperation, racism, greed--which are at the root of most punished crime. The crimes of the rich and powerful go mostly unpunished.*

- Howard Zinn, *You Can't Be Neutral on a Moving Train: A History of Our Times*

*There is no such thing as a bitter person who keeps the bitterness to himself.*

- Erwin W. Lutzer, *When You've Been Wronged: Moving from Bitterness to Forgiveness*

Hearsay has it that she is (has been) emotionally or mentally troubled for a long time. One or two say (or said) that “the condition” is progressive, “Her behavior is getting worse,” but few and fewer speak of it.

“You know how it is,” the daughter quips. “She ain’t all there, which drives others away.”

Some of this I know, hear or heard, thinking it more gossip than anything, describing the mother as mean, cruel and conniving, wicked and even “evil”.

“She is not a nice person to begin with,” she adds, her words softened in the sadness of then, now, and all else of the events that earn her mother the extreme of evil. “She’s made a lot of enemies-,”

“Enemies, your family?”

“Each, at one time or another,” she retorts. “As she wants it,” which explains perhaps why so few of family are present now and more, want come any more. It is said that “She want and goes beyond our best nature, what remains anyway,” with an apparently unending bend to break folks.

A few remarks here and there is enough to fill-in some gaps. Bitterness has more than the mother, beginning at a young age, leaving more than generation of angry, antonistic associatiions, amongst and around them. *She is a scorned woman*, I remember some saying. *Heartless, hopeless*. There is no reason to ask the question, “Where are the others?”

“They had to get away,” she adds, figuratively speaking.

I don’t begin to stuggest I know what occurred among them, between her and her children, but I suspect that is was severe, severing some if not ties. Once again, a sad story but not unusal or uncommon. The truth is that families are fragmented, emotionally seared and soically severed with and by problems

for reasons not always described in the statistics—and the wounds are deep.

“What about her brother,” I asks,

“Oh, him,” she replies. “My uncle is still incarcerated,” she explains offering

little more, his status. “But I think that it *went south* too, his crime causing her more reason to be mad and then sad,” she tells me. “Not the kind of matter that most want to know.”

*Families break up when people  
take hints you do not intend, and  
miss hints you do intend.*

- Robert Frost

I remember him from years ago. He was a great athlete, a natural, who had potential, a highschool standout; all-county, all-district—he seemed bound for the next level, maybe Division I. Still, he could not control *the drinking*, perhaps the drugs. Some say he was cursed by his *old man*, but I don't know, cannot say. But one thing his pa did was push him.

"What happen to your dad," I ask.

"Oh, he died," is also she says.

He was, like so many around, crazy over football. He bled crimson and had one of those rooms in their house plastered with it, topped-off with one wall of Bear Byrant and so on. *The boy* was bound for Tuscaloosa, *his call*.

This is one of those situations that one learns young or younger, say high school, peering through some glass at the legendary heroes of the gridiron; the circle of champions, most of which are players like them, father and son. The old man was among them, *titans of the turf*, and his son, *a chip-off-the-old-block*. The two were *cut-from-the-same-cloth*, seamed similar and then torn asunder, their *glory days* and then.

*Sure, it's easy to draw conclusions (or jump to...) when no one's checking you*, I remind myself. Folks think what they want to think just as they say what's on their mind—even if it's brainless or heartless. I cannot say that I knew them, father and son, and I sure don't know her or her other children. What I do know is that this is sad time did not have to be so, well, barely understood.

"They use to be...but then," the girl goes on, her words few but still something. "He doesn't even write or call, and as far as I know, doesn't even know that she's like this," she continues. "But then, I think you know."

*"I'm so cool. I want to date myself, but I don't know how! You want to date me instead? You're so lucky!"*

- Rick Riordan, *The Lost Hero*

*The real glory is being knocked to your knees and then coming back. That is real glory. That is the essence of it.*

- Vince Lombardi

*Sometimes you only get one chance to rewrite the qualities of the character you played in a person's life story. Always take it. Never let the world read the wrong version of you.*

- Shannon L. Alder

"Know..." I say, but then, she starts to cry, pouring on much more.

Someone said she was (is) the worst, and to think otherwise was to either not care or care too much. She had(and has) an addiction to pills and her purpose to poison herself and then the rest—not necessarily by dispensing the pills but still only the poison, the emotional and social illness. It may be wrong to think this way but after enough of seeing it, senseing it, both the condition

*Your difficulty can be hard enough, but the resentment or anger you drag along with it can be even more debilitating than the difficulty itself.*

- Jennifer Rothschild, *God Is Just Not Fair: Finding Hope When Life Doesn't Make Sense*

and conclusion, I must accept that, why I do not understand where it began, I at least see where it went and finally, what it did or does to others, her family and more. Of this, the "poiston", you just have to accept that some people are like pottery that cared for, are precious and

even practical, but neglected and abused, becomed cracked and broken with shards sharp and piercing. *No doubt that in the hearts of her children, however their lives now, their mother died long ago, perhaps in their dreams of childhood.* Whether she wanted it this way, I do not know, but as it is, or has become, it is so.

My thoughts are broken by a cry, "Oh God, tell them!"

But I heard, "She was not always that that way," but that her life seemed to change abruptly, radically and wrecklessly affecting any and all too close to her. What may have been somehow *went by the board* and then *the bough breaks*, and the whole tree is shaken, soon to fall.

"She is near death," someone shouts from the next room.

"I suppose I need to go in there," the daughter says, easing away.

*What is love for, if not to intensify our affections—both in life and death? But, O, do not be bitter. It is tragically self-destructive to be bitter.*

- John Piper

After what seems seconds, she with new tears, holding a blank envelope of which her mother requested, "Give it to Howard," just moments before her last breath.

"She ask me to give it to you, to read and possibly mail or pass on to the others," shee says, handing it to me. Hand-written with notes in the margins,

the letter is finally an apology. Reading it aloud to those present, who seemed at least curious, more tears surface as they learn of why and how she became poison, poisoned. Taking it as truth, the mother's description of her life was in fact cruel from her early years forward. Her husband was hardly the beginning of her curses but, however it happened, he added to an already troubled, traumatic life. Neither were fully at fault, their lives influenced and impacted much earlier as *the apple does fall close to the tree*.

I am glad to know this story in more depth in spite of the sadness, both *the why* and *the what*. But miraculous much more is that the story seemingly set her family free, those alive to hear it perhaps for the first time. Real love is profound even when barely understood.

**“Reality exists;”** it is real.

“How real is reality,” asks a student.

“What was that?”

“You’ve referenced ‘reality’ a number of times. I asked the question, ‘How real is reality,’” comes the question once more, punctuated.

He was generally quiet, this kid, keeping to himself most of time, a stray

*Reality exists in the human mind,  
and nowhere else.*

- George Orwell, 1984

*from the herd* at the risk of sounding snarky or a snob. The question—any question or comment—was least expected from him, but now a possible

*showstopper* at which I stumble and studder, *the chump stumped*, dead-silence. *Looking at brighter side, his question suddenly awakens the class.*

“Orwell declared it ‘exists in the human mind, and nowhere else,’” I repeat to this now captive class generally silent, sedate.

“I know what he said—I’ve read the book more than once—but I am asking you what you think,” the stand-out persists, an apparent upstart.

“Let me add some context, the subject and the content surrounding the statement.”

“What is the context, then,” he follows, not only surprising me but, given the expressions and stares of others, much the same. *I knew the kid was studious but not stalwart; still, I am glad to anytime a star lights-up and shines.*

“It’s good to see someone asking the tough questions,” I admit, aimed more to *lighten the air*. “But to the

context, well, it draws on the differences between an individual mind—maybe a *free-thinker*—and the-,”

“Controlled mind,” he interrupts, “like here, at school,” he wryly remarks, drawing a few laughs.

*Orwell was dealing with communism and his disillusionment with communism in Russia and what he saw the communists do in Spain. His novel was a response to those political situations.*

- Ray Bradbury

“I’m not sure that I follow, but Orwell was concerned about

communism, a despot or demagogue, that *drapes the flag* around himself and parades about as the deity, the statist savior, I suppose.”

*Who is this kid that till now was silent, anti-social, as not just my experience or class but on whole according to some discussion with his other teachers?* Sadly, this rare breed is the brunt of ridicule, bullying and more.

Sure, I know his name and a little bit about his family, but for now I will leave him unnamed but finally, unknown. What is remarkable is that a kid long silent is *rock 'in the world*, or at least the class who have an interest in the subject or more so, strange outpouring of what may be a brilliant mind in the making.

*Could this be a diamond in the rough—a glimmer in the eye of any teacher who still hopes that all their sweat and study is not in vain?*

*Who lit a fire under him*, I think between words, a stream without branches flowing in one direction toward me, just a substitute?

"I was just noting the similarities; the context and our culture," the kid continues. "Does he mean us, America," he asks, this time with sincerity.

"You're off to a good start, Orwell's portending and us, our culture," I reply, In this information age, the possibilities seem endless, swaying opinion,

*A world emerging, daily, out of nothing, a world that we trust to resemble what we've seen previously, [but then] we should know better.*

- Gregory Maguire, *After Alice*

controlling the media and always stirring-up fear over that something or someone, often "an existential threat."

"Creating *boogie men* to haunt us, make us cower," the kid follows.

"Yes, so it seems...for some time now."

"Was Bradbury different," he asks, "than Orwell?"

"Of course, differences but similarities too, the grim future sometimes described as dystopian."

"Gosh," the kid shouts, "grim and dystopian," sparking another stir among the others amused by his geekiness. *And I know how it is, how it goes, finding something that may be more exciting than football or the prom, never mind the realities of life.* Still, some whisper while others laugh—not with him but at him—though he seems oblivious perhaps because he is, well, use to it. *If you are going to be weird simply accept it and get on with more important things? Do not be something that you are not but more, consider the crowd.*



*Same Old Same Old, so it was*

"Yep, cultures can degrade rapidly," I continue, "where adults regress to barbaric behavior—like some of you—and most of the remaining follow the crowd like cattle." *Can they handle criticism—or do they really care?*

*It seems like a few in the class may grasp the association, the ones that*

*Stuff your eyes with wonder, he said, live as if you'd drop dead in ten seconds. See the world. It's more fantastic than any dream made or paid for in factories.*

*- Ray Bradbury, Fahrenheit 451*

*look pissed. But then, who am I kidding; they could be bored or just zoned out, their minds asleep, dwelling or disturbed by something earth-shattering on social media.*

"He's totally lame," I hear someone

whisper.

"And just when the class was going somewhere," the kid remarks, hearing the same. "I just want to know, that's all."

"Relax, I am not budging from this topic," I insist. "I know it's a bit off *the beaten path* but if you makes at least one of you think then, hey, let's *go with it*," I declare amid some sighs, the emergence of yet another sign that somebody out their cares about something. *The kid wants to know—which in that alone, is more than something worthwhile; it is what teachers dream about.*

*We need not to be let alone. We need to be really bothered [occasionally].*

*How long is it since you were really bothered about something important, about something real?*

*- Ray Bradbury, Fahrenheit 451*

"Dare I say that dissent is related," I continue, somewhat inspired by the general class sentiment, disgust at the least and disagreement, the better.

"There's also disgust and disregard," the kid adds to my remarks.

"Right, oppose oppression and do something—anything however your chances—your convictions strong and your cause just, right." *I can take a few lessons in this myself.*

"This really chaps my lips," he continues with, again, laughs from the spectators. "I mean, you're damned if you do and damned if-," he follows, adding some machismo to the matter that even gets a moment of respect from the otherwise *tool cool for school* collective.

"It seems that way sometimes, a paradox," I reply, the laughs now suppressed by *crickets, chirping*. "Still, if something bothers you enough and-,"

"Yanks your chain," he blurts-out again, followed again by laughs, veritable tracks with every line, *the script*, however serious his intentions and ridiculous the others. *This is entertaining and educational at the same time.*

"Actually, your choice of words is right-on given that sometimes oppression is, well, bondage." I emphasize. "When folks unite, any sense or sentiments of opposition is magnified and some form of demonstration can manifest; preferably, peaceful—though sometimes violence and aggression occur, the 'uprising' quelled by force, brutality."

"Some may take it hard and boom, the bust!"

"'Boom' is a bad thing, for sure," another student chimes in for the first time, the subject finally touching a nerve however buried it might be.

"Oh yes, what is intended to be a peaceful protest or public event can get out of control quickly whether caused by the demonstrators or the so-called authorities. Things can get out of hand quickly and sometimes, oddly enough, this is preferred by the present power—as *might makes right*."

"Why start something when you know you're doomed," yet another follows, more minds on the matter.

"*The power* picks a fight because they know they can win," the kid retorts, "and more, they capture the side of spectators—the uprising condemned, and all the 'criminals' caught."

"Boom, you're right again," I shout. *The kid is on fire.*

*Even though the American people may not know what has been done in their name, those on the receiving end certainly do: they include the people of Iran (1953), Guatemala (1954), Cuba (1959 to the present), Congo (1960), Brazil (1964), Indonesia (1965), Vietnam (1961–73), Laos (1961–73), Cambodia (1969–73), Greece (1967–73), Chile (1973), Afghanistan (1979 to the present), El Salvador, Guatemala and Nicaragua (1980s), and Iraq (1991 to the present).*

**Not surprisingly,** sometimes these victims try to get even.

*There is a direct line between the attacks on September 11, 2001—the most significant instance of blowback in the history of the CIA—and the events of 1979.*

- Chalmers Johnson, *Dismantling the Empire: America's Last Best Hope*

Until now, few had anything to say as even my better students sat silent on this one, but then,

"I think that uprisings are criminal," one of my best students finally *shows-up*. "Events like this can escalate and then, 'boom!'," the whole community is in chaos."

"Violence should be condemned," I agree, "but sometimes the violence is not from the protestors. No, sometimes the violence is *manufactured* or planted—such that the *well-intended* are suddenly, shockingly, rushed into a riot, clash with clubs, dogs and even guns. Sometimes the *table is turned*, and the so-called activists or agitated are stirred beyond...."

*On the contrary, our empire has exploited us, making enormous drains on our resources and energies.*

- Chalmers Johnson, *Blowback, Second Edition: The Costs and Consequences of American Empire*

"Yeah, and sometimes violence is all they know, do," the kid says.

"Oh, so you're saying that the authorities are prone to fight," another asks, "and the government is against us."

"Absolutely," the kid begins, explaining that "we are a warring nation. We spend the most on war and sell much of it to others."

Not the kind of conversation or discussion that is typical for a high school class, but then a substitute teacher may have, well, some latitude—if *the spirit moves them*.

"What drives you to be so daring," I ask myself, for which the answer is not

that clear at times, concise or conclusive. *I am sure if called before the administration or worse, some board of inquiry, I may struggle with a convincing response—as to why the controversial topic(s) and more. I would probably bluntly say, "I want to know the truth and speaking with others helps me get there."*

*I began to appreciate that authentic truth is never simple and that any version of truth handed down from on high—whether by presidents, prime ministers, or archbishops—is inherently suspect.*

- Andrew J. Bacevich, *Washington Rules: America's Path to Permanent War*

Why are we talking about this,” another speaks up, “when it’s not on our curriculum?”

“Does anyone else want to chime in,” I follow, “yah or nah?” *Though I do think that student deserves an answer, recognition for their courage to call me out.*

“Some think we are an empire,” the kid continues, punctuating the point. “An empire, given the expansive network of military operations, explains why we spend so much, both the public and the ‘black budget’.”

*So young and yet so aware of things that most give no mind let alone a matter of any interest, I think. How much does he know—or want to know?*

*Perhaps when you are young you think that something must be profound just because it is difficult, and you don't have the self-confidence to say 'this is just nonsense.*

- Francis Fukuyama

“Where do you get all this stuff,” still another blurts out, *more to play-it-down than anything else*, I think. “Don’t forget that we represent freedom and democracy,” he continues, “and that freedom is paid with a price.”

Triggering a sudden outburst by several more in the class, these remarks seem a dialogue that most have come to accept as truth, an authentic American idea of freedom and liberty made manifest, destiny. And thus, my immediate thinking that this sudden but short-lived affirmation is enough to silence us, and perhaps send the kid running back to his hideaway, his words, beliefs, ideas—who he is and is not.

But without flinching, still up for the debate, this kid comes back with, “Sure, the American creed, or something like it, sounds every bit noble, honorable, I get it. Many believe it not only as an ideology but also as policy bordering on holy writ. But in truth, it is simply words enforced as ideas and then beliefs.”

*The conscious and intelligent manipulation of the organized habits and opinions of the masses is an important element in democratic society. Those who manipulate this unseen mechanism of society constitute an invisible government which is the true ruling power of our country.*

- Edward Bernays, *Propaganda*

*I could not have said it better myself, as reality does exist.*

## Are we “All but equal?”

There is the ongoing human desire to be equal, it seems; sometimes described as egalitarian, equality is an apparent attribute of justice, *that all men persons are created equal* in the most ideal social setting, *in the eyes of God*.

*Aristotle's axiom: The worst form of inequality is to try to make unequal things equal.*

- Laurence J. Peter, *Peter's People and Their Marvelous Ideas*

“How are we made to be equal,” someone will ask at some time—perhaps as they come to realize that all

folks are not equal in all ways. *When I think about it, equality, I realize that we are not all equal and nor can or will we ever be so.*

I look about the community and see the visible differences, race, and gender but then the other ones, economic and otherwise.

There are a few wealthy, those with large inheritances of land, and a shrinking middle-class, growing percentage of those below the poverty line, many that depend on government subsidence of one form or another. *It is odd that even the poor can keep up appearances of prosperity, a high-end car, eating-out all the time, some fashionable clothes or, much less common, a big house. How do they or we, do it?*

Down the road a ways, but still in the same county, is a university that

*Indentured servitude is banned, but what about students seeking to sell shares of their future earnings in exchange for money up front to pay for their college tuitions?*

- Robert B. Reich

some years ago stood out on a national scale as near the lowest price for an education; but then, in the vicious cycle of tuition and credit balancing, this claim seems no longer the case. *What class of folks are these students, many who*

*seem to afford an adequate if not affluent lifestyle—often without a salary or employment, I consider. What becomes of those that accrue tens of thousands of dollars of student debt, later unable to cover it, “debt slaves” right out of the gate?*

In some sense, these arrangements of debt are merely a taste of the alleged “American Dream”; a temporary sense of *making-it* only to wake up

and cough-up *the blue pill*, a fantasy turned into a frightening realization of untenable debt without forgiveness.

“How do they do it,” many will wonder while some will say. And I too wonder, *how do folks on the margins afford these expensive things?* An observer from far away might say, “These folks have it good,” and if from some underdeveloped country, might say, “These folks are rich, royal.”

*“Dat’s what they say of this cauntry back home, Kath: ‘America, the land of milk and honey.’ Bot they never tell you the milk’s gone sour and the honey’s stolen.”*

*- Andre Dubus III, House of Sand and Fog*

*Sure, materialism is everywhere; one of the ‘isms that is welcomed, revered, that of gods, I realize, but still the question: How do they get all this stuff? The system seems to forbid any account of socialism or communism, but never materialism, consumerism or even secularism. Some ‘isms are encouraged because finally, they pay homage to their gods of prosperity.*

There is and will always be a working class; a group of folks willing and able to do the hard, sometimes dirty and dangerous, jobs often modestly compensated depending on their skillset and who they know—as with *the working world*. Folks depends on work and sometimes more.

Around here, as with much of America, those folks are often Latinos; that whether living locally or transported in by bus, they work in farming, food, construction and some services all the while retaining close contact with their kin and kind, lifestyle. Still, they remit much of the earnings to *the old country*, living common, communal lives whether itinerant, intentionally, or otherwise. *Those that I have worked with are good people, devoted to family and often deeply rooted in faith.*

*Folks from the west-end, whether working class or any class, are viewed as something less than east and especially up on the mountain.* Down here below and west is much of the heavy industry that flanks Noble Street between Anniston and Oxford, now appearing more as grass-choked lots, high-barbed fencing and other remnants and relics of manufacturing and warehousing and zones too expensive to remediate, removing the environmentally waste. Further west remains the largest and on average best paying employer, the Army’s Military Depot; followed by a fertilizer plant, formally Monsanto and

*Same Old Same Old, so it was*

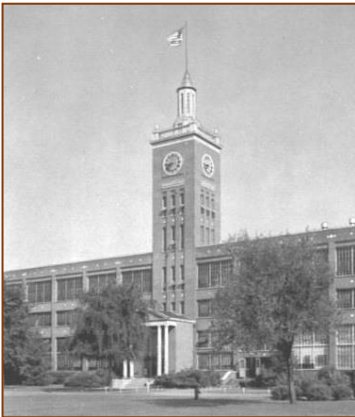
now Solutia, that received national publicity regarding PCB soil contamination, areas around South Stebbins Street resulting in at least one class action suit—veritable *paydirt* for the defense attorneys, a paltry percentage for the folks.

Income-wage disparity is rising, of course, along with opportunity. One can travel far and wide and find similar circumstances in any of the towns and cities stricken with de-industrialization, the literal shell of what was once a robust, factory-based economy offering a hand-up, living wage and more.

Deindustrialization really kicked-off in the 1970s and, continued into the 1990's, the effects somewhat offset by the arrival of international automotive plants such as Honda in Lincoln and Kia just over the state line in Georgia. These arrivals coupled with other final assembly plants and networks of first and second tier suppliers have been a *saving grace*, no one would dispute, though the dissolution of organized labor means lower wages and far fewer benefits, if any. While the *working class* continues, as mentioned already, it does so with less compensation than before and arguably less opportunity to achieve or retain a middle-class status as the past generation.

One example of lessened opportunity is Goodyear tire plant in nearby Gadsden. At its construction in 1928, it was the largest tire plant in the world providing a huge economic benefit to the city and surrounding area; this along with significant investment in Gadsden's community, including employee

housing, is a prime example of the *upward mobility*—a company deeply vested the community. Today, at my writing this short story, the union is but a shadow of its former self and, as the last two or more decades will tell, the plant seems to be ever sliding toward permanent closure, the most sited cause: production costs compared with product coming out of Mexico or elsewhere. I feature Goodyear as an example of the effect as deindustrialization because of family relations that previously



worked there, some fortunate enough to retire with pensions and other

benefits. My earliest and endearing memory of the company was waiting for my grandfather to exit from the main factory doors as shown in the photo.

Describing deindustrialization in the area is not off point as to equality; for it is such opportunities that contributed much to the community to include health insurance and other perks, closing the gap between the wealthy and the impoverished, a middle-class in degrees. Simply put, such economic opportunity presented the public a better chance of *making it* amid other deeply engrained cultural constraints often contributed to the region but realistically true of other regions and indeed other nations, humans.

“Did industrialization have any negative consequences, ill-effects,” one should ask notwithstanding the many positives to support parity among groups, the distribution of wealth.

“Yes, of course!” Ask any old timer who worked in heavy industry and they would testify to the harsh, dangerous conditions and the backbreaking physical work. Go further on this response to accept that industry, as inconsiderate the environment in both commercial and governmental, could be brutal as recorded, remembered,

“Where the land barons left-off, their dominance, the industrialists picked-up,” one form of autocracy was

replaced by another. Indeed, the great names with even greater wealth are legion; Vanderbilt and the railroad; Carnegie and steel; Rockefeller and oil.

Yet, in all that they possessed, both public and private, the industrialist apparently needed (or need) skilled workers and, as to class equality, perhaps contributed much more than any before, at least for this country, considering the locality of Stebbins Street as a sample, Alabama and other regions the more.

*Offshoring manufacturing jobs left Americans with fewer high-value-added, well-paid jobs, and the U.S. middle class downsized. Ladders of upward mobility were taken down. Income and wealth distributions worsened.*

- Paul Craig Roberts

*Don't be afraid to give up the good to go for the great.*

- J. D. Rockefeller



Beyond the industrialists is a prodigious progeny, profligacy of financiers, where tactics are treated to making money on money, *the quick and the dead* who win or lose bigtime. And It is with this segment of the business world that deindustrialization is rooted, the mobility of capital that took-off in the 1960s

*But a new wave of re-investment abroad...and other labor-intensive industries was probably an even larger factor. [] During the 1970s almost 60 percent of all the textile mill closings in the U.S. were in the South.*

- Bluestone & Harrison, *The Deindustrialization of America*

as the beginning of the end for many a manufacturing-centered economy, first the soon-to-be “Rust Belt” followed by the Sun Belt with the exceptions of international automotive as noted already. This increased mobility coupled with a period of mergers, acquisitions and closures combined to rid these regions of industry without a sense as to the future, even national interest. Whatever the particulars of a plants closure, incremental or one-time, the end result was (or is) a *systematic disinvestment* with all the attendant, adverse consequences—and especially for smaller regions without the resources for

*Loss of work network removes an important source of human support.... Special psychological problems arise when a plant closing occurs in a small community, especially when the establishment was the locality's major employer.*

- Bluestone & Harrison, *The Deindustrialization of America*

recovery, the ability to absorb such losses. Communities from one end of this county (Piedmont) to the other (Oxford) were among the many textiles left threadbare.

Economic opportunity is central to the question, “Are we all but equal”, in that it is vital of (and for) persons this side of reality. What follows from plant

closure is more commonly un-/under- employment with the loss of benefits, followed by the loss of personal assets and increased debt peonage, followed by health problems related to depression, substance abuse, drug-alcohol addiction. There is a slippery slope that succeeds such losses, the full effect perhaps impossible to analyze and ascertain. What locals will say is finally what they believe to be true, “The community was better off before, with that plant or manufacturer, then present.” Some remain to remember but more leave to forget, to find a better place to live and die.

Again, the question, “Are we but equal?”

No—and nor will folks ever be equal in all ways this side of heaven,” so I say.

*Sure, they speak of equality and even fight for it, groups, collectives, and the like, but the real intent is always privilege and power—not equality, I think, as is the apparent agenda against humanity: divide & conquer.*

*Modern invention has been a great leveler. A machine may operate far more quickly than a political or economic measure to abolish privilege and wipe out the distinctions of class or finance.*

- Ivor Brown

But here, around Stebbins Street, life and living is less than what it once was and quite possibly will never be the same, as good as before at the peak. There are always exceptions, a relative few that hit higher ground, the paydirt that wins them the opportunity to cross the railroad tracks and see how the other half (or some fraction of the whole) live their lives of convenience and prosperity. Still, many never know such opportunity and, as it is, fewer will come to realize the equality is not possible—or ever was.

*Where there is chance of gain, there is also chance of loss. Whenever one courts great happiness, one also risks malaise.*

- Walker Percy, *The Moviegoer*

**“Really, equal,”** I say, more a statement than a question given my doubts, disbelief, any justice tainted by power and privilege.

“How can you be both equal and different,” is the question raised among one in my classroom.

“Are we really equal,” is another, followed by,

“No-way—we’re never equally equal!”

And while all this sudden interest, rarely recognized, I am thinking, *I know that we are not all equal; that each and all have different abilities, the result of*

*There is all the difference in the world between treating people equally and attempting to make them equal.*

- Friedrich Hayek

*which makes us different if only in some ways.* Still, what does it really mean to be the same, “equal”?

Folks have rights, seek rights, and take rights—but *rights* do not mean that folks are right. Groups can have, seek,

and take privileges—often at the expense of others—going potentially far to protect their privileges—and beyond reason. A growing problem is that “privileges” are shrinking; that is, that persons and percentages are becoming less as wealth concentration rises as no time since The Great Depression. *It*

*America’s level of inequality is comparable to that of Russia, China, Argentina, and the war-torn Democratic Republic of the Congo.*

- Jessica Bruder, *Nomadland: Surviving America in the Twenty-First Century*

*goes without saying that this trend creates increasing tension between groups, classes, and the growing haves-nots, wealth versus want, need.*

“If some seek rights to be equal, is it equality they want, are seeking, or it is

more,” someone asks, *a central question*, I think.

After a few seconds of silence, I say, “I don’t know...but it seems that humans never really want to be equal—not really—but more, they want privilege, preferential treatment. They want to be special in the best sense of their own interest, security.”

“Whatever their true intention, equality is never fully achieved,” replies another student, a tone as true as true. “Sure, equality sounds good, right, but it is never so,” he adds, wooing some while seemingly wearying others.

“Tell us more,” I ask, accentuating the pertinent from impertinence.

"I mean that equality sounds good and right, sure, but then comes reality; that folks cannot and will not settle for it—whatever they think it might be—but always gravitate with their group whether gender, race, religion or other attributes, all aimed at an advantage."

*That all men are equal is a proposition which at ordinary times no sane individual has ever given his assent.*

- Aldous Huxley, *Proper Studies*

"I cannot say it better," I tell him...the class.

Politics is portrayed and practiced in such ways; indulging one group against others, seemingly attempting to grant them certain rights and privileges on the basis of equality—all the while, behind a veil of humanity and good intentions, using these groups for and to their purpose, *power*.

"Isn't that really what we're talking about here, *power*, or it more freedom?"

"Maybe it's just a matter of ideas, not words or a name," someone says.

"Freedom is *power*, someone else says. "Freedom is the power to do something without coercion, compulsion or constraint," another says, as some of the class murmurs, "Woo."

"One simple way to think about it is that freedom suggests what a person may do whereas *power*, what a person can do," I add, perhaps the gist of it. "Consider the Bill of Rights, specifically the Fifth Amendment."

"Yeah, *the right to an attorney* and all those other rights of the defendant," another student responds.

*Political freedom means the absence of coercion of a man by his fellow men.*

- Milton Friedman

"Those so-called 'rights' suggest then that a defendant, or the charged, has certain privileges or power, right," I continue, looking for others to *chime-in*, wherein some nod or otherwise appear to agree.

"In fact, this amendment is breached everyday across our land," I declare.

"Why...how," another says as a challenge I prefer over passivity.

Fundamentally, it is an issue of *power (or money)*; those with less *power*, who cannot afford a defense lawyer, are left with a public defender who often is simply a facilitator—not a counselor. These powerless have no defense and thus their case is entirely at the discretion and determination of the prosecutor

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or State. *Thinking about these conditions alone, the defendant has little chance of being acquitted or set free—regardless of their innocence.*

Secondly, this so-called “bargaining” is performed *behind closed doors*, the defendant presented with the apparent alternative, essentially a predetermined prosecution. Deferring on the harsher sentence, the apparent outcome of a supposed *trial*, the defendant pleads guilty. *How much is the*

*In many courts, plea bargaining serves the convenience of the judge or lawyers [prosecution/State]—not the ends of justice.*

- Jimmy Carter

*defendant really told; that is, are they truly informed of the prosecutor’s proposal, every detail, defense power?*

“How is it breached,” another asks. “After all, the defendant is given a choice, the freedom to choose.”

“They still have the right to a trial with all the other privileges of the Fifth, right,” another follows. “They still have rights, right?”

“I once witnessed a criminal court session and the judge ask the defendant if they understood the terms of the plea beforehand,” still another.

“These are all good statements, questions and such,” I respond, followed by a moment to think, convinced that this Fifth is a largely a myth.

Patently proven, I am not a lawyer or possess the education to carry weight on such matters. My understanding begins with the question of equality, freedom, and rights; the facts and figures that surround these topics, from the ideas to actual practice, personal experience, and such accounts.

Again, the Fifth Amendment, suggest that a defendant is *innocent until proven guilty beyond a reasonable doubt*.

*No person ... shall be compelled in any criminal case to be a witness against himself, nor be deprived of life, liberty, or property, without due process of law ....*

- Fifth Amendment, United States Constitution

“First a question: Is the defendant given a choice or are they compelled to self-incriminate?” And while you think about it, remember the presumed *innocence until proven guilty beyond a*

*reasonable doubt*,” I continue. “What proof occurs in a plea, a so-called choice,” I follow. “Who is finally responsible to prove guilt or more accurately, to render a verdict; the judge or the prosecutor?”

Not an unusual condition for my class, or any class of young folks, but you *could hear a pin drop* now. Finally, one of my better students speak, breaking an eerie silence.

“The witness is simply confessing their guilt, proving their *guilt beyond a reasonable doubt*. No verdict is necessary if one confesses to the charge, right?”

“Anyone else want to comment on this, the possibility that the defendant’s confession is sufficient against the earlier stated part of the Fifth Amendment, *the right to not self-incriminate?*”

The plea bargain is complex against the topics of equality, freedom, and rights. The State always acts in its best interest and here, the convenience for the courts—never mind justice and the rights to a trial, *face one’s accusers*, not to be compelled to self-incriminate—with the plea bargain as ostensibly the method of adjudication for the vast majority of criminal cases, both state and federal. The plea bargain closes the gap between *charged* and conviction resulting is a system—not of justice—but of punishment, certain guilt regardless of proof, evidence and all evidence verified, valid, veracious.

*The complexity of modern federal criminal law, codified in several thousand sections of the United States Code and the virtually infinite variety of factual circumstances that might trigger an investigation into a possible violation of the law, make it difficult for anyone to know, in advance, just what particular set of statements might later appear (to a prosecutor) to be relevant to some such investigation..*

- Stephen G. Breyer, *You Have the Right to Remain Innocent*

*Political freedom means the absence of coercion of a man by his fellow men.*

- Milton Friedman

“As to any *right to a trial, the jury is still out*, I’m afraid,” I add to the point.

What “choice” is the defendant really making, what freedom exist if the alternative is not likely; that is, that a trial in never to happen regardless of the Fifth, it’s implications and any information provided by the persecutor in the process. *I am not suggesting that the State lies but only that they withhold the true intentions and information vital to any real choice, clear understanding.* Information is power and thus withhold it is power—unjust as it is.

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*Historically, institutional records on keeping promises, treaties, commitments, etc., is abysmal, I realize upfront, offering little or no confidence in this/these institution(s). “Power poisons”, Henry Adams wrote, but in the process are increasing levels of toxicity that produce a blindness, ignorance, arrogance. When authority and accountability are not balanced, what you’re left with are conditions rife for abuse(s); which means that the powerless lose equality, freedom and rights; indeed, they are the first line of destruction amid the long train of abuses.*

*The strong were always eating the weak.*

*- James Rollins, Deep Fathom*

One knows that misinformation, to include the intentional withholding of information, is finally a falsehood, a lie, and especially when they endure something like this as it applies to a hard, heavy decision. The person that trust a source only to be betrayed by them, some so-called “word”, is one deeply touched in the folly. Whether resulting from a lack of conscience or, in the case of institutions, common practice—even procedure—such behavior is if fact abuse. In the realm of a criminal case,

*Because to take away a man's freedom of choice, even his freedom to make the wrong choice, is to manipulate him as though he were a puppet and not a person.*

*- Madeline L'Engle*

this abuse of power takes away the true nature of choice, purposely imposing a level of risk (or unknowns) that in effect engineer a “choice” under compulsion.

Should the State really *tell it like it is*, I think, regarding the consequences

of the plea bargain? Should they describe the consequences and implications of “no-contest”, “adjudication-withheld” or similar euphemisms for guilt? Such terms translate to guilt with all the ramifications to/for one’s rights, privileges?

*Deception and privileged secrets are common facets of politics.*

*- Wayne Gerard Trotman, Kaya Abaniah and the Father of the Forest*

For the sentence is never the actual end to the defendant’s punishment, as the residual effect of a criminal record persists after parole, probation, even to one’s death considering FBI and similar

governance, authority. Only folks with enough power can skirt this system, the “residual effects” and perhaps the whole affair in purchasing an acquittal—no matter their complicity—in a system deeply corrupted and corruptible.

As an analogy, imagine that you considering elective surgery and, as a basis for this choice, patient information on certain post-surgical and enduring effects are withheld; thus, you choose the surgery unaware..., perhaps to discover afterward, knowing now what you wished you had known then.

“Why didn’t they tell me what they knew, the risks and effects, bad as it is,” that with more pain, you realize it’s because they determined that you have no equality, freedom and rights to know.

When the judge asks the question to the defense regarding the terms of the plea bargain, they do so as part of the ruse; that the defendant has been duped—in addition to compelled—into self-incrimination.

*Withholding information is the essence of tyranny.*

- Bruce Coville

“We are not really equal,” but with my decided deference are unequal. Considering only criminal cases as an example, presumptions of equality, freedom and rights go by the board. One may forgo their otherwise rights in lieu of the plea but do so without a full understanding simply because they are denied information, purposely deceived. And just because they refuse the plea bargain, still any notions of a trial are also dismissed and dissolved given the prosecution’s practices of *tacking on* more charges, only delaying the inevitable, guilt without due process.

*Never attempt to win by force what can be won by deception.*

- Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince*

“Really, equal,” is not question or the answer, any notions of equality, freedom, or rights, but more likely, “Really, power, (to do what?)”



**“Worst of all,** he abandoned me,” she says, shocked, shattered.

*All the lonely people, where do they all come from; all the lonely people, where do...,* is a tune that I have not thought of in a long time—but not because I haven’t been lonely, but maybe because intimacy is disposable.

From South Stebbins Street to the ends of our state to the greater of the collective states of this sovereign and then, finally, to the stars. All these states

*Human beings can withstand a week without water, two weeks without food, many years of homelessness, but not loneliness. It is the worst of all tortures, the worst of all sufferings.*

- Paulo Coelho, *Eleven Minutes*

and space leave much space for social construction and connectivity; but ironically, the more we communicate as it has become, the less we really connect, or construct meaningful relationships, community, the commons.

On South Stebbins is a sample of the greater society gripped in the condition of the family where more and more are single-parent households, and in the vast *space* are the statistics such as: the lowest marriage rate per capita in the history of this once-great sovereign; a commonly-declining birthrate; and the prison system that preys on certain segments while engineering and ensuring many repeat offenders—those marked with a crime record long after they’ve *served their time*, apparently punished in perpetuity, but certainly set-up to return, recidivism.

Meanwhile, the least of *the greatest generation* figure-out how to navigate the *unchartered waters* of a nation in rapid dissent and descent, the *American Dream* in the twilight, and the nightmare materializing in many ways, exposed or experienced, but worst of all without a recovery, restoration.

It is a *maddening world* where consumerism and materialism have

*The loneliest moment in someone’s life is when they are watching their whole world fall apart, and all they can do is stare blankly.*

- F. Scott Fitzgerald

trumped paternalism and altruism, where the very wealthy take more and the rest give more, while future generations wait for the last full measure of both private and public debt

of unparalleled proportions is yet not the worst of all—not even close—for the absolute worst is loneliness or what some call social atomization.

We are lonely and lonelier, our society; disowned, disparate, disenfranchised, distraught, disavowed, disassociated, disaffiliated divorced and disaffected. We are atomized into singles, present but separate, physically together but socially miles away in “my space”, a supposed safe space or *space*, figuratively in most cases.

A walk down South Stebbins shows the once occupied porches as silent, those homes that still have such a space where once upon a time families filled them, did domestic work on them, played on them when it rained, or slept on them on a hot night. *The whole place seems dead*, thinking what it was like against the present, the problems *worst of all*.



Neighbors may know each other but more so believe that they know-of each other and, for that, find it superficially safer to *keep their distance* to limited, personal contact—anything more as inconvenient, maybe awkward. *Why meet each other at the door or the market when it is so easy to text or, to the extreme, personally speak with the mobility of our mobile lifestyles*, the thought occurs in this virtual existence of social distancing, antisocial behavior.

*Maybe everybody in the whole damn world is scared of each other.*

- John Steinbeck, *Of Mice and Men*

Any contact and so-called friends are best left to social media where we each have exclusive right to present ourselves in such ways as to be the envy of anyone who chooses to believe our creativity, a carefully-crafted selfie. And though some do reveal their realness, still, they receive less “liked” with comments left only by the well-intended for the rest to pass-up or casually read without a care, a prayer, or a pardon.

*Millions of people have been looking desperately for solutions to their sense of impotency, their loneliness, their frustration, their estrangement from other people, from the world, from their work, from themselves.*

- Howard Zinn, *A Peoples' History of the U.S.*

“Only the lonely” arises as the next tune to follow in the *hit parade* of songs on the subject, the echo of Roy Orbison, the line “Know why I cry”.

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"Dum-Dum-Dum-Dumdy-Doo-Wah, Ooh-Yay-Yay-Yay-Yeah, Oh-Oh-Oh-Oh-Wah..."

It, he, does not really sound sad; it never dies, such sound, but keeps on rocking and rolling along around us, in us, as *the beat goes on* if just in our memory.

*A great fire burns within me, but no one stops to warm themselves at it, and passers-by only see a wisp of smoke.*

- Vincent Van Gogh

Just off South Stebbins, I stop at a convenience store to grab a favorite beverage, *Peace Tea*. Choosing the "Georgia Peach" from the six or so varieties, I look up to see someone that I

recognize, but their name I cannot remember. *If I acknowledge them, what then?* Instead, I slip away behind a display hoping to avoid another awkward situation, perhaps a *senior moment*. And after a few minutes of meandering aimlessly, I turn toward the counter to buy my tea and be on my way while wondering if they saw me and thought, *what is up with him?*

The *Peace Tea* is refreshing on a hot-humid day, but more, the mosaic of folks on the can, a setting suggesting the *Deep South, southern hospitality*, good times, and art for the folks.

*Are you upset little friend? Have you been lying awake worrying? Well, don't worry...I'm here. The flood waters will recede, the famine will end, the sun will shine tomorrow, and I will always be here to take care of you.*

- Charles M. Schulz

*So where is it, this "southern hospitality" I think, other than canned?*

Turning the corner, I lose any peace from the tea, the street is dead, desolate—no souls in sight except one

lone child that looks to be not quite grade school age, alone and unattended.

"What is your name," I ask, bending down to speak at his level.

"I am Future," he remarks in garbled words.

"Future', you say," I respond, taken by the name but adding, "And what brings you here, now?"

"You do," he responds. "You are why I am here, now."

"Where's you mom, your family," I ask, this encounter increasingly strange and bizarre.

"I have no mom, no family," he answers without hesitation.

"I see," I follow, concerned but cautious. "Are you lost?"

"No, I know where I am and why I'm here," he answers promptly with confidence, wit well beyond his apparent age.

"Right, you're here because of me," I respond, repeating his words. "What do you want or need from me," I ask hesitantly.

"I don't need anything from you man, but rather, I have something to give you," he explains, taking more a spirit, a soothsayer.

It was a strange, sensational situation as already said; a moment, a faint and fantastical memory as though I was the boy, the child, many years ago.

"Your first name is not Howard is it," my first name and imagine at work.

"No, I told you that it's Future."

"Oh right, 'Future'," I murmur.

What would you do if here, confronted by this child in all appearance but much different in character?

"Please don't go," he urges me—as though reading my mind, sensing my apprehension. "I've got something important to tell you," he presses, my doubts dismissive of a dream, delusion, some darkness.

"Okay, what is it," a plea perhaps to cast any other doubts away.

"I know that you're down, discouraged over the dismal conditions here and elsewhere, from Stebbins to the 'vast space.'"

"How do you that,"

"I just know because I am Future," he solemnly says. "I am as real as you."

Real or not, this "thing" is closing the space between me and Stebbins, a somberness stretched to melancholy and then who knows what, depression

*What should young people do with their lives today? Many things, obviously. But the most daring thing is to create stable communities in which the terrible disease of loneliness can be cured.*

- Kurt Vonnegut, *Palm Sunday: An Autobiographical Collage*

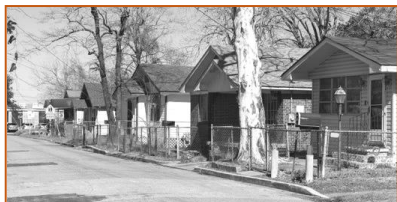
*It's no good trying to get rid of your own aloneness. You've got to stick to it all your life. Only at times, at times, the gap will be filled in. At times! But you have to wait for the times. Accept your own aloneness and stick to it, all your life. And then accept the times when the gap is filled in when they come. But they've got to come. You can't force them.*

- D.H. Lawrence, *Lady Chatterley's Lover*

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perhaps? *Sure, I get down...but then every so often, without expectation, something or someone comes along to shake me up, my somberness made sober, a smile of sunshine!*

My worst of *all* is as a similar strangeness, *better than usual*, sometimes more, a mystery, mystic and magical. *Without loneliness what is life but constant collectiveness, a herd of sheep rubbing wool and constantly Baa-Baa-Baa in place of Dum-Dum-Dum-Dumdy-Doo-Wah?*



*This boy named Future is going to set the record straight, I wonder.*

"Seasons come and seasons go," he continues, "and rivers rise and rocks crumble," he follows. *Stebbins is silent—like many towns—empty and deadly still*, as you see, sense it. "Who is without this feeling from time to time, *brought home* with no more than a venture down memory lane or news of

*I [walk] around the streets an inch away from weeping, ashamed of my sentimentality and possible love.*

- Charles Bukowski, *Love Is a Dog from Hell*

someone deathly sick, suffering and soon to go somewhere else?"

*This is deep*, is my immediate thought, though in moments, it comes to me. Anyone with an ounce of sentiment, a love for where they live, is ignited by the idleness that hangs around like *a low pressure* before a tornado, watch or warning. *It is here, such stillness that your sentiments scream and shout, your tear long gone, any weeping left for the Willows.*

*I'm not sentimental--I'm as romantic as you are. The idea, you know, is that the sentimental person thinks things will last--the romantic person has a desperate confidence that they won't.*

- F. Scott Fitzgerald, *This Side of Paradise*

"All that's left is the shouting." Future blurts out, more the child mimicking the expression with a grin.

"I suppose, but then you probably already know that already, right?"

"Yes sir, I know..., but then more, the future too, my last name."

"What will become of this place, then," I follow with prediction, prognostication, or prophecy. "What lies ahead?"

"Time has a way of exposing the truth and, above everything, what is more wonderful than truth?"

The woman "shattered" is returning walking my way and, nearing me, she says.

"...but I am getting-over-it."

"His abandoning you," I ask, my mind shifting to her sentiments.

*The soul is healed by being with children.*

- Fyodor Dostoevsky

"Yes, my man is no longer *my man*," she says candidly, "and that's alright by me—much like Stebbins is not what it was, Howard."

*How does she know what I am thinking, feeling?*

"Future told me," she says, reading my mind now and then.

"You've talked to him," I ask, astonished but alleviated.

"Cute kid, and so much ahead of his time," she says, smiling. "That little fella helped me too."

"How do you know that he helped me," I ask here, somewhat defensive, exposed. *Future is just a child*, I think again.

"I watched you two talking, your expression," she says. "I knew that it must be good. Children have a way about them, future or not; to bring out the best most of the time."

*Moving on is easy. It's staying moved on that's trickier.*

- Katerina Stoykova Klemmer

Yes, this story is bizarre, this Future, but no more than walking your *Stebbins Street* recollecting your stories that the *same old* is not so *it was* and, *worst of all*. It never will be again in his place.

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**“All the wars’** and still more it was, is.”

*How true, given the past, present and all the predictions, predicaments, and problems of policing the world, I think. “But what is to become of us,” I ask, our country and culture, the times as they are, were and will be? Can we endure this contention and conflict—and for how much longer until it comes home?*

So goes the empire, imperialism, as history holds; that all empires rise and fall, from the ancient empires of Babylon and Rome to the debatable empires of this age.

*...and when all the wars are over, a butterfly will still be beautiful.*

- Ruskin Bond, *Scenes from a Writer's Life*

*sliding down the slippery slope, sudden or slow, to something less than what our memory can construct, our imagination can conceive. The same old is dead and not alive, so it was.*

*The slippery slope was [and is] everywhere.*

- Paul Russell, *The Coming Storm*

“How long can we war,” still

another says, perhaps *our better angels*.

Consider our culture; a period of twenty years of peace since 1776; hence, a country steeped in conflict, the conditions that crush community—in contrast to those who say, “It creates cohesion, a common cause.”

“Sure, but what does this have to do with Stebbins Street,” someone says, for which I consider: *it may seem to be on some distant battlefield but war*

*It doesn't matter if justice is on your side. You have to depict your position as just.*

- Benjamin Netanyahu

*comes homes in the most insidious ways from the obvious obituary to a silent, secret variety that collectively eats away at liberty like a cancer. Look around at*

*the artifacts from the monuments to the memorials; concrete examples against the media that ever shapes public opinion, the distortions, deceptions and depictions of glory over the gruesome and guile, conquest or containment over costs, “security” merely a euphemism as with “peace” and “prosperity”.*

“It is only right to honor the fallen,” is often the sentiment, and the stand of any self-professing patriot. “Lest we forget...,” but the sad truth is that to

forget you first must remember—to know that war is an ugly thing where, in the end, nobody wins. But then, as once speaks about and writes, “War is a Force that gives us Meaning.”

*Aside from the sensitive subject, war, much of the content of these stories on Stebbins Street are not unicorns and rainbows, I realize. I do not pretend to embrace or accept the American Dream and with that, that the national interest—let alone streets and folks—is a priority for the powerful. Much of it is about more possession, power, at any cost to ad of the masses meted out for freedom, honor and all that hullabaloo.*

*“The difference between an optimist and a pessimist,” said journalist Clare Boothe Luce, “is that the pessimist is usually better informed.”*

*- Patrick J. Buchanan, *Suicide of a Superpower: Will America Survive to 2025?**

*Tough and then tougher times are coming, more than most can know and more than many can conceive—as the “sliding” compounds and finally hits-the-wall. What I present is that “the matrix” is cracking-up, all aspects of civility and culture on-the-line, and when the smoke clears, the many will be much fewer, their properties decimated and depopulated by depleted uranium and other deadly weapons of vast destruction. It will be a dreadful day with more dread in the days to follow.*

“Can this happen, here,” another asks while others wonder, some worry rightfully so.

The threat of *the big one* is always there, here, everywhere. Nuclear warfare will come, the consequences of which a relative few can or will comprehend, the extremes of man’s ingenuity and insidiousness, infinite inferno.



All the wars of the ages will be dwarfed by that to come; that what was then will be with much more, a massacre as never witnessed before and will never be again in the total effect. *No, ducking and covering under a desk, into a shelter or down in cave, for the immediate effect is followed by ages of contamination carrying a slow but lethal condition, mortal consequence, I am convinced as no less the case.*



*Same Old Same Old, so it was*

“What of Stebbins and such places,” one says, considering home as *their* world.

Stebbins and all communities, within and across state lines, will be *touched* in the tragedy; *few stones will be left unturned* while many blown unto oblivion.

*All history, then, in short, is little else than a long succession of useless cruelties; and if there happens any revolution, it will bury all the remembrance of all past disputes, wars and fraudulent treaties, which have produced so many transitory miseries.*

*- The Portable Voltaire*

*Where have all the flowers gone, long time passing? Gone to graveyards, everyone,* I am reminded, many did sing in earlier times of sentimentality. It was a different time but still similar; continuous conflict waged for acquiring something somewhere else—other than our sovereign—against an existential

threat, an always adversary, a *bad guy*. *But truth is always the first casualty of war while some, a relative few, collect the spoils, cashing-in on the crisis...catastrophe.* *When will they ever learn, when will they ever learn,* is not really a question but more a plea; for what does war profit a man except for the relative few, powerful, that promote it and then play both sides so as to assure their gains and minimize their risk?



“What about the terrorist; terrorism, those ‘that hate us’? What about those that aim to destroy our way of life,” as seems often the position we hold; after all, we are the greatest nation on Earth—which means we are envied, even scorned for simply having more, much more than most, *manifest*

*destiny.*

“I do believe some of what I hear but by far not all of it,” is my response, but I also know that first there was “The Hun” and then the “Red Scare”, and now this, another threat. Historically, a century of fears and foes. This *boogey man* is a central character in/with and cause for/of the planning and propaganda largely to *manufacture* an international threat and to then fund our defenses, countermeasures and the like – always for liberty, freedom and *the greater good*. *Again, war is a force that gives us meaning.*

What about them—those that commit atrocities on scale of Nazism, Marxism, Fascism, Communism, or Socialism? *Who, why,* and by so many other openings, followed by,



“What is to come of the sinister, seditious sultans?”

“Sects that vie for victory at depths too deep and disturbing to comprehend, nothing less than savagery,” so says another, offering some overture of the violent, virulent nature, a caliphate, a jihad, a religious revolution of the unruly, ruthless regimes.

“They’re women are subordinated, second to the men,” is another that

*strike a chord* for those still convinced that equality is possible, their right to be right. *One has not arrived until able to drive.*

*Everyone’s worried about stopping terrorism. Well, there’s really an easy way: Stop participating in it.*

- Noam Chomsky

Finally, “They worship a false messiah whose mission is to kill,” is perhaps partly true but then the question, “Who is doing most of the killing, funding the civil unrest, sanctioning economies, fomenting regime change or contracting a proxy war?”

*Is it fair to pose such questions,* I consider as I stand at the war memorial downtown? *Is it right, patriotic, to consider the comments and wonder why each seems to be all about ‘them’ as vile, the villain, the “axis of evil”?* *What about us—what about the United States and its accomplices, allies, and agents?*

*The greatest danger of a terrorist’s bomb is in the explosion of stupidity that it provokes.*

- Octave Mirbeau

After all, we do have a history of one conflict after another after another after another. *War is a force that gives us meaning.*

It is common and clear that we spend the most on weapons and, in fact, export weapons to other nations, public and private. Technology is foremost in the potential to at least one-up the competition and, as to potential, destroy world civilization several times over. It has been said that “war is a failure of

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policy” and if right, suggests that policy continues to fail. *Could it be that all which drives our diet of war is finally a failure?*

I walk along *the wall*; a fascinating replication of the Vietnam Memorial in Washington, this local version is touted as Alabama’s memorial. I look for names that I might recognize; the last names of generations of folks in Calhoun County that may just well be found in the American Civil War memorial located nearby at Janney Furnace on the Coosa River.

*What were they like, all these souls whose lives ended short, sudden, or shocking, death before life should stop? All the many names—too many to think about, comprehend or give a care, I am sad to consider.*

“Look, these two are likely brothers or relations of same name,” a voice I hear as my steps take me along each column and row, a few family names recognized as shared by fellow classmates in high school—as memory serves.

It is magnanimous to honor those that sacrificed but does it mean that the cause should too be honored, glorified, as even a great and terrible time? How long can any accept continuous conflict on the conditions that anything less is unpatriotic or worse, is unsupportive of our soldiers living and dead. Is it possible to continue the conflicts abroad without compromising liberty *at home*—defying John Madison’s warning and Lee’s premonition, concentrated powers beget increased aggression abroad and despotism, once again, “at home”? How is it that to achieve peace there must be war—as though that continuous conflict translates to perpetual peace?

*There were empires and still empires, I reason, the rise and then the fall.* The phases and stages of empire have been detailed and documented to the bitter end, and in the fall, empire *leaves its mark: the leviathan* carries with it



much in the way of carnage and costs—a vortex of vanquishing villainous vile—from the precipitous crest to the proliferous crevices at the steep cliffs of time & memorial.

On Memorial Day, this place is alive to remember the dead; a color guard, music and speeches represent the day’s event that is perhaps only matched by a similar event held just miles

away; a WWII German-Italian cemetery located at Fort McClellan.

Honoring the casualties of any war of most-any side is *to give a care* for those that *paid made the highest sacrifice* regardless of their motives or the movements that place them *in harm's way*. We may think of the "they" as evil, but *they* are often compelled to defend their lands, homes, and such per propaganda in part and something lower than *our better angels*.

The memorialized usually share an experience whatever the cause; that most have seen the face of conflict and ~~know~~ knew it for what it was (or is)—and is not. And if they could tell us..., what would they say? *Not enough to convince us of the truth*, I am afraid. But still, they fought and fight for someone or somebody and finally, for themselves, survival.

It is convenient for conflict or war to always be about *them* (not about me or my own too *close to home*). No, I much prefer to step by *the shadow* than to be in *the shadow* of the stoned wall. I much prefer to read or hear of their gallant victories absent the gruesome, the grotesque, *the cost and carnage*. I much imagine our goodness to promote goodness and not our badness to demote and degrade humanity to merely a casualty, condition or "collateral damage". I see conflict as *a necessary evil* for them, the powers.

If it were any more than *to step by it, the shadow* would overtake me and then burn my shadow into some wall like that of a woman at Hiroshima. But only the shadow knows what is out there, beyond this wall, the many wars o then, now, and then again.

**“A most authentic thing,”** he says, as it apparently happened.

They were friends of mine; practically family that had struggled and sacrificed with life’s offering; but they are tough, these folks on and around

South Stebbins Street.

*The most authentic thing about us is our capacity to create, to overcome, to endure, to transform, to love and to be greater than our suffering.*

- Ben Okri

It is a summer day in the Deep South aptly titled as “a hundred degrees in the shade”, or so it seems with the humidity, the haze, as a *dog-day* that could easily make the simplest outdoor

activity undesirable, even downright difficult, all things silent and still.

Labor and sweating are normal, even welcomed, as it befits the place and position that they know, the faith and feelings that produce a measure of effort and energy in the struggle and sacrifice of everyday life and living *Deep South*.

A haze in the sky is a sure sign of such a summer day; the sun faded while the preferred contrast of white and blue blend into a prevailing but stagnant sphere of grey interrupted by an occasional glimmer of sun, maybe a shower.

“Hey Howard, it’s a hot one,” he follows. “Where are you headed?”

“I’m headed up to the top of the hill to get a better view of things,” I tell him, part of my daily walk. “How is your family?”

“You didn’t hear,” he asks. “Mom is really sick and not doing well— a few days maybe, but more like hours left.”

“I didn’t know,” I say sympathetically. “How is your father taking it?”

“He has his own problems but seems to be taking it well. I think that he’ll get through it, like other things,” he tells me *though less than assured*, I think.

The father is authentically a positive person; he seems to take life’s

*Storm?  
Shine your light and make a  
rainbow.*

- Richie Norton

offering with a *silver lining*, a *glass half full*, *better angel*—all demons kept in the depths, distant and disassociated. *He is a rock, solid and sure*, I am sure.

“How are you doing,” I continue, only because I want to cover everyone related starting with the soul at hand, the rest of them perhaps to follow as she sleeps, *the by-and-by*.

"We're doing fine, I believe, my brother and sister," he says with similar style somewhere between respect and reticence.

"I'm glad to hear," but still, as a courtesy, I add, "Please let me know if-,"

"Oh, I will Howard, I promise."

It was a redeeming moment, a most authentic account, some good times from some bad, sad news. *It reminds of a saying some years ago, "Turn lemons into lemonade," though I can hardly consider death so simple.*

Perhaps "the good" is more the positive outcome in such times; that, at least a notion, *the rain falls* and then *the sunshine* is that much more, warm and welcomed more so. *Does the father care anymore or is it more acceptance, I wonder, life's travails, tragedies?*

*Even the darkest night will end,  
and the sun will rise.*

- Victor Hugo, *Les Misérables*

*Even the darkest night will end,  
and the sun will rise.*

- Victor Hugo, *Les Misérables*

"How many times do I worry about things I cannot control," I say every so often, "or worry about worrying?" But that is what we do all too often, perhaps another authentic thing of our human nature however useless and even undermining, worrying about tomorrow against today's troubles. I suppose worrying is a way that we cope—thinking that it somehow removes any cause..., culpability—whether done or left undone.

So often these matters get out-of-hand; the bitterness of family relations come oozing-up and the whole event becomes tainted by irresolvable or irreconcilable problems. It is a troubling thing to see family fighting on the eve of a death and then beyond *the day*, no treaty in time but only resentment for things without peace, a plot and stone, or reverence and respects.

"We're just trying to keep our wits," he continues. "They had their problems—that's for sure—that seem as though they might outlive death."

"Deep problems, then," I follow, careful to pry, poke.

"Yes, *deep*," he replies. "Papa was a ladies' man, you know."

"I had heard some," I add, as the stories go.

"Yep, he loves the women—still does, it seems. That cavorting of that kind eventually catches up to a marriage, but she held on—because that was thing to do, 'stand by your man'."

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"And she-," I begin, following a moment of stillness.

"And she, some mental problems emotional issues," he continues, the cause and effect less than sure.

"She had that-,"

"Yes Howard; she did..., and worse as age set-in."

"Papa put up with a lot of grief from her. I believe that long before his wandering that he was on watch and on match, a married man. She always blamed him regardless, never trusting for as long as the marriage was, maybe more, I'm told," he explains of both sides and maybe more. "Maybe he decided to *do it* because she always thought he *did it* anyway."

*Self-fulfilling*, I think but how often do these things happen; the person we expect them to be is the personality that we impose on them with all the flaws and foibles regardless of who they really are or want to be. *Maybe she long decided that she deserved no better so that no matter how good a man he was (or is), she was sure to make him less, lower and beneath her*, is another thought coming from what I have considered, caught.

"I have to wonder about his choices; was it his decision or was her, them? Call a heart a spade and eventually the heart turns like a spade," the son says. "Still, she is here for now and I suppose that means he will be free from her spell," a wistful whisper.

I had not really counted on the conversation going this way but, as I thought about it, he was just trying to get some troubling situation *off his chest*. But *situation* is not enough, for what he went on to say was more a lifetime of hurt, pain and suffering—not only for the marriage but the family in full.

"They fought occasionally but with age, the more difficult was the silence—the *calm before some storm*.

*The Queen is controlling, the Witch is sadistic, the Hermit is fearful, and the Waif is helpless.*

- Christine Ann Lawson, *Understanding the Borderline Mother*

She would sulk or go into a rage and he would walk-out or just turn his attention to something else, usually constructive."

*That may help explain why he accomplished so much*, I thought with a little sarcasm. *If your marriage is untenable why try? Find something or someone that satisfies, both ways if it suits you.*

"It may have been her heritage," the son suggests in lieu of the stillness, silence. "She may be been born with it although I don't think any of her siblings were that way," he says, somehow aware of *the bigger picture*. "At times she could be saint, sacrificing to extremes, but other times darkness seemed to overtake her, and she changed as like *Dr. Jekyll and Mrs. Hyde*."

*...They become angry and drive the relationship to the breaking point, then switch to a posture of helplessness and contrition, beg for reconciliation. If both parties are equally enmeshed, chaos and conflict become the soul of the relationship.*

- Theodore Millon

"She never tried to get help?"

"Oh, he tried for them—and then others too—but she would have no part of it," he explains. "You know; all that shame and such—spirits and skeletons."

"There was a stigma I suppose that-,"

"That was part of it, yeah, that could ruin her if everyone found out, though the irony is that, with no help, ruin is the result."

This is a real problem to be sure, and no one understands that more than those there—close and controlled—unable or unwilling to *distance themselves*, to *cut and run*, and possible say, "This is behind me."

"An unsolvable problem," he says with a sigh. "How do you force someone who refuses to-," he opens again, before withdrawing from this question without an answer. "Thank God for this day!"

When someone endures a caustic or toxic relationship, their reaction tends to be withdrawal, emotionally and even socially. A person will not endure such pain forever—not really—but will eventually seek and perhaps find an outlet, a way out—and *the old man*.

"It may seem too little too late, their 'unsolvable problem', but I had to come to terms with it," he explains holding back his emotions.

*It's not about blame or wallowing...you are all molded by so much more than a dysfunctional past, and you must ultimately take responsibility for creating the life you want.*

- Kimberlee Roth, *Surviving a Borderline Parent: How to Heal Your Childhood Wounds and Build Trust, Boundaries, and Self-Esteem*



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"And the others," I follow. "What about them?"

"It would be best to asked them directly Howard, but even if you did, I'm not sure you would get a straight answer," he says, implying that shame has a lasting effect.

*I know how things so close can be held so tight.* I believed him—his candor on these personal matters, *a most authentic thing.*

"And anything positive to take from all this, the problems," I ask, searching for *the light in the darkness*, not yet the death but still, *a death that keeps on dying*; the lasting effect of family psychosis, dysfunction, codependency or whatever other kind of condition that comes from closeness far apart.

"Oh yes, I believe that something positive has come out of it—after I come

*You know now how deeply unhappy your mother was, and you also know that in his own fumbling way your father loved her, that is, to the extent he was capable of loving anyone, but they made a botch of it, and to be a part of that disaster when you were a boy no doubt drove you inward, turning you into a man who has spent the better part of his life sitting alone in a room.*

- Paul Auster, *Report from the Interior*

out of Weaver Cave," he says without blinking an eye, assuming I know about the cave off Highway 21. "Seriously," he begins again, "I've learned about overcoming; getting through all the garbage and coming-out on the other side; forgiveness, love, gratitude, and healing!"

"Clean *on the other side*," I reply—realizing that none of us are ever quite *clean* as angels or covered white as

snow like the blizzard in '93.

"Never squeaky clean, never new, but definitely improved, accepting that some things are not resolvable let alone understandable, complete or comprehensible," he adds to press and punctuate that purity is a process and, this side of Heaven, is a lofty goal to be sure.

No doubt that he (they) have been through much but then, how many folks are like them, faced with (or facing) difficult and daunting problems that go *deep*, far and wide intermixed with wants and wishes, prayers and petitions, tensions and tears that come randomly or routine but then seldom run the opposite way. *No, I cannot deny such problems my own, so close that I hate to touch them.*

“What is it,” he asks to one of *the others* that approach, who whispers something that I cannot hear but somehow know, *she is gone*. Yes, mother *is passed* moments earlier, her husband, their father, at her side; and thus, I should be leaving now—customary, I suppose—my condolences kept to a few words to him.

How it happens or happened is seldom determined to the detail and yet some of us must live in it, around it and finally beyond it. *And somehow*, I think, *that he and the others must each find a way after this present loss per se, a most authentic thing.*

"It went from **'Bad to worse'**, Howard," I say to my reflection, my downcast eyes and still, my disbelief.

There is that view, perhaps *a glass half empty*, that reflects a wanting or needing for more, but I am sure that with age, one knows that *the glass* is never quite full, sometimes bone dry – our self-pity in charge.

"If only I could...," says those who try, and try again.

"If just another...," says the one never quite satisfied, complete.

"If only he would do...," says she regarding *her man*—what she wants or needs to be happy or satisfied or at least content and settled.

In a more serious setting, the *sports' nut* says, "If only they would have run that play and passed," referring to this final outcome, implying their prowess of the game, sense of the technicalities not to mention insights of speculation turned reality.

*Life—the way it really is—is a battle not between good and bad, but between bad and worse.*

- Joseph Brodsky

*In the "battle" there is the way we want it and then the way it really is, the difference between "good" and "bad" sometimes formed from bad desires or worse, intentions and actions that gleefully await the outcome, something's or someone's undoing, preferably all undone—and I win.*

"If only they could have seen..., they could have...," is a possible assessment in the coming or concluding consequence(s)—also referred to as *"Monday-morning quarterbacking"* for the *sports' nut* or *'good'* as a colossal victory of *"his team"*, preferably a crushing defeat for the rival(s)—such that he is vicariously has won.

*I suddenly realized it's no coincidence the two middle letters of life are "if". For every action we make, there is a reaction, the outcome often beyond our control, fragile and fraught with ruinous consequences.*

- Michael Faudet, *Dirty Pretty Things*

And what, tell me, is your view of life, of life and living?

"Well, it depends doesn't it;" as sometimes life seems promising, much potential, while other times bleak and

bland, an *up-hill climb* or a *tough row to hoe!* However, much we long for convenience and comfort yet, as it invariably comes, challenges and sometimes crushing consequences lead to the reality that, "Life is hard."

“Choose your battles,” is the advice of the well-intended, “and make your mark,” to carry it forward, leaving the world with some memory, good or bad but always and forever, preferably a folk hero.

“Life is not a *bed of roses*,” says another that evidently wants to say what is probably already known, experienced and endured, though expressed with emphasis in *the broader context* of a crisis, *bad or worse*.

Life is, in the experience of Forrest Gump, “like a box of chocolates; you never know what you’re going to get.” But as confections carry an almost certain craving, can we say the same for life? Of course not, as life brings all manner of conditions that change us, character and content, whether for the collective good or bad, the better or the bitter—and even *between bad and worse* as conditions unravel, consequences occur, sometimes without closure, any conclusion, but death—if that possible. As the contemporary calls it, “Life sucks!”



“We each and all are sinners,” the pastor punctuates, “and thus, must seek forgiveness and redemption,” he presses. “We live in a fallen world,” is perhaps another way of putting it, the prevailing condition that lends to sometimes and some things falling *between bad and worse*, and perhaps staying there for, well, a lifetime if not *beyond the grave*.

*And the beat goes on, the beat goes on  
Drums keep pounding a rhythm to the brain.*

- Sonny and Cher

“The beat goes on,” so goes the refrain from Sonny & Cher’s duet, where

in the rhythms of life comes disruption, discord, and notes that make singing nearly impossible, disturbing and discord. We want for good times, fine music, but we cannot seem to sometimes *carry a tune in a bucket*—not even a dirge, psalms or songs of despair, fear and foreboding up and down the fretboard.

Where is *the light, the end of the tunnel*? “*The light* exposes and reveals what *the darkness* hides,” the pastor continues, “And only then can we begin

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to-," he follows, offering some solace for the seeker, the saint, waiting, wanting for this *present world* to end, the new to begin.

I think too of *the darkness* between *bad to worse*, when I thought about, and seemed to long for, a ray, a glimmer, illumination. Maybe *the darkness* was not so bad—since it seemed inescapable, impassable? Maybe I grew accustomed to *the darkness* and relegated myself to it, in it, part of it. Do I love *darkness*, or do I want for *the light* that *exposes and reveals my darkness*?

The sun is setting beyond Coldwater Mountain while darkness begins to envelope the Piney forest, the long needle. The sounds of day give way to that of twilight and night. From the ridge, I begin my descent to South Stebbins Street only a short distance ahead. The gravel road is rough, washed-out with a network of crevices and cuts that make for a challenge, a hardpan of rock and clay. A slip here or there could be a fall, but should I fall I doubt anyone is there



to notice, the embarrassment more than an injury. I am alone and the darkness is coming quickly, a colder-moonless night is fast appearing before me. *Where is that light of the Alabama moon when you need it?*

The echo of a barking dog is as much welcomed as it is alarming; and while it might seem small to be concerned, I am alert to this Pit Bull with heavy pounded jaws. Our eyes are fixed, our bodies ready for action, but heaven forbid a battle between us. *Was this dog ever nice, tame, or has it always been this way?*

*Dogs have evolved to understand us better over the millennia, but in modern pet culture we appear doomed to understand them less.*

- Bronwen Dickey, *Pit Bull: The Battle over an American Icon*

"Oh, he won't bite," shouts the owner who stands in the shadows of a porch light. "He just looks mean," he says, attempting to reassure me. But I say nothing, for my words mean nothing to this dog and any thoughts on why the

thing is this way is nature and nurture. *If he lunges at me, what will I do?* But no such thing occurs by *this thing* as I make my way down Stebbins, saved from a fall or fight, a cut or a bite, humility, or harm.

*Odd at it seems, the dog reminds me of me: looking fierce but deeply afraid.* I am told that this owner has been seen kicking the dog and beating it with a strap. *Is it any wonder that the animal is angry, aggressive? Folks get this way too; beaten-up and torn down till all that can do is shout, scream and even slide into savagery, the extreme, fringes and then frayed. They hurt others because they are (have been) hurt—paying-it-forward with a fury.*

*Is it just that that they are careless, or it is more, the dog's so-called master? Maybe it is worse than .... Maybe they hate me and aim to destroy me; barking, pawing, gnawing, growling, ripping, and crushing while still standing in the shadow of the porch light ignorant or indifferent—even amused with or by the melee.*

Other things are heard and seen along the streets that are likely not threatening as things go, present just the same. Some are big enough to

identify; cats and rats that slip or slide along, one possibly pursuing the other. And then the more subtle things; the smaller species that creep and crawl, fly and flitter and stop long enough to make a noise, *the buzz* of their kind.

*On any other night would all these same things be around to see, hear, and feel?* Not likely, for life changes and, for the lesser lives with lesser life, change more often, life far less at least in the average lifespan and, as only humans have it, quality of life.

*Nothing last forever and some things for only a moment, the blink of an eye.* One tells another with apparent trust, “I love you,” yet maintains *one foot out the door*—going so far as to *stand at the porch under the light*, thinking of someone else, their sensitivity and sincerity dulled by years of ingratitude and some deep hurt that they *cannot let go*. “What the Hell,” they say to themselves. “I have lost at love and will never win again, try again.”

*In that moment, we were all witness to the dark truth that no matter where you are, how safe you feel, there are sometimes bad people looking for an opportunity to do bad things. And it's not all about winning against them; it's about being brave and not losing against yourself.*

- Watt Key, Hideout

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"I know what love is," so says Forrest to his life-long affection, Jenny, while I wonder, *does she...? But then, Jenny had a bad childhood, bitter and bothered by someone's undoing and as song of that age, "She's come undone."*

Yes, I know that love is many things to many folks, but for dogs, love is about commitment, trust, and loyalty. Perhaps it would be better if Jenny responded, "And I know what commitment is," leaving *love* as abused as she

*Love is the power of a wise man. It is a net for a lover. It is a tool for a clever man. Love is a song for a singer.*

- Debasish Mridha

whether committed or not. For in the end, where a glimmer of ray of light begins, is commitment above all else—even suffering and sacrifices far from convenience and the clichés of love.

*Still, love is timeless and therefore will be, always.* The Beatles said it, "Love is all we need," but I am not saying it is everything; for without indifference and ignorance, what reason might there be love? Without those aimed to hate me and destroy me, how can love tick, timeless, and tantamount? Without *the darkness*, what good is *the light*?

I see that campfire, a couple of yahoos that hang out at an abandoned house claimed to be one of their own, the house of a relative. *Should I stop*

*Love. What is it truly? Love is a spiritual state, an intangible, often insatiable need to put one's needs above your own.*

- Bella Vespira

*and shoot the shit with these shadows of men that, like Peter Pan, cannot catch their shadows and perhaps still have a Wendy to drag along on for their pirating of ships and heroism among*

*other lost boys.* Yes, we have talked on occasion and yes, they are a couple of yahoos who cannot seem to muster their manhood, perhaps held-back as boys that still strive at recess, meandering and mischief, maybe more.

"That you Howard," a shadow shouts, one or two nearly beyond sobriety, maybe sanity. "How's it hanging," a second shouts, sending the dogs to bark and folks to their front porch, otherwise stuck in front of *the tube*.

"Yeah, it's me," I say.

"Got to love that Pit," another says. "He's a mean son-of-a-bitch."

"I survived," is all I can say.

"This time, but the old man like to let it go and, boom, it bites."

"We'll see," I say, their words about half true perhaps made so by their half-wit, half full of booze, maybe *shine*, lives.

I move on, back to the matter of love and away from them and the shadows they cannot seem to find.

*Love is not it*, I think more, *as the word is so often used, abused, going from bad to worse.*

"Who wants to experience love only to discover it false, a fraud?" *Who wants to make all the sacrifices with suffering for something so shallow—stuff full of shit?*

"What say you, my shadow?"

And then my shadow says to me, "If love were so easy it would not be so special, the moments of suffering intermittent with the spectacular, the stupendous. We love as a matter of survival, a basic need, never mind the sacrifices."

*I suppose that things can always be worse*, I think while the fire within me warms my soul, and my spirit *the light in the darkness.*



*Same Old Same Old, so it was*

***“A repulsive need”*** or want, is difficult to digest; first, that you have or desire it, and second, that you don’t always get what you want, I think as I look across the Chicago skyline from my sixth floor window. *There is so much to take-in*, the decades of vast expansion and growth; a behemoth, much of which

*I always had a repulsive need to be something more than human. I felt very puny as a human.*

- David Bowie

I will never see now or forever. Still, I am determined, and so, beyond my commitment to this conference, I *hit the bricks* and take a few shots of *The Windy*

*City* along Michigan Avenue, the museum to the public beach.

From O’Hara, I take the ‘L that will put me out downtown somewhere along Washington Street, on *The Loop*. On several stops, folks come and go, but capacity soon is maxed-out as the “blue” train steadily rolls and rocks its way from one borough to another. Departing my route, the hardest part of the trip so far, is finding my way to street level. *You know you are not from the big city when you cannot find your way to sea level let alone “the top”?* But on finally reaching daylight, what is the first site but Trump Tower, the name in big, gold letters on each facet. *Ah yes, our president’s commercial interests*, I think, having never seen one of his many holdings, a properties’ tycoon.

*Only one is a wanderer.*

- Ralph Angel

On to the task at hand, to find this Hyatt among several in the business district—without GPS, a smart phone,

the country bumkin that I be. *Who would figure several Hyatt hotels?*

Chicago’s *Magnificent Mile* is much more than a mile, but no doubt, it felt my footsteps much of the time as a sought out all that I can see and, to my dismay, *a repulsive need* to shop for someone I hardly know. *Why bother*, I

*We can be redeemed only to the extent to which we see ourselves.*

- Martin Buber

would think, *for regardless of whether I buy them something or not, it may not matter*. But even with doubts is a need, the moving factor too much to ignore,

suggesting a sense of power and promise like nothing before. *Maybe Trump Tower is sending out a signal or sorts, raising me to such high elevation, above the maddening crowds around me*. “I can do this,” something big; large enough for me to remember that I was there, am here, a mile of magnificence.

Gift giving is for the giver, you know. *If you cannot get satisfaction from the giving than you have lost the meaning of it, right?* At least that is what I reminded myself as I hastily sought the right color, the right garment for that someone that I do not know—not really. One olive-brown and another more a “wine” color; these were my choices, here and now, *The Mile*. *I hope they like it, them*, I think, given my pleasure, the choices, styles, and such.

*The most truly generous persons are those who give silently without hope of praise or reward.*

- Carol Rylie Brink, *Caddie Woodlawn's Family*

But back to Chicago, the single-most word that remains with me is the span, chasms and schisms, between one and another: the folks vary widely and wildly; of all colors, dialects and descriptions, and in all other differences gleaned from the naïve eye.

Then the buildings, the clusters of high-rises that are each unique and possibly famous though, in all examples, towering over me and each other. *All this property above sea level*, reminds me that however high we go, still, the earth is there to catch us and finally cover us if only our soul. *What are needs and wants when we are finally done with any efforts of rising to higher floors and bigger, better buildings*, I think. *Even love dies among, between and within us, idolized by it (of them) and something more, majestic, mysterious—however magnificent*. And perhaps that is why I seek gifts; that somehow this will resurrect love and restore all less, lost, in the aging of my living, my life presently. *But then, I am lost among these towers as in love, between the streets and endless shops, the wins, and the losses, and cannot seem to find my way, more miles than The Mile*.

*Everything in modern city life is calculated to keep man from entering into himself and thinking about spiritual things....*

*The whole mechanism of modern life is geared for a flight from God and from the spirit into the wilderness of neurosis.*

- Thomas Merton, *No Man Is an Island*

*Love will commit, or love will commit suicide.*

- Anthony Liccione

Of all animals that one may see in the city is a rabbit crossing Michigan Avenue from a cluster of shrubs to somewhere. *I could see a rat, cat, or some similar city creature, but a rabbit?* Maybe I am imagining, as with Jimmy

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Stewart is some classic film, but no; it a real rabbit casually making its way to somewhere, carefully crossing a colossus.

I keep goats, so when I learned of the legend of the Cubs' curse, there came another connection to consider. Back home, some call me "Goatman",



which, if you have ever smelled the musk of a goat, might sound offensive, repulsive. With some imagination perhaps I can set my purpose for being here as, well, to carry on the curse and perhaps plan another visit with mine, Hugo. But the Cubs won the World Series that year, breaking the curse so I guess that, well, the goat has done its damage

and it is time to move on, many miles.

If you do not prefer baseball or the other noted sports here, look no further than the abundance of museums and bold exhibits of architecture. No, I did not really take either in—not really. For some reason, such cultural exhibits were neither a need nor want, my mind to taken by this mammoth skyline though it sounds like I missed out—which would not be the first nor the last time. *We sometimes make choices whether accepted or not.*

*Chicago is a place of extremes*, I thought again; while walking toward the 'L' at 3AM, back to O'Hara and the full-body scanning of TSA, etc. In the walk, the homeless tucked away in their makeshift habitats while some construction or maintenance continues working through the early morning. A man asked me for money, and I oblige with a five while billions are being transacted at

*I am willing to accept Chicago's gigantism...*

- Jean Genet

that very hour, the trading house close by. I look around me to see, one last time perhaps, the behemoth skyline just before passing under The Loop's

elevated tracks. The place is eerily quiet—almost dead—contrary to the prior afternoon when you might have thought an evacuation was underway, Again, *extremes that give credence to such masses of everything from endless wealth to abject poverty, all dimensions and all degrees, the extremes in excess.*

I do not like this place because it is deceiving; fixed and secure in appearance but then let the power go down for a week and see what happens to civility? Big cities seem very vulnerable, undependable; large, integrated systems that fall short of enough redundancy or contingency to avert catastrophe. It may seem impossible but eventually something goes wrong—very wrong—and creates change much more than the difference in (or of) dimensions and degrees, the extremes indeterminate, unrecoverable.

*In a big city you become a ghost; you walk on the crowded streets and realize that you are a kind of transparent entity; an indistinct being, a thing which is not something!*

- Mehmet Murat ildan

At the “L” station, a man approaches and asked for my day-ticket; he says that he is down & out and is looking for employment among other things. His life and living, as described, is divided between a wife who has numerous medical problems and a lover who has recently rejected him. We talk at length though it seems at times as a dream, my mind foggy in the early morn.

“You look tired,” he tells me, “Not from around here, are you?”

“And you do too,” I reply, seeing much of fatigue in him built on his open, candid conversation.

“She is white,” he tells me, “and listened to folks who disapproved of a mixed couple. At first, she was okay with it—as I helped her work through a drug problem—but then she listened to others and...,” he says seemingly hurt in the outcome, the whole affair. “After all that, this....”

Boarding the blue train for the second and perhaps last time, I find a seat while continuing our conversation. As the train makes its way in route to the airport, the car fills-up to the point that folks are standing. Statistics indicate that hundreds of thousands use the ‘L’. One of only a hand-full of inner-city transit systems in the country, it has been around since the early 1900’s.

*Chicago does not go to the world; the world comes to Chicago! [ ]*

*Who has taller buildings than our tall buildings?*

*Who [has] a busier airport than our airport?*

- Peter Orner, *Love and Shame and Love*

I marvel at the myriad of folk and the metropolitan functions all about me—much more happening than I can take-in. But to the *extremes*, my other side is loathing it all, maybe even rejecting it all as some sort of time-bomb soon to go-off. The thought of such catastrophic ends is wild yet strangely winsome, the very notion of such ends to concrete and steel with foreboding, albeit fascinating, fantasy. *Could it happen if only heaven forbid?*

From rail to air, a connecting flight to Cincinnati followed by a second leg home. *It is a real experience, extremes unexceptional*, I think as I turn my attention once again to her, of thoughts that will not easily pass. Still, there is at least one similarity between the two, the big city and the beautiful woman; both build excitement in the arrival, an adventure, though—as with most relationships—never fill the repulsive need or want to *be somebody* or someone beyond who are what I am. *Is it realistic to believe that anything can fill a repulsive want even if I feel it a need, necessary?*

*There's something about arriving in new [big] cities, wandering empty streets with no destination. I will never lose the love for the arriving, but I'm born to leave.*

- Charlotte Eriksson, *Empty Roads & Broken Bottles*; in search for *The Great Perhaps*

Nearing my home now, but still thinking further on these two, the big and the beautiful, is another association; that even the fewer, more meaningful relations can gradually but grimly die.

*My town is dying and in some ironic way it reminds me of relations that have died or, more likely, are just a breath away, the only sign of life as the memories of what was or could have been.*

On the radio, by some coincidence, is a sentimental song by Iris Dement, “Our Town”. *Is she right, that “nothing good ever last?”*

*I cannot imagine Chicago falling with what I saw, in awe as a child in a candy store, but my town is much less...and therefore much more to fall by the wayside, I accept. Chicago however....*

Folks around here think about these things too, I am sure; the way it was or could have been versus the way things are, now and likely to be. Occasionally, one will say or ask, on this matter, “What do you think, Howard?” Sometimes I try to say something positive or uplifting but other times I unload, painting my impression of the *gradual but grim*. “No, the town will not vanish,

but it will continue to decline, a fragment of what it once was, the 'All-American City'." And for us on the West end, well, the signs are more of less; after all, we never measured-up to most and especially not those on "the mountain", country club and all that high-life. "We're just plain folks."

*There remains a repulsive need to be somebody, especially here in my hometown. Maybe I can (could have been) one of the few that rise-up and move away or at least up yonder on the mountain, I think on occasions like this, or otherwise made a mark, legend beyond my days. But how many really become something or someone beyond themselves without forgetting who or what they are—and are not. That is a problem with fame and fortune; you forget what and who you are really are, am.*

In places like Chicago, it is easier to get entangled in the throngs, but here, with decline on the mind and better times pretty much a memory, the effort to really know thyself is simpler, less inhibited, however repulsive. *I am sad about our town, but I am at least glad that I know it for what it was and see it as it is whatever becomes.*

There is **“More than meets the eye”** when it comes to folks, the way they seem, they look and sometimes sound.

“We’re going tribal,” says a dude, displaying one of the more evident tattoos, a “sleeve” on one arm. “My woman has the other wing,” he touts, suggesting that the markings make them inseparable; two unbreakable wings, free-birds but still nesting after all these years—no chance that “I leave here

*A tattoo is a true poetic creation and is always more than meets the eye.*

- V. Vale, *Modern Primitives: An Investigation of Contemporary Adornment and Ritual*

tomorrow”. And his body is a story of some sort; an endless series of color melding into something of a fantastically clothed style—a human wrap of pain followed with pleasure, the peace of

body art that ages like a fine wine or something like that.

“You’re all covered-up,” says another, expanding on the exposed, marveling and motivated. “Where’d yah get that one,” the gazer asks, followed with each story: the shop, location, context, and a few other details.

“Yeah, my body is a work-of-art,” he replies proudly, disregarding the blunt nature of boys. “One day you’ll have some too,” he adds, winking at a girl.

The interesting thing about tattoos, besides the endless designs and variety of color, is that the trend continues. Folks love their body art, but *there is a deeper meaning or message*, I think. *Is the cultural popularity of tattoos more than a fade? Is it a sign of the times, going native, nihilistic?*

Body art has been around for the ages and by one means or another has been posted to the body for similar reasons of sentimentality or setting one apart from the crowd, the masses. While the instruments/methods may have changed, the nature remains the same. I believe it as a branding, a display that

*My body is my journal, and my tattoos are my story.*

- Johnny Depp

we belong to something or someone whether as a somewhat *badge of honor* or symbol of shame, scorn. *Here, at the*

*present the tattoos are the former*, without a doubt. *It is only when the relationship or commitment ends that the once cherished or celebrated brand becomes the reminder of a bad outcome, break-up...broken relationship—never anticipated until, it happens and then—what do you do, so much for the wings?*

“She really likes this one,” he tells his growing audience, leaving the question of which “she” he is suggesting. *Okay, a tattoo, but when enough is enough?* It seems that for some, the more you have, the more you want as a kind of timeline or lifeline or something like that.

A brief on the background of body art, and especially tattoos, traces the translated word from Tahiti. In a more-recent film version of “Mutiny on the Bounty”, Fletcher Christian (played by a young Mel Gibson) is shown receiving his share of such body paint; a continuous process of tacking or hammering while his lover applies counter-tension to evidently ease the pain.

But back to the present, modern world for which tattoos are the rave mostly among the young but still beyond.... While addressing the possibilities, tattoos are allegorically taboo, tribal, and teeming toward a *brave new world* of *Max Mad* dystopia.

As it is, the tattooed teller is a biker and, *bad to the bone*, shows some choice ink spots. So called biker tattoos came about in the 1940s perhaps only preceded by the navy, Tahiti or not, who made their mark too long ago to even argue. *Somewhere and soon, he should reveal his own variety; those that brand him to some club presumably of Harley’s though, as with tattoos, come in other brands as classic as Indian or an Indian legend.*

Of course his *thunder* is threatened when others begin to show their flesh-bared wares, other brandings of/for the brave; those gutsy for the glory of a graphic to show and say, “Yeah, this is me,” who I am or what I am about—my life!

Perhaps in early stages of this art the primary need was one of survival; that with this or that symbol, the tribe was told with all the necessity to belong to and be with *your own*, your owner.





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"Yep, I belong with this "\_\_\_\_" club," I hear the dude tell them, their reaction mixed depending who is what or not.

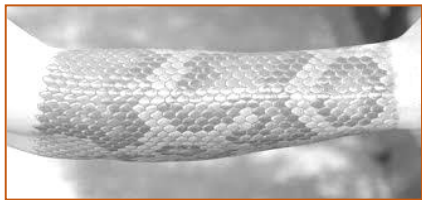
"Yeah, I got the skull and," begins another, rolling up his sleeve, followed by, "Oh yeah, I know where that came from. That's cool!"

*What is the rave over body-art, the raw tissue or tag or something more or less? Why do so many young folks seem set on getting tattoos, sleeves and then torsos, from head to toe and back again? From the ages to the pages of time and memorial, folks seek significance, specialty and any sort of something or another to show others and themselves who they are, were and perhaps will be.*

A broad view of/for tattoos might be that the world is regressing, nations and regions, and thus the folks are merely riding this trend or tide toward, well, *barbaric times*. On the other end is that it is simply a fad and thus will fade. *Is it the one or the other, a long trend or more a flash in the pan?*

As it is for some, the decorative effect takes on the form of a circus show: "See the tattooed man," so said the host of the traveling band of a bizarre burlesque, the trains carrying such odd characters great distances to dazzle.

"Wow, he's got snake arms," the boy blurts-out, pointing. *The boy's right, reptilian. I wonder if he has scales too, sheds his skin ever so often.*



What is the idea behind the skin replacement? *I know that so-called "lizard people" represent some humanoid forms; those seemingly removed from the mass of folks, on perhaps a plane or tier too far and high to be real humans, humanity.*

"Are you a lizard," the boy asks, carrying comment to *snake guy* who makes who says,

"Yeah, and I slither around and strike like fire," while lurching over the boy, playing the part.

*Why does one need a tattoo or, in his case, a variety, a sleeve and still more? Is nature not enough or the body beautiful as is? Not always, I think back, answering a thought with a sense of it. Tattoos connotes more than a*

cover-up of that thought plain; no, they are punitive to the point and then, following, a passage into a new strain of self-adulation, applause.

"Where'd you get that one," the boy insists, inquisitive, impetuous.

"Oh, this one took several weeks and—man, did it sting—but it was worth it, the pain, the price."

*How often does someone regret a tattoo at the taking, the getting?*

"What happened there, up there," the boy blurts out, once again using his finger.

"Oh, that one was taken off," the painted person replies poignantly, with a sudden sullen expression as though the sad clown—except with words, a voice. *How often does someone remove a tattoo, the pain, the price?*

*Maybe that's what I needed.  
Another tattoo. Some pain on the  
outside to ease the pain on the  
inside.*

- N.R. Walker, *Spencer Cohen, Book One*

*I often think we should have  
tattooed on the back of whatever  
hand we use to shoot or write, "I  
might be wrong."*

- Louise Penny, *A Fatal Grace*

"Yeah, it came out-of-nowhere, but

I knew it had to go after that," the forlorn fellow follows. "I'll never forget her," he adds, his showing taking on more a confession than a comedy, more for the drama than the little dude with a determined doubt.

*Is the tattoo more a tribute, a duty, or is it something we do for them because it stays, a kind of semi-permanent?*

I think, *most would agree that tattoos look better on younger, youthful skin.* Let a tattoo age and what is left but a raison, once a lush grape, but now a tried, tired taint—merely a mark instead of a work of art. Oh sure, tattoos are *the creation*, but the canvass is what counts. To carry this thought to the erotic, the so-called "tramp stamp" is rightfully for the girl still fertile—not the gramps perhaps feeble—with the message, more than imagination, fantasy. Tattoos are sometimes sexual, arousing, erotic; but for that happen, again, the canvass and more, the person's appeal.

The "sleeve" may connote virility placed on the right member while anything along the waistline (e.g. "tramp stamp"), breast-line or even upper of a female gives rise to fertility at the most base level and perhaps fun for the time being, a real pleasure if just in your head, mind, moaning pheromones.

On the neck or head, the tattoos remain somewhat taboo—and especially where profession and public perception apply. The thinking may be one of thuggery on both sides; a high tolerance for taking pain and thus, inflicting it too with or without a criminal background. *Should I continue?* If I do, let me remind you that this is largely my impression somewhat supported by an article here and there—and nothing more.

I cannot say that I am right but rather that this is my opinion. No, I do not have a tattoo, and nor do I want one for the simple reason that I am older now and do not really see the value of purpose in it, for it. Still, I write about this contemporary custom because it touches Stebbins Street, the common folks of our day. Moreover, *tattoos reveal a certain cultural change*, I think, as I think about often.

“I can tell you that taking one off is a Hell of a lot more painful,” he follows.

“I’m thinking about ‘Bama’,” another says, looking, “On my hand to go with the ‘Roll-Tide’ on the forearm and the NCAA on my-”

“Yeah, that’s cool,” another says. “But what about Saban’s face?”

*Another sports fan, the Crimson Tide, what is an obsessive (or excessive) to one is repulsive to another. But then football is sacred here—as much if not more than, well, Jesus and his apostles—unless they possibly played the game. But then, some do get “Jesus” or more often a cross while others some expanded text, a favorite scripture or something like that.*

Somewhere I read that the rising popularity of tattoos is symbolic of a culture in moral decline, suggesting that tattoos and other body art are an image of not only tribalism but nihilism as well. *But then body art is nothing new under the sun, right?*

The crowd thins as the colored figure eases away, the illustrations and images of his story as well, not to be forgotten and sometimes to forever. If as Johnny Depp who says, “My body is my journal, and my tattoos are my story,” is right, real, then the more tattoos the more stories. But the language of our lives is not always so graphic, superficial, skin-deep; no, it is so often more, our words whether spoken or written, first-person or another. Each is unique, to mean that we each have a person that is as no other—not anyone, anywhere or at any time. *It is easy to get overwhelmed by the present population or lost*

*in throngs of folks that cover big-city walkways or endless traffic jams on the major thoroughfares. It is difficult to find true friendship through Facebook or companionship on (or through) a dating service. And it is impossible to tell one's story by tattoos or any other, single medium. Sure, a tattoo has a purpose but it does not stay the course of one's life—or beyond, our legacy—but is just an image, a sign or stand-out as another way of expression to elicit other interest, attention, attraction or caution. A tattoo may be more than meets the eye, but it does not define who and what we are, each of us.*

*Same Old Same Old, so it was*

“There is **‘Something so precious’** in finding and keeping the things that matter,” he says, his stare somewhere distant. “How often do will let what matters slip away.”

*Humans were so stupid. They had something so precious, and they barely safeguarded it at all.*

- Cassandra Clare, *City of Bones*

“What was her name,” another asks, half-heartedly.

“Her name,” he responds, hesitant to offer more but, as often, merely leaving his words to the moment, not

some saga that suggest he is too less a man to *get over it*. “I’d rather not say, speak it right now,” as to avoid this moment of the emotions, the tears.

“Yeah, who is this precious person,” the other now persists to know: “The “things that matter”.

He says for conversation, compromise, “Let’s just call her Cassandra.”

*Cassandra is a classic*, I think. From Greek mythology, the name represents a true prophet or foreteller; one whose predictions are doubted, altogether disrespected, but still given audience, a crowd.

“Cassandra,” another repeats. “Is it any wonder?”

“What do you mean,” murmurs the man, a morose expression and matching tone. “What’s wrong with that name,” he inquires, insists.

“The name is from ancient Greece,” the other reluctantly replies, surprising all other onlookers with some perspective applied these parts. “Yeah, it has meaning that, well, is best said as ‘letting matters slip away’ or worse, *killing the messenger*.”

“Really,” he says, sighing. “She was, to put it simply, right,” he follows, “and we were wrong for not *going with it*,” he continues in the abstract.

*I willingly accept Cassandra's fate  
To speak the truth, although  
believed too late.*

- Anne Killigrew

What is it about truths that go unchecked; why do folks fail to remember—or soon forget—when history is there, waiting, and willing to wise one up? Since history repeats to

some extent, the cycles and so forth, *why not give it mind and action—since it is as true as truth*, I ponder once more. When will we ever learn, and then, *take it to heart, respect and reverence?*

"Were you in love with her, this Cassandra," another asks, possibly *touching a nerve or crossing the line*, the things best left alone.

"I was (am)," he doubles back and still dubious considering the consequences. Love is more than feelings, the flesh, but takes to *heart* the others..., mind and soul, the whole of who they are, what they know and where they take you. *Love endures much, surviving the struggles, sacrifices.*

"Hard to forget them, but then, she tells you how some things will go and, when it goes, you think about her even more, right?"

This is it; the things that are not forgotten may *slide by* for a while but then suddenly and without warning, return to remind of us who we are, were, and perhaps will continue to be.

*The edge... There is no honest way to explain it because the only people who really know where it is are the ones who have gone over.*

- Hunter S. Thompson, *Hell's Angels: A Strange and Terrible Saga*

"It was like she was (is) miraculously resurrected and even restored to something greater than before, the real one, my confidence complete—though my regrets all the more, I'm afraid."

"It's like you reach that edge," another follows.

"Or a ledge," another adds.

"Yeah, a cross over in degrees and I must say that the danger is equal; on the one side, you are stupid but subdued while on the other, aware and anxious," he confesses of this Cassandra, much for the mind to manage, as he continues.

"She told me (us) what would happen; that this place would dry-up like other towns, once great. She said that hard-times would return whether sudden or subtle; still, the times would change and the *hard would grow harder*," he recalls. "She would say, '*The hard rains will come without a rainbow*,' or such sayings as though reading from scriptures, the figurative."

"We know that" someone said.

"Oh yeah, well what did you do about it," another challenges him.

Cassandra is a funny thing; it (she) will tell you what to expect even when (or as) she is rebuffed, thought a fool. It is though she is driven by something other than the satisfaction of potentially helping folks. Perhaps she (or they) is more afraid of saying nothing or worse, lying, than telling the truth? But

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perhaps they do what they do—not out of any immediate fear—but because of love. Truth can hurt, sure, but it is the intentions that really matter to God and to those that love. Sometimes a lie is more acceptable, agreeable, and

*An unbelieved truth can hurt a man much more than a lie. It takes great courage to back truth unacceptable to our times. There's a punishment for it, and it's usually crucifixion.*

- John Steinbeck, *East of Eden*

accommodating—but then the truth that time reveals, exposes, perhaps too late for what matters to matter.

Bad news is not welcomed but maligned, the messenger or message. *The real prophets of old had the same problem, I think. They were despised, run out of town, threatened with their*

*lives by powerful folks, Jezebel, judges, and kings.*

“What about Christ,” another asks. “Wasn’t he a Cassandra too?”

“Yeah, Christ told the truth too, who he is and what is to come, and”

“They took him out,” another adds. “Pilate had him hung on the cross.”

Still, we believe (them, him/her) in such matters. One must be willing to listen and then to reason, without which they will not hear or most willingly will not abide or even adjust. *The truth costs dearly, finding and delivering it.*

“Christ is God,” comes more on mark, “and thus, the truth be known,” he suggests, the *real deal* from the make-believers, the anointed from the frauds, false prophets, and other such exploiters.

But in this notion, truth be told, is the possibility that only God alone is truth and that anything or anyone else cannot possibly be truthful, revere and

*Honesty is more than not lying. It is truth telling, truth speaking, truth living, and truth loving.*

- James E. Faust

respect truths. *Since God appointed or selected folks to speak the truth, is it wrongheaded or wayward to think that folks today, Cassandra or not, can do the*

*same, similar?* This is, after all, at the heart of the matter.

An *honest Joe* is more admirable whether they speak of good things or bad, better, or worse, favorable, or not. *What then should we do...or should we say, about the Cassandras of these times; those who claim to tell the truth, seemed convinced, convincing as much as credible by the many who acknowledge them, endorse or extol their earnestness of events to come?*

And still to question with questions:

- No person should believe Cassandra, portending pure poppycock?
- Can you believe that nut?
- Are you that stupid?"
- More Chicken Little, the sky is falling?

Few will to *rock the boat* and thus instead *follow the herd* rather than risk the possibility of being a fool or worse, being right!

*Heaven forbid* the one that says, "I told you so," or something like that, the invective that ensues, the scorn that follow however accurate or now assured it be, this truth.

"She said so much and, damn it, I did not listen," he laments, leading to the following detail from her journal:

- Folks of working class will be squeezed and pressed into poverty—this time largely because of de-industrialization, the dismantling of foundational industry and commerce, lowering per capita income, the opportunity and standard of living
- Family pressures will rise from economic, social-media influences, and political-legal laws-courts that weaken the institution of marriage while devaluing the parental role and relations, diluting societal strength and standards

*If the United States continues to allow its manufacturing base to erode at a staggering pace how in the world can the U.S. continue to consider itself to be a great nation?*

- Michael Snyder, *The Economic Collapse; "19 Facts About the Deindustrialization of America That Will Make You Weep"*

*...an inverse relationship characterizes relations between the family and the state: as one becomes weak, the other becomes strong. Moreover, the trend over modern history has been the growth of the state at the expense of the family*

- Stephen Baskerville, "The Growing Role of the State and Family"

*The declining (church) attendance is really dramatic...churches are losing the ability to dictate to people how to live their lives.*

- Ronald Inglehart



*Same Old Same Old, so it was*

- Personal values and mores will continue to decline against the influences of mainstream media, the “dumbing-down” of education and the ever shifting of, again, social norms leading to nihilism
- Church activity and attendance will wain with a few exceptions, their congregants or members aging while the younger generations, indifferent or increasingly skeptic, view the church as irrelevant or worse, intolerant
- Media will continue to consolidate, concentrate under centralized control, and the integrity of information-news will vanish—the media increasingly influenced by powerful bias, propaganda
- Democracy will continue to falter against the pressures of an advancing and unassailable alliance between government and corporations, an ‘ism with schism, chasm, and the despotism that ensues when political power is unfettered, centralized, entrenched in corruption and criminality
- Conventional-classic spirituality will give way to carnality, many forms of secularism, nationalism, consumerism/materialism, nihilism, and barbarism
- Apathy will rise as with an empire in descent, the consequence of continuous conflict and hegemony, untenable public and private debt, setting the stage for despotism, a supposed “savior” touting to restore order and greatness and *bring America back*.

*Cinema, radio, television, magazines are a school of inattention: people look without seeing, listen in without hearing.*

- Robert Bresson

*The opposite of love is not hate, it's indifference. The opposite of art is not ugliness, it's indifference. The opposite of faith is not heresy, it's indifference. And the opposite of life is not death, it's indifference.*

- Elie Wiesel

*This empire is vast .... They will kill us, all of us, for we are slaves, and we cannot be allowed even the barest hope of freedom. Without us, they have no empire.*

- Anthony Ryan, *Queen of Fire*

"She was so right," he concludes, this summary of what she said, we did or are doing.

"Where did she go—what happened to her," another asks.

"Oh, she is not actually a woman," he promptly replies, "but rather, a way of describing what I thought, true."

"And then," the other follows, now knowing who or what she represents.

"And then something so precious turned to contempt and all that truthfully could change me was lost. I'm afraid to admit that I lost my Cassandra."

*A democracy survives when its citizens have access to trustworthy and impartial sources of information.*

- Chris Hedges

“**Death is**’ ceasing to live,” he remarks to a question. “That’s what death really is; it’s dying even before the body and brain give out.”

*It is not so much that we fear death as much as it is that we fear or dread*

*Death is part of who we are. It guides us. It shapes us. It drives us to madness. Can you still be human if you have no mortal end?*

- Christopher Paolini, *Brisings*

*that our life has not been significant, meaningful, I think, of as death.*

Death happens to us all and in places like Stebbins Street, it is frequent with many seniors and still that

occasional, “untimely” death from disease, cancer, accidents of one sort or another. *Death is not a stranger to Stebbins Street, summing it up.*

Christians embrace eternity, Heaven, as do other religions embrace some idea of a paradise, a place where life is bliss and death is no more.

“I insist that death may come before the pronouncement, any wake or funeral,” the old fellow preaches. “It is not how we actually die as much as how we live—lived. I know folks that gave-up before they gave-it-up and all that’s left is the shouting and,”

*I'm not afraid of death; I just don't want to be there when it happens.*

- Woody Allen

“The shell of man,” another finishes. “No soul or spirit, but just the flesh barely breathing and hardly moving,”

she says, agreeing. *Where does the soul go, even before death knocks?*

They say that “death only comes once”; yet in this modern day some folks have what is called “an afterlife experience” sometimes reporting on it, writing about it, dramas, and interviews. This phenomenon gained popularity or attention as firsthand accounts are more than mere curiosity, but potentially about planning with the notion that your passage will be as peaceful and promising. Depending on the favorability and tranquility of “their story”, the ardent and active attendee may attempt to follow suit, weighing the disciplines of *this side* with the rewards of the apparent other. Some folks find solace accepting that the passage is pleasant, perfect, a tranquil state. *But is the complete or coherent description of the afterlife?*

Whether the afterlife stories are true or perhaps fall short of the end, the final destination of death, the mystery remains much alive for both the deceased and the survived, the whole realm of humanity as well as the

subhuman species that we extol as worthy of “dog heaven” or something like that. *Why dwell on anything but heaven for us, our loved ones?*

Folks have some interesting and intriguing ideas about the afterlife irrespective of these studied accounts.

Some Christians consider that Heaven will include their earthly family and that, on ascension, they each and all will not only identify with one another but will further the present relationships to, well, eternity. One can be heard to say,

*Death is no more than passing from one room into another. But there's a difference for me, you know. Because in that other room I shall be able to see.*

- Helen Keller

“I can’t wait to see her,” they will sigh, anticipating that their folks are there waiting for them, an ever growing and everlasting reunion of what is or was or will be. *But Jesus made clear that at least marriage is not carried forward, a response to the rightful of husband of one married several times.*

Will the folks and their families here on earth be reunited or collected in Heaven—save those that were not worthy? *I do not think so*, I think while reflecting on it, what our family is and is not, *but what do I know.*

“Who will be her husband in heaven,” they demand to know (more the question-situation to trick him than to tap his insights). Jesus responds that none (no marriage) will be the case but rather that each will be a new, resurrected-eternal life—as with Jesus

*...28 the first took a wife and died without children. And the second and the third took her, and likewise all seven left no children and died... The sons of this age marry and are given in marriage, 35 but those who are considered worthy to attain to that age and to the resurrection from the dead neither marry nor are given in marriage,*

- Luke 20: 27-40

at ascension—without any prior relations, the mother Mary bequeathed to John.

*In this story is, I think, is an example that eludes some, maybe many as to after death relations, but still raises the concept of who and what we can or could be beyond Earth as it is, our present or physical lives?* There is a deep desire to see those that *have gone on*, I understand, but I am convinced that this after life is not about our present desires however conceived or contrived.

*Same Old Same Old, so it was*

I believe that all that we have, as to the dearly departed, is our memories for as long as we remain or until those minds are thwarted, as sometimes true of the aging, or time moves it further away, less and less frequent to recall.

Death is about loss too, losing something whether for better or worse, richer (in character) or poorer. Again Christianity, of which I know more than other faiths, there is a dying that occurs over time, sometimes hasty and other times slowly, called sanctification.

“How is sanctification dying,” you ask.

First, the process of sanctification is (from Ligonier ministries): the work of God’s free grace, whereby we are renewed in the whole man after the image of God, and are enabled more and more to die unto sin, and live unto righteousness. In this brief description, death comes in the form of righteousness or integrity—being made holy, Christ as both *the means and end*.

*Regeneration is a momentary act, bringing a person from spiritual death to life. It is exclusively God’s work. Sanctification is an ongoing process, dependent on God’s continuing action in the believer, and consisting of the believer’s continuous struggle against sin.*

- Nathan W. Bingham, “What is Sanctification?”

For children, this process is sometimes illustrated with the butterfly; that by metamorphosis the caterpillar is transformed to a beautiful butterfly. Whether in the natural as with the moth or butterfly or by the supernatural (work) of the Holy Spirit, regeneration involves the dying of some things to bring about or deliver something finer,

finished, *that he would increase as I decrease*.

You might think this story is too religious, even sanctimonious, but how can we consider the subject of death without attention beyond the grave? We

*Though lovers be lost, love shall not; and death shall have no dominion.*

- Dylan Thomas, *Do Not Go Gentle into that Good Night*

mourn and then will ideally relish the best memories amid the regrets of *what could have been*, their lives and then ours. Convictions, albeit love or hate, may never die—or even fade—but

return as pleasures and pains, good times and bad. One might say to another on this, whether out of concern or frustration,

“You need to let them go,” for the sake of one, others, life and living, etc.

A death may never die; those we memorialize, immortalize, sharing of one to another whether present or forever differences, disagreements, and division, that may last for several lifetimes, generations to come, their names revered and then smeared, marveled and then maligned, from *hero to zero* as society changes or is made to change. And any society in decline always decries such idols, either the figure or the supposed facts, first defacing and then destroying, alleging some good, healing, or reconciliation but actuality, *throwing gas on the fire*, losing our future by destroying our past. Sure, the facts and figures are altered, distorted or dismissed—but that is not the point—such that the story goes as perceived, tainted and transformed, *grist for the meal* of those who *manufacture* the matter, it's meaning, regardless of the truth.

*The most effective way to destroy people is to deny and obliterate their understanding of their history.*

- George Orwell

More personal than public, adjustment or alterations the story may be accentuated on *the good*, leaving *the bad held closely, perhaps left to the closet* or the secrets of some, tacit or tragic in nature. Some, maybe all, sleep better by keeping secrets secret, silent, too fearful that *stirring the pot* may lead to a boil over, smoke and stench, yet more to clean-up, scrub, scour, and shine. On a public level however, these alternations and distortions are more to misinform and misdirect, leading folks *down a road* contrived, conceived by ill plans and purpose. One sleeps and wakes to a world intentionally *make believe*—not necessarily because they desire fantasy but rather because they have been programmed to believe the history is facts and figures however crafted the words and creative the images. Much of the public is influenced and even controlled by such programming developed and disseminated, sometimes noted as “History is always written by the winners”.

*In this era of fake news and paid news artificial intelligence is more and more used as a political tool to manipulate and dictate common people, through big data, biometric data, and AI analysis of online profiles and behaviors in social media and smart phones..*

- Amit Ray

*Same Old Same Old, so it was*

*Death is, I think, ceasing to live; it is a condition or lot of hopelessness or powerlessness. One can experience these moments—as ironically, in death of someone close, crucial to their own life—but more broadly, when/as fear overcomes, the light at the end of the tunnel is fleeting, the rain unceasing and the sun superfluous, and the moon morose however full and bright it be.*

*How do some find the light while others do not, I think without taking in all the circumstances, conditions, and characters? How do persons cope with and even overcome death and dying? Call it courage or the character's integrity, but I know not all is evident, explainable, or earned, the resolve to keep growing beyond the grind.*

Biblical scriptures speak much of this human dilemma; striving in and through tough times that test *our will* to serve, to strive and even survive both spiritually and physically. *Yes, the deeply spiritual are not immune, I am*

*Then Jesus asked him, "What is your name?"*

*"My name is Legion", he replied, "...we are many."*

- Mark 5:9

*reminded, having drawn a healthy sample of mental health and emotional distress among believers.*

*In this reminder is the realization that these health conditions are more a mystery;*

*the struggle and suffering, sense, and sensibility, sometimes stemming back to childhood, terror, tragedy, and trauma.*

*Needless to say that the stigma of these neurosis among the spiritual community is perhaps heightened considering the few cases described in the scripture and other influences: one, the incensed and perhaps deranged is possessed by a host of demons then healed miraculously when Christ who cast the spirits into pigs—freed from the maddening possession called "Legion"—*

*Life could do nothing for her beyond giving time for a better preparation for death.*

- Jane Austen, *Sense and Sensibility*

*is but one account that comes to mind. I admit that I too struggle here to understand and separate science from the spiritual; these conditions that overcome and then take a person, their personality, the person.*

Taken from the Old Testament and a key character in Christ's lineage, David (more than the heir-apparent King) is thought to have pretended insanity during his flight from then King Saul—a character moved to madness, most

maniacal and malicious. Was he pretending or is more authentically what happens to a fugitive, said to become king, of fury on the one side and friendship on another? Can one survive a friend and foe from the same family or, more, of the same family member?

"What does all this have to do with death," says one in the same. "You speak of this illness when I talk of death."

*Yes, I do deviate, taking this and that direction, but still some deep questions on life before actual death and especially given illness that maddens the mind and possesses the soul, sometimes with debilitation worse than death,* I think. Losing one's mind is worse than losing heart.

I think of folks around here stricken in such ways. Someone close may remark on the matter, a family "situation",

"She is struggling," or "He is back in hospital, clinic, recovering, rehab, etc."

Some recover but some do not. Some will see a glimmer or two but then relapse to *the darkness*, while others will go from bad to worse, debilitated and detached, their families disquieted, distraught but dismissive to any who dare distract them.

*Leave the door open for the unknown, the door into the dark. That is where the most important things come from...*

- Rebecca Solnit, *Field Guide to Getting Lost*

"Yeah, but they're hanging on," comes a determined, distanced voice, "And I think they got a chance."

I assume we all die in degrees whether self or some other, but I think that these "touched", as they say it, do so in a different dimensions or depth. They should be a reminder that life and living is sometimes beyond science, even sentence, with the spiritual perhaps the only light left.



**“Life is about...,”** he baits our attention, an appetite for seeing, believing, finding, and receiving help, hope, and inheritance of sort.

“Desperate times call for desperate measures”, so goes the saying, that behavior, decisions, and determination, proportioned to conditions, *the times*. *As it went for this working-class community, such times fostered such kind, I think, tough and tenacious. But here and now, tough times, the community is less so, the social fabric fraying and even threadbare; the family quilt that is unraveling and with it, community, society, trust, and faith.*

I suppose that “tough” is not always right, but these times seem more about victims, not the valued or valor, and how he or she is as they are,

*All my failures as a human being, I blame on my father.*

*Life is about accepting responsibility, and it's time my father started being held accountable for my deficiencies.*

- Jarod Kintz, *This Book is Not FOR SALE*

expecting excuse, because of him, her, or them. I know that such things are real, enervating even to think about it let alone experience it, but is healthy to excuse everything because of it, the default for all one's faults, an incessant ire, ingratitude beyond grace?

“What is life to you,” he asks, once again to grab attention. “What is it that you want out of this life,” he follows while more turn and notice.

*This is a question that we each must ask, perhaps often,* I think to myself, though I do not, else the pains, problems, and predicaments—the kind of thought that *takes us back* and then *brings us home*. *Yeah, the opportunity to examine what happened then, now, and my excuses, exclusions, and exemptions from the emotions that, when experienced, enable life and living to*

*In three words I can sum up everything I've learned about life: it goes on.*

- Robert Frost

*consider where came from and now, where we are or should be.*

“I can't go there,” a woman whispers to another, for to *go there* is to confront and contend with what is, in the advice of another,

“Best leave it alone,” though the spirit is remains to ridicule and possibly ruin what could had been, or could be, if the courage to face these demons.

There are the disappointments, damages, and dissolutions, within and among what was once family, friends. One may believe that their life is about these folks but then things change, sorted *colors* I suppose amid confusion of the apparent, the actual, acceptable, or accepted. Who is to blame when that relation or life is no more, the *bonds broken, the ties severed* by death of one sort or another? *I miss them, sometimes more than others, and in that, wonder what could (maybe should) have been then and now, save the sorted colors.*

But life goes on without wants or wishes, even *needs* as we believe our needs to be. I think (or thought), *I*

*cannot go on*, when reflecting on one relationship, maybe another or more.

Around here, as with other streets like Stebbins, that was *a better day.*

*Brokenness is common*, I am reminded,

in the *daily grind* that makes and breaks us, preferably for the better. *All is not lost*, for when *times get tough the tough get going*—right?

That bellicose brother bangs on, *the better angels* of this life and our living.

“What will you do when you lose and then think, *there will be more*,” he shouts, stern and stalwart, staring at the heavenlies, words without wind. “Worse is when you lose and think, ‘I am a loser, lost!’”

*I suppose. The biggest loss of life is such a set-back, a life about, well, losing*, I follow thoughtfully. *What can we gain from losing?*

“My dad did it,” she says, “the bast-,”

*Did what*, I think, too reserved to ask her point blank. But perhaps picking-up on my movement, she proceeds to tell me more, the fragments of her described, “fragmented”, life—as it is, her dad to blame.

“He’s a bastard,” she blurts out with other expletives that, in the old vernacular, would *strip the varnish*. “He drank and partied, but seldom had time for us, for me,” as it was, and “When he finally died of drunkenness, it was more relief than remorse,” punctuating the possibility that, as a killing kindled with karma, “He got what was coming to him.”

“That’s too bad,” is all I can construct, my own history and habit to “best leave it alone”, but then something more, possibly courage over caution.

*There are wounds that never show on the body that are deeper and more hurtful than anything that bleeds.*

- Laurell K. Hamilton, *Mistral's Kiss*

“That must have been especially hard on you,” I manage to mutter, maybe because I knew that she is the only daughter and oldest of four children, their mother gone just two years after the birth of the last.

“I raised my brothers,” she explains, confirming for me that she grew up fast. “From twelve on, I was the mother,” her tone raw with regret.

Engrossed in this moment as I am, the otherwise overwhelming voice of the man nearby was no more—not really—for what I see is someone whose life is a hard one, regrets and reservations without resolution. *Who can blame her for her feelings about his failings?*

“I have a habit to *spit it out*,” once again raw. “But you seem like the kind willing to listen,” she continues, softer. “So different than my dad who cared only about himself half the time, his pleasures more than parenting, providing. Hell, he’d hocked the house if the church had not-,”

“Thank God for the church,” I cut-in, knowing somewhat of their outreach, compassion for this family. *But am I such a soul; someone who cares?* “I am touched by your story,” after some silence and my thoughts still in store, our two souls happen to pass on Stebbins Street and converse about something meaningful, something that moves us.

*Anything that’s human is mentionable, and anything that is mentionable can be more manageable. When we can talk about our feelings, they become less overwhelming, less upsetting, and less scary. The people we trust with that important talk can help us know that we are not alone.*

- Fred Rogers

“Sometimes we just have to imagine the best,” she says, her words made more meaningful by her past, expressed and explained, an abundant and seemingly insurmountable series of serious disappointments; the kind that render despair, depression and even death of something within, *deep and dark*.

“What about your mom,” I say out of compulsion, a desire to see her darkness life, even a glimmer of light.

“I think she was a good woman, wife,” she says, a response and that warms as the sun that peeks out on a bleak, cold day.

“That’s good,” as what one says when nothing else comes to mind or, if it does, may *cross the line* or *go to far*, leaving more bitter than better, perhaps *things done left undone*.

“But I really can’t say for sure,” she continues, leaving some uncertainties about the other half that like her mom endured his ways, her weariness of his waywardness.

“She probably had to hold much more than her own,” I follow hesitantly, not sure what to hold of my own. But I knew (and know) of families addled by addictions, sick and suffering by the sick selfishness, the insufferable sacrifices of all else—some more than others. All the factors come into play: age, gender, income, extended-family and other support. The symptoms are inescapable, endemic, and inherent; often, a similar but sad story where the one destroys himself and then everyone—no one is left standing, sensible, sound.

*Is she the exception, much different than the few others that I know, many more*

*than I have heard about, common threads fraying in a soiled patchwork of a supposed family? No, her underlying sense of guilt that she could have done more to help her brothers, see to their needs as more a mother and less as just another sibling, is piled atop the shame that once was, and still remains.*

“But I never stopped trying,” she tells me. “I never let him beat me down no matter how much he tried—or how much I ‘earned it’!”

*She wants to love him*, I still hold, *when all reason says the opposite*. This is the bizarre part, for those who know

little or nothing of it, of living with an addict; they seem to strive in making you suffer without any shame—except your own—or any sense of wronging on their part. Oh sure, they say “Sorry,” *till the cows come home*, but their sincerity—like their shame—is long gone, passed up and over by their power to

*To have the beginning of a truly great story, you need to have a character you are completely and utterly obsessed with. Without obsession, to the point of a maddening addiction, there is no point to continue.*

- Jennifer Salaiz

*It’s the great surprise of my life that I ended up loving [my father] so much.*

- Pat Conroy, *A Lowcountry Heart: Reflections on a Writing Life*

*Same Old Same Old, so it was*

punish as it pleases almost as much as the pleasure derived by their drug of choice, their dependency that paramount to everything and everyone.

*Shame was an emotion he had abandoned years earlier. Addicts know no shame. You disgrace yourself so many times you become immune to it.*

- John Grisham, *The Testament*

"He never took responsibility or blame for nothing," she follows, her developed agony that, without personal accountability, what is left but acrimony

and actions that turn on you as though looking into a mirror.

"I would frequently plead with me, 'What is wrong with me,' as though looking into a mirror, blaming myself for his behavior, his abuse."

"I don't think your alone in blaming yourself, erring on the side of the innocent while the culprit gets-off seemingly unshaken." But the addict is not so blind as to live a completely desensitized life. Sure, they've learned to *play the game*; to get what they want by any and all means—as long as it works for them—but seldom to *thrown-in* and *deal with the hand dealt* and hence, *dealt to others*. *It is, call it a life, that absence of courage that stops one*

"Did your dad come from the same," I ask, aimed to find a reason when reason was not possible

"Yeah, I guess he did, what I gathered from a few if the folks who grew up with him, around them," she tells me. "He had a hard life, broken and-,"

*Wounds are an essential part of life, and until you are wounded in some way, you cannot become [\_\_\_\_\_].*

- Paul Auster, *Sunset Park*

How often this is the case; that *bad* begets bad. No, I tell myself, *I want jump to conclusions or act impulsively*, but sometimes there is solace, a salve to sooth, when one can see beyond themselves and more, those who hurt

and harm them, however tempting and tantalizing the power to hate.

"My dad had it coming, I suppose," she follows. "It was in his blood, the bad and the booze."

Not pretending to be a therapist, but with a penchant to at least listen, I think on it but say nothing immediately. No, I merely listen and let her speak as she feels and thinks, with all the wounds of past and present, all *the dirt* that compounds or is covered over; everything and anything that she needs or

wants to say if just to speak it, never mind the life that seemingly could be or should be, or what she can be.

"He had a brother and two sisters ahead of him, two more behind," she follows, "Several worked at the mill, one was killed in 'Nam and another died early of cancer, but only one remains alive, well."

"How did your dad die?"

"Got liver disease and other things. He was practically *gone* at fifty but *hung-on* for two more years, bed-ridden and all."

"And you took care of him, right."

"Yes, mostly me but in the last part, hospice."

"Wasn't he a good ball player in school," recalling something of all-county and football or something sensational.

"Oh yeah. He used to talk about it," she affirms. "Played quarterback for the panthers and made all-county and all-state his last two years."

"College," I ask, once again recalling *the papers*.

"Sure, he could have played... Several sought him but he balked at all of them saying, 'If I can't play for 'Bama I'll play for no one!'"

"And that ended that?"

"For the most part, yeah," she says. "He loved football and, I think, probably regretted his decision, but that was a year or so before I came along."

"And then?"

"He went to work at the mill and assumed family life. Three wives later, and at least six children, he was well on his way to an early grave, drowning in dissipation, debt and despair."

*Probably wondering at times how he got there*, I think.

"Were there ever some good times?"

"Yeah, we had some, but I guess I don't consider them nearly as much as the bad."

"I have to remind myself that life is about *the good* too—much as I dwell on the bad—and especially in these times."

"Me too," she says, "Me too."

**“I’ve seen a look,”** she said, “and it makes me mad as Hell.”

“What kind of look is that?”

“You know the kind, Howard; that roll of the eyes and sigh—as though I’m too stupid to sense, too old to understand.”

She is a grandmother and more, a mother of two generations, her children of course but then then her daughter’s children too. She is among a growing number who find themselves taking-on this responsibility *well into their years*, when “retirement” just a word. *Maybe she is too of this or that but most of all, she is too good to let these children go*, I think.

“She is of good stock,” as the older would say I some parts.

Hearing and meeting her is more than a privilege; for while she must deal with human eyes, I am sometimes confronted by others no less telling but with *a bite that draws blood*.

*I've seen a look in dogs' eyes, a quickly vanishing look of amazed contempt, and I am convinced that basically dogs think humans are nuts.*

- John Steinbeck

There is that look that is more than a dog;; the kind that says they are smart and I’m stupid, they are sober and I’m drunk, they make sense and I’m crazy, *one step from the looney farm*. Folks have a way to do this; to believe they are *somebody* and that I, well, am *nothing to write home about*. *Dogs cannot understand*, I suppose, *but folks can...if they are willing to try or worse*, I think, *they think they do but have not even scratched the surface*.

*When you are raising grandchildren, you may feel overcome with emotions. You may feel grief, sadness, and a sense of loss and disappointment that your child wasn't able to raise his/her children.*

- AARP, Raising Grandchildren: Support

“Folks need to believe they matter,” I say to her, the grandmother who cares for her daughter’s children. “You are a good person,” I add, sensing that she needs such words, encouragement, faced with the challenges of not only *picking-up* where her daughter fails but also satisfying

the demands of DHS who seem fixated on *the best interest of these children*.

“I hate going to court,” she says, our thoughts somehow connected. “They are so high-and-mighty, so full of learning but at the same stupid.”

I have heard the stories, for sure; those who go *above and beyond*—as though such degrees will *get the job done—to dot every “i” and cross every “t”*. It is an uphill battle, I realized, trying to do *al* that one can do and more.

“Do they have children,” she says, satirically. “Do they really care about ‘the best interest’ of my grandchildren—whom they seldom speak to or think about, I suppose.”

*How little do they really know and still less, care?* But my feelings are skewed, my own experience, encounters. How much can an institution really do whatever their individual effort to make a positive difference in these child’s life, living? Sure, there are some I can think of; those that run summer camps or clubs are good, but they are not constantly probing and pushing, threatening the family, broken as it is, taking control without *any skin in the game*.

“I know it must be tough, the children asking about her, them,” I offer, moving to the mother as it is, seems.

“How do I comfort these children and still tell them the truth,” she replies, my realizing that parents can sometimes veer way off course, punishing everyone let alone themselves, promises made and then broken irreparably.

Here however, in this moment, it is a growing concern; not just a concern for her and them but for many more out there, among and beyond South Stebbins Streets and communities like it. Yes, the societal changes that run with some relation to other trends of decline and degradation—a society that has seen its better days and a court system that appears to be hell-bent on

*Family Court has become a highly profitable business. In courtrooms across this nation, children are being torn away from and isolated from their [family] as they become pawns in a game designed to keep the family fighting [financing this campaign], and money flowing.... CPS workers frequently use their power to enable such abuse(s) as their opinions are treated as scientific conclusions.*

- Maryann Petri, *Dismantling Family Court Corruption*

*Death is a product of state Family Courts and its judges and attorneys. They view it as the cost of doing business in the ever-expanding fraud business model that is styled as “family court” and the effort to socially engineer American society.*

- Daily Record, “Dysfunctional family courts destroying lives,” Sep 5, 2018



undermining families—what’s left of them—under the guise of “the children’s best interest” or some other language that, in effect, are just platitudes.

*The injustices that I have experienced have given me a better understanding of the struggle for social justice and the discrimination that so many Americans have encountered — I now have so much empathy for those that have struggled attempting to find justice and equal protection under the law..*

- Walt RE-GAN, Tompkins County Family Court, Ithaca, New York

“It always cost money that I don’t have,” she continues. “Every time I report, it’s another fee or charge, that seems-,”

“That seems like what,” I interrupt, my sentiment growing from, once again, my own experience and sense that corruption is deep and wide in such courts. *If is more than hypocrisy*

*that they call themselves “family court”—tyranny plain and simple.*

“Well, like a ransom,” she responds as a confirmation of what I too witnessed, watched—seemingly powerless.

“It’s hard enough just covering the costs of the kids let alone these fees and charges—heaven forbid that another attorney will follow,” she explains, exacerbated by a system that is deeply flawed—far from family life except perhaps for *their own*, well protected from such predatory threats no doubt, the travails that tear asunder what otherwise would have a chance or more, a cause.

The courts can create criminals, manufacturing a cause based merely on pretense—seldom if ever checking such allegations as to what they refer to as “veracity”.

“I am reminded of something someone like you told me years ago about these courts, systems,” I offer.

“What was that?”

“He said, ‘The justice system is far too busy to evaluate evidence for its merit.’”

“Hmm, but family court is not really a justice system,” she says, reminding that of not only his words but his own personal experience, as with her.

"I know this this, but I guess I say it only because justice is often overlooked—even what evident or fact is disregarded for reasons that simply are not reasonable."

"I've seen a look in them, the judge, attorney or some other court officer; a condescending look that reminds me of one of my own, then a teen, who presumed I had no sense."

"Yeah, but they were teens who themselves had little if any sense, sometimes, and nothing like these elected officials, professionals and all."

"As to making no sense, something that I try to do is keep the grandkids out of it as much as possible," she tells me. "They have been dragged through that court more times than the local hunting drags a coon for the dogs," she says sympathetically. "The courts just don't seem to really about this, what it does to these kids."

"And"

"And thee courts just don't let up, frequently checking-up on them, interviewing them and probing for 'problems'—anything that might indict me as irresponsible or worse, abusive."

Most might say, "Well lady, they're just doing their job, trying to look out for the safety and best for children," but do "most" have any experience with family court, whether actual or affectual? *Do they really know what goes on there, the way these systems operate?*

Others might say, "It's hard all around, why, with the failed parenting and all the attendant problems, how can the courts be expected to be fair, just"

Certainly, the failings of key family members cannot be denied; it happens and, as it seems, more often now than generations past or among persons that themselves received *a good upbringing*. But there is more in view than the sad and sorted stories of mis-parenting, divorce, illegitimacy, and the host of other ills surrounding parentless children. There are serious social problems that I have studied and seen, sometimes firsthand, so I cannot deny that parents are part of the problems, culpable for some faults and failures. Such personal and even endemic problems are evident, erstwhile documents and even eternal as stories of the Bible describe.

Beyond these personal matters is however *the system*; that is the state *machinery*, that takes metaphorically *good stock* and grinds it down finally spitting it out as nothing more fat or *tainted tissue*? Said as a consideration for this grandmother, and those as her,

"*The courts* finally do not care about you are your grandchildren; but because it is an amoral institution—without the capacity to love—is functions merely on the state's behalf, their interest."

"But what about welfare, disability and the like," she says astutely. "They provide all those things, don't they?"

"Of course, but where does ultimately come from," I ask her.

"From us, right?"

"That's right; *the state* is simply returning a portion of what they take or, more often, borrow against our future, rendering generations with the consequences of endless debt, depression, and deprivation."

"But I depend on that Social Security check and-,"

"I know—as do many—but those funds also came from us, once in escrow,

*It still remains unrecognized, that to bring a child into existence without a fair prospect of being able, not only to provide food for its body, but instruction and training for its mind, is a moral crime, both against the unfortunate offspring and against society; and that if the parent does not fulfil this obligation, the State ought to see it fulfilled, at the charge, as far as possible, of the parent.*

- John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty*

but probably depleted by now, appropriated to other things."

"I've seen a look like the judge and others from time to time; haughty looks—as though *they've arrived*—and know what's best for us, me," she follows. "They talk to each other about me as though I am not there or, when they do say something toward me, they speak to me as a addle child," she goes on.

This treatment to an educational no less, as this grandmother was an English teacher for 40 years and during that time, published multiple stories and two books.

"Why do they treat you so," I ask her.

"I don't know," she says, "But that's how its been since-,"

“Since there have been such courts,” I close. “But you do know that it’s not personal, right?”

“I suppose, but these are my family and-,”

“Oh yeah, I understand that it’s about them, your family here,” I agree, “But they treat anyone *outsider* this way,” I suggest. “Unless you’re one of them, you’re not going to be treated with the same respect they expect of you?”

“Why,” she follows—though I am sure she has put much of this together already and indeed could write about it with a distinct description, details that they, with such power, simply do not detect. *That is a problem with power; it forgets the powerless and it forgets history, the tendency for unchecked power to abuse until it ultimately annihilates itself.* But I am not going to *go there*; that is, to the depths and degrees that authorities abuse their power, always and forever.

“But you know, don’t you?”

“Yes, I know, but still the children, their future,” she persists, herself even more than a grandparent, more the matriarch.

“That where prayer and works work,” I suggest though I am sure she understands that too. “The courts don’t rely on such powers—not really.”

“But the counselor goes to my church and-,”

“Oh, I am not saying that believers are not among them, however *it comes across*, but as a collective, a corporate body.”

*The truth is, one who seeks to achieve freedom by petitioning those in power to give it to him has already failed, regardless of the response.*

*To beg for the blessing of “authority” is to accept that the choice is the master’s alone to make, which means that the person is already, by definition, a slave.*

- Larken Rose

I am not sure she understood my last comment, but I do believe she *got-it*—of what the courts are and are not: she has seen that look more than once and understands that it is not about her or her grandchildren but about the pursuit of power at any cost.

**“That we can sustain,”** the farmer begins, “The food shortages that are coming.”

“Food shortages,” I whispered. But as he continued, it all made sense; the intensifying weather and other climatic events, economic trends, and other factors that I had honestly not thought about, let alone prepared for, planned.

*At other times what slips through are the minutiae, the minnows...metaphor of idea chasing. But, sometimes, you can bring home something that is food, food for the human community that we can sustain ourselves on and go forward.*

- Terence McKenna

“Mark my word, it is coming,” he continues, “As sure as I’m standing here it is coming, and when it does-,”

*What will become of us, I think, this region already reeling from the economic upheaval?*

“Times we be worse than that before,” he warns, referring to the stories passed down on The Great

Depression, hard times that left them *hard*.

“You need to take a lesson from them,” he says, referring to that generation that survived it, the kind that new the worth of everything unlike times since as most increasingly waste the valuable while *chasing after the wind*. “Some of your folks must remember them, their stories of thrift, sacrifice and struggle, and *making ends meet* when there ain’t no end to it,” he utters of

*They had discovered one could grow as hungry for light as for food.*

- Stephen King, *the Gunslinger*

something unrelatable, inconceivable.

The crowd gathers but most seem amused more than anything. I hear some comments circulating,

“Who does that ole’ man think he is,” answered with, “Some sort of sad case looking for a following.”

“You better wake up folks and *smell the coffee*, for the times are nearing when the only coffee you’ll have is the memory,” he followed.

*What would I do without coffee*, I think, considering that I have been waking up to it—because of it—practical all my adult life? With a coffee shop on every street, it is impossible to comprehend that coffee would (or will) become scarce, but then maybe he is using this as an extreme, not an example.

“What do you think about him, Howard,” someone asks me. “Do you think it’s possible?”

“I do,” I tell them. “It is hard to imagine, sure, but then look at the world as it is.”

“This isn’t Africa,” another says.

But some of this, our disbelief, is not really the chance of happening but rather about what we don’t know about country, state and county is what the old fellow is trying to suggest as he speaks of a few statistics, facts and figures coupled with the factors cited at the beginning. Excessive and extreme rains, more severe winters in the West and north of us have hit the farmers hard. Other parts of the world are experiencing similar conditions coupled with earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, natural fires, and tropical storms as never before, it seems. *There is a sense that these “factors” are real, growing, I consider, and with it, the sometime reported effects of crop yield, produce and meat.*

“Could it happen,” I ask another and then another, a mix of responses but much more often doubt, denial.

“Our county is not so bad off,” one says to another, just after the old fellow mentions a local *food desert*, the demands on food banks and other social and charitable non-profits.

“What about all the Title 1 schools,” he says, as an indicator of income and the population’s apparent needs, financial support.

“Would anyone like to guess how many folks depend on such programs,”

he bellows. “How many children receive free meals, morning and lunch,” he adds to punctuate the point.

“What is his point,” one says to another, “telling us what we already know, live?”

Which I ask too, “What is trying to suggest,” and then it *hits me*—though I have realized it for years now, of just how tenuous our lives, dependent on something or someone else for even these necessities.

*Hunger has always been at my elbow when I played, but now I began to wake up at night to find hunger standing at my bedside, staring at my gauntly.*

*- Richard Wright, Black Boy*

*Same Old Same Old, so it was*

It was not always this way, our economy weakened by the loss of industry, a local military base closure and the expected windfall of growing needs, unmet obligations and changing, declining demographics. From post-WWII to the 1970's, the county continued to grow; in fact, in 1976, the city received national recognition as "An All-American City". But South Stebbins Street, as just a name for a condition sweeping our land, began its descent, the post

*Well we're waiting here in Allentown,  
For the Pennsylvania we never found,  
For the promises our teachers gave,  
If we worked hard,  
If we behaved...  
So, the graduations hang on the wall,  
But they never really helped us at all,  
No, they never taught us what was real,  
Iron and coke,  
And chromium steel,  
And we're waiting here in Allentown...  
But they've taken all the coal from the  
ground,  
And the union people crawled away...*

- Billy Joel

industrialized losses often aligned with Allentown or Youngstown, with little to no chance of ever fully recovering, returning. Unlike many areas, our state did see some relief with the automotive industry, the region becoming "The Detroit of the South", but the conditions prevail, the evidence all about us.

Many who had spent a long time, even a lifetime over a generation or more, in textiles or

other mills either moved-on, retired early or took-on less paying jobs elsewhere. And though the area is far from a so-called unionized workforce, some plants or factories were *organized*, providing more benefits and *upward mobility*. In short, those were better times that are not coming back. Food shortages seem *far away* but given the trajectory we have been and *the times* as it seems, such extremes are not *too far away*.

The *greatest generation*, growing up in The Great Depression, *knew the life*; rationing, fewer food variety and perhaps volumes, and scarce money made for necessity as nothing seen since. *Had they not practiced farming, gardening, canning, hunting, fishing, sewing and a host of other skills who is to say they would have ever succeeded let alone survived?* They were conditioned for such scarcity whereas we, well, are not both in mind and will, craft or skill or any of the other resources that covered *times of want and woe*. *Perhaps that is what made them "the greatest"*.

"Are you prepared," the old fellow repeats, a crucial case to consider, of concern. "Like our folks were way back yonder, that depression?"

*But we just don't what they had, the skills to meet the sacrifices,* think more on the significant differences.

"They knew how to *stretch the dollar*," he continues without consternation.

*And they did, so we hear, though a dollar was worth so much more,* I consider as things change, have changed—and will never be the same, here on Stebbins or wherever *Stebbins Streets* struggle in that time or this.

There is that local, famous author; practically a legend, Rick Bragg writes of *those times*, what he recites from the seniors and resuscitates from their spirits, times as they were and were not.

Yes, Stebbins is near about the stomping ground of Rick, one on the Westend of Anniston and the other to the north, the college-town of Jacksonville. It was there among his kin and that kind that he leaned of the *greatest generation* and *the most they ever had*.

And though Rick is just a year or two older than I, he knew the folks and know of them, enough to enunciate their language and to give his readers the richness of the poor, a working-class without too much *class* but with a hell of a lot of *character*.

*It is true that almost everyone in the foothills farmed and hunted, so there were no breadlines, no men holding signs that begged for work and food, no children going door to door, as they did in Atlanta, asking for table scraps. Here, deep in the woods, was a different agony. Babies, the most tenuous, died from poor diet and simple things, like fevers and dehydration. In Georgia, one in seven babies died before their first birthday, and in Alabama it was worse.*

*You could feed your family catfish and jack salmon, poke salad and possum, but medicine took cash money, and the poorest of the poor, black and white, did not have it.*

*Women, black and white, really did smother their babies to save them from slow death, to give a stronger, sounder child a little more, and stories of it swirled round and round until it became myth, because who can live with that much truth..*

- Rick Bragg *Ava's Man*



*Same Old Same Old, so it was*

“Do have the character to carry-on what generations past did for their own, for you and me,” the fellow bellows on. “Do you the courage that they had to look the truth in the face and say, ‘I know...and I will?’”

The old fellow’s lasting language is more than the dubious and deniers can defend and some stand now silent perhaps learn something wile a few simply, subtly drift away in distraction, deception.

“What about the government,” one breaks the silence, “Won’t they help like they always do?”

*Hey, a few are at least considering the possibilities, I think, though it be more news atop the pandemic and other things going on.*

“There’s a possibility,” the old man replies, “but you just don’t know given all the debt and all the deceitfulness, the disregard and disgrace,” he follows, evidently doubtful.

It is a fact that government helped back then and since then, at times, *but who are the helping in the long run,”* I wonder. *Sure, folks get help, assistance,*

*but whose money is it, really? It seems so easy for government to borrow with a limitless credit limit, but can we do the same—even if we need it and possibly paid for it in taxes and such?*

*To cut 1930s jobless, FDR taxed corps and rich. Govt used money to hire many millions. Worked then; would now again. Why no debate on that?*

- Richard D. Wolff

“*Drastic times call for drastic measures* and this time *the times* will test our time as no other past,” he continues somewhat in riddle form, though backed by much, I believe, and certainly well intended.

I know this old fellow enough to know it is *not about him*, looking for a *following* or some sort of movement—except for folks to know and get ready. He happens to know what is coming and for that I am glad, but more he is willing to *lay-it-on-the-line* to give his message some matter, to tell folks that he cares about *what is coming* and what they should do.

Food scarcity and insecurity is on the rise. And If it is wasn’t bad enough that we will never get back to where we once were, it is probable that some things are going to worse; things that we have taken for granted or otherwise, never considered as luxuries or special as the old fellow claims.

"I know you think I'm crazy, but consider those pictures from South America, the empty shelves and long lines," he offers. "And as to the government, let me caution you that they in no position to prop-up this problem."

I think he is right; the government will not approach these shortages in the same way as before. For one, states and the federal government are laden with debt and if it gets bad, budgets will shrink, and all sorts of subsidies will *come to a screeching halt*, derailment of *the gravy train*. While the Federal government seems to spend *at light speed*, how much longer can it continue?

*I think people do not understand how badly mismanaged some states have been, and their unfunded liabilities. And if they were in the private sector, they would have to reorganize under the bankruptcy code. But there is no bankruptcy code chapter.*

- Hugh Hewitt in an interview with Mitch McConnell, "Could states go bankrupt"

*It is hard to be probable in this land of plenty*, I realize. We just will not see *the storm of the century* until the ship is sinking and all we can do is look bewildered because someone said, "This ship is unsinkable." And then, if then, that we can sustain.

“‘People stopped being’, their selves as everything became mechanized, automated and integrated,” the old woman tells me. “Howard, it is just not the same and it sure as Hell cannot be so every again!”

There is that tendency, the nostalgic notions of *that times were better before*—whenever *before* was or *times were*, as though it matters. What I

mean is that it is not as it seems in several ways; first, that it was better *when* or second, that any such *when* or *where* was so, a place and time. My thinking tells me,

“She, like many as we age, are more likely reflecting on a dream or delusion, some idea of what

was, would have or could have been. Some days that dream is very distant, asleep or in a slumber, while other days, awakened and rustled by something uncertain or unclear, is *heavy on the mind*, the heart.”

“He was such a dear,” she says, referring to perhaps a romance, relative or other relationship. But was he as she describes, a *dreamboat* instead of an old decrepit *dredge*, a drudge?

*Whoever or whatever he was, this description is not altogether solid*, I consider, simply because no one can be all that, an *earthly angel* or *resurfaced saint*. Such a vivid memory is what I want to believe of her but what I must accept is that, well, she is decided creative.

But not all dream like this or at least express their dreams as she does; not some, hold such deep within, perhaps too afraid or ashamed to speak of it or even suggest it was or was not.

Some look back with, as sometimes said, *a half empty glass*; that whatever happened, the worst will be their words on it, their word, with aims to glory in the ingratitude, to *play the victim*, or otherwise to framed the story as less a fantasy and more a failure on somebodies part.

*It is finally about who we are, what we think about ourselves*, I believe, that influences our thoughts, feelings and finally our experiences.

*People stopped being people in 1913[:]  
Henry Ford put his cars on rollers and  
made his workers adopt the speed of  
the assembly line. At first, workers  
rebelled...unable to accustom their  
bodies to the new pace of the age. Since  
then, however, the adaptation has been  
passed down.*

- Jeffrey Eugenides, Middlesex

The same woman who dreams of that once man is also apt to talk of her despicable dad, “the drunk”, as she refers, often.

“He *dragged* momma down and took the rest of us with him, down to Hell,” she tells me yet again with the same cold stare and chilling sound.

But I knew of him and while she is right about his drinking, what she is evidently inclined to share again and

*Memory believes before knowing remembers.*

- William Faulkner, *Light in August*

again, does she know anything else, good about or bad about him, about them? Could it be that her two stories, her dad and this other man, are somehow connected; say, that her horrid experience of her family life is softened or offset by this fantasy or creative story, the one a tyrant and the other a savior of sort?

*Back in the day*, before therapy was popular or the pharma industry produced a pill for *anything that ails you*, what did folks do? Did having so little in the way of so many conditions, comforts and conveniences make them better, richer in character and caliber, more courageous? Did having so little by comparison to *more recent times* ironically make give them more to work with, to cherish and to express gratitude?

*It shocks me how I wish for...what is lost and cannot come back.*

- Sue Monk Kidd, *Traveling with Pomegranates: A Mother-Daughter Story*

Henry Ford did change assembly forever by reducing the time to make a product and consequently, the costs too. What is more, and in keeping with cost reduction, he enabled his employees to own one or more. Yes, he put is work and rollers and the country on wheels—and this changed near about everything that involved work and play—but did it change us for the better overall? To say it again to myself, another way,

*Everyone has two memories. The one you can tell and the one that is stuck to the underside of that, the dark, tarry smear of what happened.*

- Amy Bloom, *Away*

“Has all this change made us stop being better?”

As I walk down Stebbins Street, my low impact exercise, I think of those no longer around, maybe dead, who lived here and there; those that I grew up with, graduated with, or fellowshipped at the church. Sometimes my thoughts

are short, other times lasting for at least a day or two, maybe to rise again or to fade off as if *it* never happened or *they* never existed, or we never knew each other. *Even if I did know them though, it is safe to say that,*

*It's something else to go home and visit with the folks in Reed's drugstore on the square and actually listen to them. The reason you can't go home again is not because the down-home folks are mad at you--they're not, don't flatter yourself, they couldn't care less--but because once you're in orbit and you return to Reed's drugstore on the square, you can stand no more than fifteen minutes of the conversation before you head for the woods, head for the liquor store, or head back to Martha's Vineyard, where at least you can put a tolerable and saving distance between you and home. Home may be where the heart is but it's no place to spend Wednesday afternoon.*

- Walker Percy, *Lost in the Cosmos: The Last Self-Help Book*

"Things change," and that who I thought they were is not really who they are—and vice versa. That like a film of childhood buddies or sweethearts that, after years of separation somehow find each other again, the wonder and innocence of *those times* make *these times* difficult to digest whatever the dreams.

*Things change more when you go away, and the longer you stay away and the further your figurative distance, the harder it is to see that time as it was and you were,* I consider.

"He left me," she tells me.

"Huh, who," I ask, though really knowing it to be her supposed *savior*.

"He left me to go off to war," she said, "and he never came back."

I am too reserved to ask why he never *came back*, but his story is not that uncommon given *the times* when comparatively so many young men did that thing; leaving for this or that and ultimately never returning to *pick-up* life on Stebbins Street, working at a local mill or taking over the family farm or business. It seems that when those young folks *got a taste* of the "bigger world", it was or is often out of obligation, sometimes left on some distant battlefield or at deep sea, their spirit given-up and those who had waited, given-out on a hug with their homecoming.

"He died in Korea," she repeats, "as I read in *the paper*, the clipping, now yellow and faded too.

Some who go away not only stay or settle *out there* but decide somehow to never return, or if they do come back, make their stay short as the distance widens, connections and causes pass, their commitments to yellow and fade, much as newspaper clipping.

It is a sign of aging I suppose; where our time and interest is more on the distant past than future—the older she gets, the younger she behaves, as though a child at times, innocent and insulated from all that happened and is happening. *Is she able to really describe her story, what happened and why?*

And as to why I consider *Great Expectations* is because this woman's stories seem eerily as the recluse woman who, *left at the altar*, was likely

*I stole her heart away and put ice in its place.*

- Charles Dickens, *Great Expectations*

betrayed, deeply affected and apparently stuck in time, still wearing her wedding gown with all the attendant artifacts of that special day that did not happen. She was decidedly bereaved but more, beset on passing-on or down her bitter, ice-cold heart, her story to influence the young impressionable girl.

Then there is *Gone with the Wind*, when the seductive and power-driven Scarlett *crosses the line* killing her one chance for otherwise undying commitment. *How might she describe his leaving her at the end of the story*, I think, *his final, fed-up phrase*,

"Frankly my dear, I don't give a damn."

*I was right when I said I'd never look back. It hurts too much, [and] drags at your heart till you cannot ever do anything else except look back.*

- Margaret Mitchell, *Gone with the Wind*

"Oh, he left on business," she says at the social. "He is on travel, another trans-Atlantic trip or some other calling," she tells them unaware that they know all too well what happened and why. That he will never return is inconsequential to the moment when, thinking only of herself, she simply lies to them, to herself who is unable to accept that she *drove him away*.

But whether a domineering debutant, a betrayed beauty, or any sullen soul finds life as less than desired, anticipated or expected, their stories may lean toward fable more than fact or otherwise, something seemingly made-up as

*Same Old Same Old, so it was*

they decidedly or determinately fabricate what should be—or should have been—against reality, cause & consequence.

“Did you love him, this man,” I ask as more an obligation, a show at sympathy.

“It was love, yes, love it was,” she says with a still, solemn stare and a sacred, soothing sound. “He told me that he loved me and ask me to wait for him.”

*“Some people don't understand the promises they're making when they make them,” I said.*

*“Right, of course. But you keep the promise anyway. That's what love is. Love is keeping the promise anyway.”*

*- John Green, The Fault in Our Stars*

But she did not wait, for by the time of his death, she was married and was expecting her first child. They did correspond and more than once he returned, only to find that she was engaged and then married—the rest of

which is her story to tell, for better or worse with the changes, her change.

To be fair or human, the twisting and turning of such stories is common, more than enough to safely say

“Folks write and re-write their story,” partly because *times change*, warranting some updating, but also because they change from child to adult and back again, reminiscing with or without regrets.

There is however the realities that will not go away; that though, like a child, one might pretend *it never happened* so as to avoid the pain and punishment, yet *it is there* if just a flash or ill-feeling on occasion. And though I am certainly no *escape artist*, far from expert on either side, delusions will go to great depth and distance despite the facts and figures.

*“I lie to myself all the time. But I never believe me.”*

*- S.E. Hinton, The Outsiders*

“Yeah, folks lie and sometimes all the time,” someone reminds me. “Howard, I suppose we all do it or have done it from

the *tall tells*, to the *little white lies*.”

*Does it really make us better than before or, given the times, are we more prone to lie and hence less than our progeny—if not the whole of the passing population*, I wonder. But then, lies are legendary and if there is one thing true

of folks is that they lie at least on occasion, excusing it for any number of reasons but invariably what they believe is *in their best interest*.

If you judge this generation on the volume and variety of lies, you must consider the sources, the controls and all that coordination, collaboration, and creativity.

Did *the information age* up the game on lies, lying? Does information really control a relatively peaceful society using deception, distraction and finally the dread of some crisis that always seems to *crop up*? Are we better than past generations given the conveniences of information or news, digital versus print or do lies beget lies such the scale becomes immeasurable, a sort of mash-up, a menagerie of minutia—or is it manicure that not only looks bad but smells to *high heaven*? The *information age* has not only proliferated lying among the public but more, persons, and people stopped being....

*There are three types of lies -- lies, damn lies, and statistics.*

- Benjamin Disraeli

*Things come apart so easily when they have been held together with lies.*

- Dorothy Allison, *Bastard Out of Carolina*

"It is good that you still loved him," I say to her, aside from her decision to marry another, to forgo her prior commitment to this special man.

Does she really understand that her story is not really, not altogether truth or fact, or am I certain that she is so, not altogether accurate about what happened with him, her, and them? *I cannot know or say*, I think, as she may think it right, any error excused. But then we all do it, sometimes sharing our stories and as time passes, changing them without necessarily knowing it.

*It is one thing to lie and another to create what we believe right, accurate*, I know. *She is*, I think, right though

*But being goes on regardless.*

- Charles Frazier, *Thirteen Moons*

wrong and hence is no worse or better for it, by it and beyond it. Some however are intentional, purposeful, *twisting things*—knowing all too well that they are lying—and for those, there will be a reckoning, any, all being.



She sometimes uses the expression, “People took awful”, to mean that folks do things and take things, abusing something and somebody, with good intentions but bad consequences. It seems that the tougher folks get, the tougher they can be on themselves and others as though life must always be a struggle; that no matter how good or bad one gets, there is always room for

more to test and try us, making and breaking us, saving and killing us.

*People took such awful chances... because they wanted the quality of their lives to improve..., so they did their best to make their insides beautiful instead.*

- Kurt Vonnegut, *Breakfast of Champions*

“What’s wrong,” I ask, careful with my inquiry.

“Oh, it’s that boy of mine again,” she says, sighing. “He seems bound and determined to destroy something or someone.”

“What happened?”

“He got mixed-up with the wrong company,” she begins, though I have to think, given his history, that he is the “bad company”—but oh well.

“Why do you say that about him,” I ask, my tone more out of courtesy or compassion than to challenge what I obviously think is bias.

“I don’t have to tell you everything,” she continues, “but I will say that he *has gone off the deep end* and I don’t know what to do.”

Her face says it all; the fatigue and faintness indicative of a sullen and surrendered spirit, one that is beyond *their wits end*. But it was not always this way, his waywardness, wildness; no, he was a babe and then a boy, of course, a good one altogether. An all-county athlete, but besides and perhaps more, a national merit finalist, he was (or is) truly gifted with potential that was higher than most, possessing in my mind only a few around here ever have as to either natural or God-given gifts. Few if any doubted that *he would go far* whether in-state or some prestigious place recruits these sorts of student; and indeed, he did...at first, being selected and then qualifying for several schools, maybe more.

“Something happened, something went wrong, I know.”

And this often what I hear—and even what I think regarding my own family and friends—that something “went wrong” and voila, “They bad.”

But it never that easy to explain; *what, who and why* of it.

"He had so much," she continues, "but you know that already, don't' you?"

"Yes, I know about your son," *as does anyone who was around to see him at his height, over 6 feet and a brain to boot.*

It is odd how some who you think will *go far*, end up falling on their face while others *sneak up on you and shine like stars* some time later. I always prefer to think that *most everyone can give it a lot*, but I cannot say that,

"Everyone makes it." Just because that possibility seems to depend on more than trying—even giving it *your best shot*.

"I know," she says, perhaps referring not only to him but to others in and around the community of Stebbins Street who went *this way or that* but never seemed to amount to much of anything.

"It's the drugs," some will say as a sort of all-encompassing excuse for the error deliberate or not, our failures or frailties amid fate and even faith.

"He robbed a store, you know," she says, the shame and sorrow as hers to hold.

"There holding him," I ask, regarding bale and all that business.

"Yes, I thought it best," she says, though one or another may press her.

*Keeping him locked so he can stay out of trouble*, I suppose, "It seems best to me," I reply, "all things considered."

There is however the indecision that folks go through when *doing the right* whether *tough love, letting them go*, or something else that says.

"I have tried and tried to help but it does not seem to help."

"Do you know why he did it," she asks, rhetorically. "Why he robbed the store?"

"No, not really," is all I can say, now expecting her understanding.

*I'm trying in all my stories to get the feeling of the actual life across—not to just depict life—or criticize it—but to actually make it alive. So that when you have read something by me you actually experience the thing. You can't do this without putting in the bad and the ugly as well as what is beautiful. Because if it is all beautiful you can't believe in it. Things aren't that way.*

- Ernest Hemingway

*Same Old Same Old, so it was*

"He did it for her, that woman who he says he loves."

"Does he love her?"

"I think he does in his own way but love sometimes seems *a long way off* for him," she remarks.

Whether he does or not, though, he seemed well intended so she explained.

*Because sometimes you have to do something bad to do something good.*

- Oscar Wilde, *The Complete Fairy Tales*

"She needed that money for her daughter, you see, as the child needs surgery and, well, they don't have insurance."

"And he didn't have some other means to-,"

"Not that kind of money and I suppose he is too proud to ask me," she follows. "Lord knows I have bailed him out many a time."

But it was more than that, the choice of that store; you see, that store is owned by her stepdad and, well, he refused to help even so much as with medical assistance or something like it.

"My son robbed his store as his way of saying, 'Do the right thing', though he acted foolishly."

I agreed, and besides, any gains from that store—even if he had *gotten away with it*, would *hardly touch* the usual expenses of this kind of healthcare.

"I think it was more his anger that *got the best of him*," she adds, consideration or consolidation in this case.

He is only nineteen, I am told, and we all know how young folks can really *screw things up*—without knowing it! He is young and understandably is not as bad as I think she describes it; "...bound to destroy something or someone",

*Here's all you have to know about men and women: women are crazy, men are stupid. And the main reason women are crazy is that men are stupid.*

- George Carlin

but in actuality he fell in love and—as men can confess—can make life confusing at the least and in extreme, chaotic as Hell. Add to this mix a child, young and innocent, and for some men the

paternal instinct *kicks-in* and *boom*, a store gets robbed or something to that effect.

"To be so smart, he sure is stupid," she describes it, more a sense than sensibility but still, how she sees it. "What would you do?"

"What would any caring parent or person do," I reply, question to question.

"He seldom listens to me these days," she follows. "Shutting me down everything I try to-,"

"That should not stop you from trying, still," I say, as love is strong, stubbornly so.

*Love looks not with the eyes, but  
with the mind,  
And therefore, is winged Cupid  
painted blind.*

- William Shakespeare, *A Midsummer  
Night's Dream*

There is much on *love*—perhaps a fraction of which is fact, founded, while the balance just winsome words and wistful want. Most believe that *love is the answer*—that *all we need is love*—without really embracing love's suffering and sacrifice: the pain of loss, the ingratitude of gain, and the abuses within and around the word itself, love, that offer the unbridled liberty to lust in actuality.

"Does she love him, this girl?"

"I don't know, they're both so young, frail and foolish," she remarks, "though I was about that age we I married."

"Times change and-,"

"And folks change—for better or worse."

*"You love me. Real or not real?"*

*I tell him, "Real."*

- Suzanne Collins, *Mockingjay*

There is that generational view expressed sometimes as, "Kids today are not as mature or responsible as they were, then," usually involving a personal story of disbelief, disappoint, distress even despondency—and one's *wits in!*

"I tried to raise them right," is a statement of remorse, resolution, or relief, but less often,

"I failed them," as a consolation or cause.

Here however, she is still *in the game* though her expectations for him, of him, lessened for now, maybe forever, dashed or just doomed. *Is there hope for him, for them and thus for us*, I think on this matter like so many—some closer than I prefer.

We fool ourselves into *thinking the best* and, worse, deserving so, but then there is reality, the passing of sins in one degree or another whether by omission or commission, the consequences accepted, denied, or dismissed. We do deceive foremost ourselves left to a life without love, but then someone who loves, laments,

"I am afraid that my sins will not be forgiven let alone forgotten: my mistakes will be their inheritance, my posterity," considering that *the apple falls close to the tree* or that *the sins of a father pass to three generations*.

"Does she love him', is more the question, I believe," she says to me. "I don't think she loves him nearly as much as she needs him right now, why with the situation, her daughter and his help."

"Is that I bad thing, her needs and his help," I ask with discretion.

"Well, whatever the cause, you can bet that they're sleeping together—his reward for do-gooding I suppose."

"Has he ever been in love," I follow, going deeper with her dialogue. "What about the child?"

"Well the child is precious, as children are, but that does not mean that he has to help and then, as though married, the two-,"

*There's nothing stupid about wanting to be loved. Believe me. [But then, what is your impression and expression of love, given and taken, your experience?]*

- Nina LaCour, *Everything Leads to You* [Adapted]

*Right, I know, as though they're married, a couple coupling, I get it, I think but not speak only because it is obvious to any adult, her, me and them; though when two think that it is love, they may*

not think at all about anything contrary, conscience or consciousness—as she describes them, are "frail and foolish".

"People take awful," she murmurs, an expression, good English or not, that simply mean that folks do fault, falter and fail for sure unless held to find fault only, implying or denying their own doing.

"Where do you believe this will go," referring to help and her need, their sleeping..., and the precious child, given the possibility that it already is already "awful".

“At first I was angry that he would not listen; this, after all those years of ensuring he did well and performed to his best,” she begins, suggesting that much of what *made him* was her diligence and determination, not only *planting the seed and nurturing the plant but apparently serving as the sun and season too*. “I have given him my life, something awful,” she says, the add-on of “awful” usually to mean, “with all my heart”, but ironic just the same. *Awful does not always means awful*.

“What should he do now,” I ask her now that she gives more of (or about) *the much* given to (and for) his life until now.

Hesitating as I expect, but then a coolness, maybe cold, she comments, “He should drop this dependence and get back to school and use the good mind given him.”

Already missing the semester because of this, he can or could not just up and return, but what she meant was clear: resume his education, his excellence without her, the child, and anything to with them.

As to *what should he do now* may not be what she wants, even demands from him, the changes in him, them with or without her approval, demands, or more, rejection. “Who is right,” is not clear, for while he may be foolish or frail, the fact is that he seems to think this love—and even thinking it so is powerful, power. Whereas he may never have before said “No” to his mom, possibly always aimed to please and impress her, for the present his devotion is at least shared if not shifted as such changes are life.

*You like to claim that you're in charge of the world, but it's as if the world hasn't noticed and it does whatever it pleases in spite of you. You claim the sky is blue, but almost daily it betrays you.*

- Trish Mercer, *The Falcon in the Barn*

“He no longer respects me,” she cries, inconsolable to all achieved prior, her persistence to possess him, control him and finally, count on him to fulfill her desire, his dependence and her demands, her needs above his wants.

I remember him saying, “A person is ‘Not human until’.

*Until what*, I wonder. Until they are aware of themselves, the good, the bad and the ugly, or is it more, or even something entirely different?

“It is about the heart,” he says. “The sense that it is more than an organ, as vital as that is, life and all,” he adds.

*...you're not truly human until you've had your heart broken and you've broken someone's heart.*

- Catherine Gilbert Murdock, *Front and Center*

“What about the human heart,” I bait him for more. “What is it about the human heart that is different, unique, special and spectacular,” my thoughts to

words though knowing something of this human heart—without knowing what I think I know and while wanting to forget what I do.

“It is our capacity above all other animals to break and be broken, the heart never fully mended as it were, say, the first time it spoke as though an audible other than the heartbeat or pulse.”

Sure, we each know about brokenness, whether our hearts were still in infancy, adolescence, or even aged, more greying matter than the customary color of love, heart, red. But how much do we know even of ourselves when *the heart* is so apt to turn on itself let alone another, so hot but then cold, so *soft*, but then hard, ironically heartless. *Is there any doubt in the Bible's warning that the heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked?* Who can know it, even a person their own when and as they do the unthinkable and hardly if at all think it wrong, even wicked?

“Child draw and color hearts,” he continues, “full and whole because *the heart* is perfect to them, intentional and often innocent as one will ever be.”

*I think... if it is true that there are as many minds as there are heads, then there are as many kinds of love as there are hearts.*

- Leo Tolstoy, *Anna Karenina*

And if they believe they have found love, they have for the longest let it known with an arrow, initials and other features heartfelt, carved in a tree, marked

on a wall, tattooed and even engraved given the greatest chance for eternity to what may be a passing passion, a spark short of a flame or a raging fire snuffed-out, affection rejection, a balloon burst before it ascending to the stars.

"The heart can play some real tricks," he continues, "overriding common sense while you soar high above the earth," he tells me, 'But then it can teach hard lessons too; that love and loss are intertwined as with pleasure and pain, as 'the heart has reason which reason knows not'."

*And I have had my share of suffering in love, loss,* I am reminded. One heart that both pleases and pleases me and then, without apparent reason or no reasoning at all, *turns* opposite and delivers the *deepest cut*, the hardest lesson for which the heart is to blame however much or little is said of it.

Suffering is something that simply is human; not just the physical kind of the heart's beat but the emotional kind that beat hearts and preferably for our good over the bad and the ugly.

A heart overtaken by *the bad* is reformed to avoid that pain and suffering.

"He said that he would never let that happen to him again," I hear it said, a heart *cut-off* from any more *cutting*, the wounds infected with indifference, insensitive to even the easiest to love or to like.

She said, "I am finished with love," the denial, deception and divorce, another *lost cause*, an ill-effect, as so often happens in this modern day of disposable relationships, valueless vows, conditions without commitments, a contract.

"But there is the good too," he says with a smile, that gives without taking and takes it without given it back. "Folks are not human until they can forgive and continue to give if just to help themselves never mind the other."

Is it human to forgive, I wonder; my own struggle to *let go...let God*, to do that which is done to me but more, *do unto others as I want done to or for me?*

"Howard, it is the only way to be at peace about it," he says perhaps reading my mind, my heart diseased by and with and by *darkness*. "It is a struggle to be sure, but the struggle means you're still trying."

*Suffering has been stronger than all other teaching and has taught me to understand what your heart used to be. I have been bent and broken, but - I hope - into a better shape.*

- Charles Dickens, *Great Expectations*

*Be the one who nurtures and builds. Be the one who has an understanding and a forgiving heart one who looks for the best in people. Leave people better than you found them.*

- Marvin J. Ashton



Recalling from some distant time, English and exposure to classics, another

*Be still, sad heart! and cease repining.  
Behind the clouds is the sun still shining.  
Thy fate is the common fate of all,  
Into each life some rain must fall.*

- Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

poet whose work I probably disregarded, such stuff full of fluff that my young heart refused to *take to heart* at the time, is now relevant, reality. For now, as an adult with heartfelt hurt that will

not heal, and when and while the winter comes in and out of season, I am destined for dread, that damned darkness that not only dulls my senses but disables my sensitivities, neither safe nor sorry. For as another poet and musician who wrote and sang,

*I am shielded in my amor,  
Hiding in my room,  
Safe within my womb,  
I touch no one and no one touches me,*

I pretend that I am strong and courageous when in truth I am the opposite; afraid of what can happen—again—saying to myself, “Never again!”

“But this is not a brave heart,” another says, hearing of my *sheltering* from the cruel and merciless world.

“I know, I know, call me a turtle,” I say in return, relegating myself to the shell, barely my head to see beyond the edge of, dear God, not a soft shell.

*The heart of man is very much like the  
sea, it has its storms, it has its tides, its  
depths, [and] it has its pearls too.*

- Vincent van Gogh, *The Letters*

“Don’ t run and don’t hide, but breathe and give thanks that you did try despite the odds or anything else that stands in the way of a heart’s destiny—never

mind desires,” comes that small voice once again. “For what will be without a heart expressed but, well, the shell of a man.”

“You’re right,” I say to the small but stubborn voice, “But can’t a man shelter in place for some reflection, restoration, respite?”

“Don’t give that excuse, spreading eloquence over your cowardness to make it sweet, a three-layered *stuff of fluff* unlike that of English exposure,” that small voice returns, ridiculing my cake creation hardly *half-baked*.

"It may be sweet to you, but it's shit to me," comes the course side of the small voice. "Why make it worse with your own pity party, indulging those dregs of pride at the *bottom of the barrel*?"

"I know it's not brave but bloody Hell; my heart is battered and bruised, bleeding profusely while the rest holds in reserve, behind the bludgeoning."

"I don't know where you're going with this script; you're no theatrical talent or you're sure not a playwright. You're just a man but then, you are, and for that I am saying that your heart must survive this; not just hidden or hapless, but alive, pumping and humping, and pressing on for more of what this life, with all its heartaches, has in store."

How do we this; something that we just can't do, undo? Someone, small or stout voice, says, "You must," or "You should," or something of the sort to stubbornly suggest that I surrender my bitterness, the betrayal, my self-righteous power?

"I cannot do this," I shout to the small, stout voice. "I cannot simply *change coats*, convert from the shell-socked soul to some stellar statue of strength, monument of mettle."

"There you go again, more *stuff of fluff*—what you somehow think gives credence to your cause when, as any sane mind and sound heart can tell, is just another facet of someone lost in their losses, destined to be lessened from love's opposite."

"You mean hate?"

"No stupid. If you hated at least you would show some passion, possibly making a point. No, what I am suggesting is indifference—the one or more who said or suggested,

"I care," and then, to use your *stuff*, said or suggested,

"I care not," as though they never knew you, and leave wondering about that life, what you thought it was or would be, who they were, so you thought.

*In the desert, I saw a creature,  
naked, bestial,  
Who, squatting upon the ground,  
Held his heart in his hands,  
And ate of it.*

*I said, "Is it good, friend?"  
"It is bitter—bitter," he answered.*

*"But I like it  
"Because it is bitter,  
"And because it is my heart.*

- Stephen Crane, *The Black Riders and  
Other Lines*

*Same Old Same Old, so it was*

The small voice is right; indifference is the opposite of love, once love is lost to the, *to the tune of,*

“Alone Again, or “All by Myself”, or” Seasons in the Sun” *to end us, the way we were*, I think.

*Goodbye my friend it's hard to die,  
When all the birds are singing in the sky,  
Now that spring is in the air,  
Pretty girls are everywhere,  
Think of me and I'll be there,*

But how deep is your love anyway, your heart's deepest depths? For if the *heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked*, then where can this go but finally to indifference, all sense and sensibility failing, reason or reasoning futile and love dead to darkness?

*Gradually it was disclosed to me that the line separating good and evil passes not through states, nor between classes, nor between political parties either -- but right through every human heart -- and through all human hearts. This line shifts. Inside us, it oscillates with the years. And even within hearts overwhelmed by evil, one small bridgehead of good is retained. And even in the best of all hearts, there remains ... a small corner of evil.*

*Since then I have come to understand the truth..., the struggle with the evil inside a human being (inside every human being).*

*It is impossible to expel evil from the world in its entirety, but it is possible to constrict it within each person.”*

- Aleksandr I. Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago*

*But therein is the beauty of brokenness; that is, the truth about us, you, me, us and all of humanity who still have heart*, I believe: there is good and there is evil, light and darkness, right and wrong but then all that *grey matter* subject to study, learning in the loss, crying because it hurts and then laughing until it hurts.

“If only my heart were stone,” Cormac McCarthy says in *The Road*, but of course, it (his heart) is not; for in the darkness and danger of the father and son's struggle to survive, to reach the shore, is a hope if just for the son to see *a better world* of those who still have heart however dim the light or slow the beat may be.

And the wounds, the scars, evidential and circumstantial; what of these that sometimes flare-up, fester, or fret? Is it okay to acknowledge and admit the pain, *the past* that is sometimes present?

*Hearts live by being wounded.*

- Oscar Wilde

“Yes Howard, it’s okay to be human until.”

*Same Old Same Old, so it was*

“*They vanish,*” those that find *the promised land* or *hit pay dirt*,” she remarks. And what that means is that when folks win the lottery or a large settlement, they tend to *go off on the deep end*, to drowned in what they thought was an island paradise but also, when they think *they’ve arrived*, whether by hook or crook, their pride gets the best of them.

Even here, around Stebbins Street, this sort of thing happens; maybe not

*If people reach perfection they vanish,  
you know.*

- T.H. White, *The Once and Future King*

as often or in other proportions, but sometimes folks have a lucky streak or, perverting the meaning of the phrase, will say,

“I am blessed,” in the context of all their material possessions, earthly prosperity on some scale of *The American Dream*. It is all relative and, coming from working class, may translate to as little as a fast boat or high-end car, but more often, is a move to somewhere else.

Don’t misunderstand my expressed view as just sarcasm, for the truth of the matter is that most anyone would want to get a *leg-up* or *helping hand* or anything with the potential to raise their standard of living—understood! But it is more than that here; it is something on scale of an earthbound miracle that rains down money—not manna—as a supposed blessing beyond need, more so to whittle down one’s wish list only to see it grow as *The American Dream* would have it.

How much can envy or jealousy hurt for those who fail to catch wave or, with the surf out, lose it; those with notions, plans and even once lifestyles of “the better life” thwarted and finally dismissed as just that, *the dream*?

But much more redeeming, I believe, is the resolve of downsizing; families

*Downsizing is just getting rid of junk;  
those things you collected over a  
lifetime, [that] when your gone  
someone must sort through.*

- Richard L. Ratliff

or even individuals, perhaps exhausted or dismissive of *the rat race*, as a *one-off* or possibly recurring reduction in *things*—even of property—though sometimes necessary rather than

preferred as the cycles of lifestyle go: age, employment and other things associated to *things*.

But is (or can) *downsizing* be more than simply get rid of the extras, the *has-beens* or junk? Is this term more a euphemism for the unexpected and undesired but crucial liquidation of present lifestyle—that might also reverse the original idea, making us magically reappear, reconnect, or regroup rather than vanish into the ethos of *high-cotton* or *living high on the hog*?

“Folks lose themselves in this dream,” she adds. “They get all that stuff, all those *things*, and forget where it comes from, who made it, and how others sacrifice for their upscale or uptown finery.”

“Is the plant going to re-open”, a bystander asks while another adds,

“Yeah, downtown is destitute, but I remember when-,” is often the remark and recollection, some *better times* for most but never all folks.

“How many Title 1 schools are there now,” still more to say referring to the signs of disparity—when families seem increasingly income-strapped—even for what should be the essentials.

The signs are more than there, the symptoms of a community somewhere between gradual failures and dramatic freefall. *Sure, there will always be those folks on the mountain or hidden behind their security gates*, but most are living on credit and in that, a growing number unable to *pay the man*.

“Bankruptcy is on the rise, that’s for sure,” another comments, “But the only folks going to jail are those with child support arrears,” he follows, *his family affected by this ordeal, more often keeping the matter close, too close, and carrying a burden too heavy for any one person*, I think.

*Then, in the 1980's, came the paroxysm of downsizing, and the very nature of the corporation was thrown into doubt. In what began almost as a fad and quickly matured into an unshakable habit, companies were 'restructuring,' 'reengineering,' and generally cutting as many jobs as possible, white collar as well as blue . . .*

*The New York Times captured the new corporate order succinctly in 1987, reporting that it 'eschews loyalty to workers, products, corporate structures, businesses, factories, communities, even the nation.*

*All such allegiances are viewed as expendable under the new rules. With survival at stake, only market leadership, strong profits and a high stock price can be allowed to matter'.*

- Barbara Ehrenreich, *Bright-Sided: How the Relentless Promotion of Positive Thinking Has Undermined America*

“What if one can’t pay,” is more a condition than a question, a comment, as costs rise and incomes fall and fail, and at a *higher station* and stakes of life, the wealth gap widens; fewer folks having more..., while an increasing percent are losing out, their dreams at worst nightmares and at least simply vanished. “What to do,” the *condition* inferred in the context, “when the trends are not in your favor and any prospect of a turnaround is remote if not ridiculous?”

As to the vanished—or was it “vanquished”—celebrating sobriety comes at so many costs, greatest of all that *The American Dream* demands a supply and yet more, always more, but never *the same old same old*, however good it is was or may have seemed compared to past generations, other peoples or nations. We are sick, stricken by or with *affluenza*: an incurable cause of

*The Vikings thought they were big shots because they had boats. You know how obnoxious people get when they own a boat.*

- Colin Quinn, *The Coloring Book: A Comedian Solves Race Relations in America*

ingratitude; disease of untenable debt; a contagion of insatiable consumption; a culture that commodifies one and makes a *house of cards* looks as solid an oak, as secure as Fort Knox.

But there is that notion, that nationalized grandiosity that “We’re great because \_\_\_\_\_”, almost always referring to or inferring of prosperity and property, *things upon things*, and, finally that,

*I have seen all the things that are done under the sun; all of them are meaningless, a chasing after the wind.*

- King Solomon, Ecclesiastes 1:14

“They who die with the most toys win,” with “win” or winning as never quite accomplished until you’re dead—when it’s too late to realize what Solomon warned, a

chasing after the win, *the wind*, and by any other mantra to mean *meaningless*.

And yet *The American Dream* survives, not because it means anything meaningful, but because we continue to chase the wind, miserably failing to follow the wisdom of the ages, the truth of toys or by any other name, *things*. We are children with tempers of want and then, when we get that *thing*, are soon bored with it, casting it aside along with everything else—even the things that should be meaningful, all for the sake of ourselves—no matter what else we call it or it calls us.

Some have known, and still more our learning I am afraid, that *The American Dream* is not real or possible for most. No, this is more an idea fostered by the same who invented the *carrot before the mule* and the *cart before the horse*; first planting the seed, the desire, to get things going and then second, growing the plant as though anyone and everyone that tills the soil will harvest a bounty. But of course, such an idea is rooted in deceit and grows in deception, suggesting all the while that you can *have your cake and eat it too*, when in actuality to bask in such a bounty of sweetness one must steal the sugar, fleece the flour and *Lord knows* what else, to ensure that every slice is that of the buttered and better life, always a belly full.

*I've always resented the smug statements of politicians, media commentators, corporate executives who talked of how, in America, if you worked hard you would become rich. The meaning of that was if you were poor it was because you hadn't worked hard enough. I knew this was a lie, about my father and millions of others, men and women who worked harder than anyone, harder than financiers and politicians, harder than anybody if you accept that when you work at an unpleasant job that makes it very hard work indeed.*

- Howard Zinn, *You Can't Be Neutral on a Moving Train: A Personal History of Our Times*

"This just can't go on," so says the exhausted with or without excuse.

And how true that statement is, how clear their conclusion; for as things go, *here today and gone tomorrow*, legend has it that the when at first it seems a gift or reward, sometime afterward it is assumed, an entitlement or some sort of right, decidedly deserved.

*The assumption that you everyone else is like you. That you are the world. The disease of consumer capitalism. The complacent solipsism.*

- David Foster Wallace, *The Pale King*

"The work was hard, but it was the most we ever had," an old fellow says, one who worked at a local mill, who knew the life. But his words, as his hard life, are a memory now, his body long laid in Edgemont Cemetery, a black & white that collects dust, the edges frayed, the image faded, and *the most we ever had* as a fraction, plain pennies to today's dollar—worth less.



If it *can't go on*, then where is it going? For better or for worse, it is going the way of history, those vaulted to victory but then, over extended and entitled, *vanish* before they vanish down and then death.

*Many years ago, I was so innocent I still considered it possible that we could become the humane and reasonable America so many members of my generation used to dream of. We dreamed of such an America during the Great Depression when there were no jobs, and then we fought and often died for that dream during the Second World War, when there was no peace.*

*But I know now that there is not a chance in hell of America becoming humane and reasonable. Because power corrupts us, and absolute power corrupts us absolutely.*

*Human beings are chimpanzees who get crazy drunk on power. By saying that our leaders are power-drunk chimpanzees, am I in danger of wrecking the morale of our soldiers fighting and dying in the Middle East? Their morale, like so many lifeless bodies, is already shot to pieces. They are being treated, as I never was, like toys a rich kid got for Christmas.*

- Kurt Vonnegut, *A Man Without a Country*

"The president says he will 'take American back'," another tells; one who evidently accepts that American went somewhere it shouldn't have and now, in the relatively short span of four years, will be brought back, made better once more. *It is often such for those on the brink or ropes, not a comeback or resurrection but rather a swan song, the last hurrah, the final finale, and then the inevitable end of The American Dream.*

"He says that he will bring our boys home and get us out of that quagmire," the man muddles on. "He says-,"

And "he says" or they say things all the time about *the things*; the economy, commerce, business, employment and other such terms that generally give rise to *the promised land...pay dirt*, and yes, that dream. But the

more this goes on and the further we fall, our lives as the least we ever had, the less likely that what he says or they say has any value, worth or merit. Not a question, but past tense of a certainty, complete as they say,

"This just could not go on," or those than vanish are indeed vanished, not safely and securely behind their gates or beneath, their bunkers, but gone for

good as the old fellow whose body is destroyed, his words beyond that damned dream and *the things* therein.

To leave this story on Stebbins Street is best on *a high note*, something that is more suited for folks that once knew about that hard work and the most they ever had. There is after all tradition or sometimes said, serious or not,

"The way it was."

Perfection is not finally to think,

"We have arrived," or

"We made it," or

"We been blessed," as to mean that we are materially or monetarily above the mass.

Before the mills and before the rails, this street and town was no town at all, but carrying such novel names as Talladega, Etowah, Coosa, and Tallapoosa, it was part of those nations of Native Americans, the Creek and Cherokee among others lesser known. They too vanished save some annual

events here or there, a Powwow to evoke the ancient days, "untamed" and untouched by us. In such times were the *same old same old* though without *The American Dream*, but of sacred, soulish myths and legend.

*All of it would be shattered, too. Because their life would be part of the lie that this country repeated to live with itself - that fairness would prevail; that laws protected everyone equally; that this land wasn't stolen from Native peoples; that this wealth wasn't built by industrious white men, "our" founders; that hardworking immigrants proved this was a meritocracy; that history should only be told from one point of view, that of those who won and still have power.*

- Nancy J. Kim, *The Last Story of Mina Lee*

*Same Old Same Old, so it was*

When *“Even our fears”* become the means to our end, what is left but the shouting, are my thoughts amid this latest crisis, apparently international in scope. And what is worse than such causes (for/of fear) is that we lose our will

*Even our fears make us feel important because we fear we might not be.*

- Terry Pratchett, Nation

to survive, to succeed in the best sense of what that means to mankind, the help and hope so essential to life, living.

“It is not enough to say that we have courage,” is a statement that someone made sometime ago, “But it is vital that, in spite of the fear, we recall and reset what the past had to endure, their hardships and heartaches, against our own in the present but ever changing world.”

“That’s the biggest difference today,” another adds to this statement, “The rate at which the world is changing.”

“Just take communications,” a senior says of this often-applied subject on the rate of change, technology. “I remember the hard-wired handset,” he continues, and the party-line, sharing that set with a neighbor, maybe more; to compare with mobile, wireless, multi-modal voice and data on demand.

“It is more than ironic that that more does not mean better,” he says, suggesting that the volumes of/by Ethernet and much more, Internet—while reliable—does not ensure that the information is same.

*The advancement and diffusion of knowledge is the only guardian of true liberty.*

- James Madison

“Don’t believe half of what you read or any of what you hear,” comes another comment, a

cautionary tale of the Web’s tangled and entangled powers of and power of information. “You should know that there is a fine line between fact and fiction, truth and a lie,” the old fellow follows.

*But do they mean well*, I think, at least some of the time—even if they don’t *get it right*, inadvertently leaving-out one thing while accidentally adding another.

“There is always the interpretation though,” he continues. “What you think you hear is not always what is being said, you know, and we’re each likely

to misunderstand simply because we weren't listening intently, preoccupied and full of perception and presumption."

It is perhaps the last thing we do; that is, to question our own interpretation or to accept information or news as fact when in fact it is carefully crafted: not just to inform but to control; not just to educate but to program; and not just to benefit the listener or individual but to bolster the interests of powers, their power...over you, over us.

To fear or to be afraid, given what you hear or what is delivered as news, is not by accident or your weakness per se.

Given that fear renders the power to sway, to seduce and to surrender body & soul, is it any wonder that from the playground bully to the bully pulpit, it is so effective and thus endless, an ever present ethos?

"When you hear a puppy or small dog yep, you don't run, but when you hear that deep roar of a Rottweiler or see the profile of a Pitbull, you run like Jesse Owens," an old one remarks, unless of course the beast belongs to you as your support, safety and security.

*All I know is just what I read in the papers, and that's an alibi for my ignorance.*

- Will Rogers

*Fear of a name increases fear of the thing itself.*

- J.K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*

"I find the best way to deal with those big dogs is just to stand your ground and, as possible, carry a big stick," a retired postal worker remarks—one that *knows the life*.

"Given its nature and territory, the dog is still like to strike," comes an expected reply, a remark of reality.

"Yeah, it happens and hurts, but sometimes it's better to face your fears—don't you think?"

"I just don't want to be attacked, that's all," the other returns. "I understand that a few dogs around here dauntless, made so by mean folks that make them mean. Better to be safe than sorry."

*Nothing in life is to be feared, it is only to be understood. Now is the time to understand more, so that we may fear less.*

- Marie Curie

“The hateful like that sort of thing; it makes them feel powerful to possess

*I imagine one of the reasons people cling to their hates so stubbornly is because they sense, once hate is gone, they will be forced to deal with pain.*

- James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*

such ‘a pet’,” the postal worker explains, somewhat philosophical.

“I don’t know if they’re all hateful—like that—but they sure can cause a lot of trouble, why telling you that ‘my dog does not

bite’ when it’s pulling at its chain or leash, growling and salivating, and looking at you like your it’s next meal.”

“I know about,” the retiree agrees. “I can’t say that I understand fully but, hey, I’m no fool after the first attack.”

“Maybe you frightened the dog,” another offers. “Dogs fear—even the fierce ones.”

“I guess that fear breeds fear or-,”

“As love beget love,” another adds, speaking of the other side of fear—just as powerful if not more.

*It's the questions we can't answer that teach us the most. They teach us how to think. If you give a man an answer, all he gains is a little fact. But give him a question and he'll look for his own answers.*

- Patrick Rothfuss, *The Wise Man's Fear*

“You’re suggesting that an attacking dog might be soothed into a kinder state, given some kindness.”

“Yeah, but it’s about time, the timing of kindness to tame, teach and train,” says another inclined

to think that animals are not born angry or afraid but become so to survive and, in the hands of hateful folks, *fight fire with fire*.

And in relation, a fierce dog and other objects of fear whether seen, heard, or just thinking of it, underscores the power of fear if not the fear of power. To say it in so many words,

“Power generally gravitates toward the pursuit of more power as fear breeds fear—to say nothing of the corruption commensurate with that pursuit, often at great costs, that can finally destroy practically everything and everyone if left unchecked. Beware and be weary of power left unaccountable.”

There is crisis to be sure, as time tells and age allows, but what sometimes occurs is its exploitation; that is, an advantage or opportunity derived by and through the crisis, driven by power in pursuit of power, that elevates and emphasizes fear without courage, surrender without apparent sacrifice, topped off with an *all Hell breaks loose* campaign to fuel the fire.

“Sounds like politics,” come a few words to match *so many words*.

Statecraft or witchcraft, this *exploitative elixir* is a concoction that blunts the dulled and disinterested, that spins the spent and rewards the ruthless, and consequently punishes the poo; as power most punitive, punishing, because it poses as good and right while in truth is evil and thus, deeply destructive and divisive—as to divide and then conquer. Yes, politics; exploitation and with it, through it, the fomenting of fear— the bread & butter of every opportunity and advantage achieved by tyrants or their types. Let know crisis pass without seizing an opportunity for yet more power and control.

*We live in a world where unfortunately the distinction between true and false appears to become increasingly blurred by manipulation of facts, by exploitation of uncritical minds, and by the pollution of the language.*

- Arne Tiselius

*In every age it has been the tyrant, the oppressor and the exploiter who has wrapped himself in the cloak of patriotism, or religion, or both to deceive and overawe the People.*

- Eugene Victor Debs

I remember a story of one of those that hate, their dog hated because of his hate. He, that man of hate, tells the story of how he got the dog as a pup and raised it, a responsible and kind master. *Hard to believe it though, considering first the man, his personality, and then the dog, his temperament*, I consider. But this is his story, punctuated and to the point that he, the master, is perplexed by the dog’s violent nature, an evident danger to any who get close.

“I raised that dog well,” he says. “I don’t know what happened.”

But then, another who knows this man more and who witnessed his raising the dog, swears that the dog was beaten so severely as to bleed. He tells me,

*Same Old Same Old, so it was*

“The old man beat that dog unmercifully—for no reason—all the time! The longer it continued, the meaner the dog got. It’s clear to me that he *made a monster.*”

This same witness could say more and, on occasion did just that; but finally, it was this testimony against the old man who, as anyone who knows him knows, is full of hate, an angry old cuss. And evidently when confronted by

*Before mass leaders seize the power to fit reality to their lies, their propaganda is marked by its extreme contempt for facts as such, for in their opinion fact depends entirely on the power of man who can fabricate it.*

- Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*

this witness, the testimony of what happened or is happening, the old man still denied any cause with rage and rant.

“What then is the lesson,” I ask myself on learning of what I consider the reality—not what the

old man said.

If not already evident to you, anyone able to reason, it’s that the old man is angry, deeply disturbed, and beating the dog is his way of feeling some level of power probably lost in past life. *He would have been better off in using an actual punching bag, I think, but that would not satisfy the pain he needs to inflict on others to forget his own.*

“What does this story have to do with exploitation, fomenting fear and such things that tyrants do,” I ask myself.

*The receptivity of the masses is very limited, their intelligence is small, but their power of forgetting is enormous. In consequence of these facts, all effective propaganda must be limited to a very few points and must harp on these in slogans until the last member of the public understands what you want him to understand by your slogan.*

- Adolf Hitler

The exploiting or abuse of power is similar; for the old man, his brutality but for the other, a “crisis” for which perception far exceeds reality, the overwhelming volume of “information”—threats and such—as justification for order, more power. Then there is

the denial of any culpability, blame or fault, in the outcome or result; the old man lies about his beating the dog whereas the other generates layers of lies aimed to confuse and convolute, the veritable smoke & mirrors that cloud all

sense of reasoning, even rationality in the best sense, capitalizing on the loyalty of the public and sense of urgency to overcome yet another crisis.

"Other neighbors knew of the old man's beating his dog," the witness tells me, "but did nothing or said nothing to him about it."

"But you did-,"

"Someone had to do something before the dog-,"

"Yeah, that's a tragedy waiting to happen," I agree, understanding his concern.

But whereas the old man is still accountable, should the law get involved, the other is not simply because they are in effect "the law"—*above the law*. Still, the man rambles on, his fury forever instilled in his soul, and the other, well, exploiting both a crisis and the good faith of its supposed citizens is their stock-in-trade short of any soul or salvation in eternity.

As the ages tell and, to the present, *the other* is alive and wealthy, power as both *a means and an end*.

"But for how long and finally, to what end for the rest of us, not of *the other*," is the question, and in reply,

"When even our fears become the means to our end, what is left but the shouting?"

*We often hear of someone saying, 'So you don't trust me' or 'Are you questioning my integrity?' or 'You don't believe me.' They get defensive and angry because someone questions their actions, and they think they are above being questioned or having to prove their trustworthiness. But none of us is above questioning.*

- Henry Cloud, *Safe People: How to Find Relationships That Are Good for You and Avoid Those That Aren't*

*He was so effectually screened by his great wealth that he was called to no account for his crimes, not even for murder.*

- Harriet Ann Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl: Written by Herself*



**“Nothing more or less,”** is all he has to say.

I wonder, *what is to become of him, time served followed by probation and all.* It is a messy situation: the divorce and child custody; his unemployment and arrears, then some jail time; and now what?

“We’re both just human,” she told him just before leaving, “as perhaps her

*We're both just human; nothing more,  
but also nothing less.*

- Carrie Ryan, *The Dead-Tossed Waves*

last excuse for that taken rather than given; for all the lies intermixed with actions thought less becoming but then justified at least to their friends and some

family—all who might side with her story unless or until they tire of the lies.

Betrayal is a tricky thing; something more than theory and less than conspiracy, it is as a fire that begins with a spark but then, the glow and heat intriguing, ignites with wind, spreading beyond control to the ignorance of some, the fears of others and the tragedy of what was thought to be more than

*It was a mistake," you said. But the  
cruel thing was, it felt like the mistake  
was mine, for trusting you.*

- David Levithan, *The Lover's Dictionary*

*nothing more...nothing less.*

“Was it a mistake,” someone says or thinks.

“What part,” I say, “the relationship, the betrayal or

what?”

“Just looking for answers...that maybe the relationship was already failing, the supposed betrayal merely the final step,” someone says or thinks, perhaps to *put two and two together.*

Again, betrayal is a tricky thing in that it is prone to rationalization that somehow, at least in the mind if not the matter expressed, claims that

“They deserved it,” to mean that the betrayed in effect earned what they got perhaps because of their conduct or prior behavior—as with *an eye for an eye* or some sort of karma that finally warrants or justifies only the latest in a series broadly described as cause.

“He had it coming to him,” is not unheard among folks that were or are *just human.* How convenient to come to such *off-the-cuff* conclusions and commentary when *you have no dog in the fight*, no fears, risks, or tragedy.

“At least there are no children,” is perhaps another consideration that unlike that last, has some worth given custody with all its proven problems, present and future.

But here we are or, more accurately, here he is; soon to be released but still *state property*, the father of two beautiful children above the betrayal, will be regulated in all respects: his visitation, his income and assets, and his conduct whether actual or just alleged—as the law permits it.

“I hate my life,” he told some months ago, just before arrested for child support arrears, and in this vein, is later psychologically analyzed under order, allegedly suicidal.

Let me think about this, first his statement and then the subsequent allegation, the psychological analysis.

First his statement and then Job from the Bible who said something similar, as the record reflects, that he loathed his life; this feeling after a series of major losses not the least of which was his wife who asks him:

“Are you still holding on to your integrity,” followed by the advice, “Curse God and die!”

*Both just human*, and to the extent of the tragedy thus far, they could be nothing less than distraught. But here, in this verse alone but well short of the plot and purpose, is division, perhaps betrayal at least at the moment, of both her faith, as presumed after a life of God’s good and her marriage for which, as it appears, is not worthy of his life, then and thereafter, as per her advice.

*For there to be betrayal, there  
would have to have been trust first.*  
- Suzanne Collins, *The Hunger Games*

Whether in the moment, a tragedy in the making, or from then on, the two are divided in thought, word and action; he, on this particular matter, remains true to his faith however disturbing the series of sudden and striking losses, while she, *nothing more but also nothing less*.

I think of Job often; not just now and specific to this man’s plight, but as it applies to bad times and difficult circumstances. Job is a remarkable being, as the scriptures relay, but his life is forever changed—all because of God’s test and perhaps foreknowing that his faith would stick regardless of the pain endured, emotional and physical.

*Same Old Same Old, so it was*

What must it be like, the life of Job or, in the contemporary, the life of one who seems to be losing practically everything: marriage, family, income, and finally, his freedom not only with the jailing but more so, his responsibility and to, and participation with his children, now a non-custodial.

It is hard for me to speak to this man with reasoning as that of Job; that perhaps this experience, distraught as he is, is a testing among the *trials of life*.

*Stab the body and it heals but injure the heart and the wound lasts a lifetime.*

- Mineko Iwasaki

*What would he say or how would he respond if I said this to him, I wonder? Would he get angrier, resenting my words, or would he*

*cower in a corner.* Either way will only feed any notion of suicide whether his or the courts, their allegations and analysis.

*I don't want to say the wrong thing*, thinking of Job's colleagues, three of which counseled him while completely wrong in their conclusions, the cause of his plight. But what if it is a judgment? God does judge and finally is a fair judge, just and right, all creator of truth from beginning to end. *I suppose if and as I must be judged, surely God is preferred over man's courts.* Whether a test

*It's hard to tell who has your back, from who has it long enough just to stab you in it...*

- Nicole Richie

or a judgment—or both—at least God thinks enough of me to apply his righteous, guiding hand, to *turn me around* or *awaken me* to the hard truths of this *fallen world*.

Maybe I should let him talk, say something or anything, *nothing more but also nothing less*. Maybe I should just pray for him and for me; that I will and may love this man with all he is going through, suffering and seemingly without any solace. *If only I could understand more deeply*, I think, *but to do so would be to experience the same or similar*.

*I could never hurt him enough to make his betrayal stop hurting. And it hurts, in every part of my body.*

- Veronica Roth, *Insurgent*

For what reason, I am not sure, but the thought occurs to me that *even self-pity is a form of*

*pride*, but then, who am I to guide others on the merits of humility? But then

Job struggled too; questioning God, arguing with his so-called counselors and finally, the misery and mire of a body consumed with boils, for which is *nothing more but nothing less* than malicious.

“Men at ease have contempt for misfortune,” he says later, “as the fate of those whose feet are slipping,” to say that pride is not his misfortune alone but as it stands, his supposed counselors have their pride placed completely on the wrong conclusion: God’s punishment for Job’s sin.

“Why me, why us,” is a question for which I have no clever or convincing answer, explanation, but then Job crying out for justice amid his sores and suffering,

“The tents of marauders are undisturbed, and those who provoke God are secure—those who carry their god in their hands.”

Perhaps God does not bother with marauders or provokers or any such characters simply because they are beyond his help, their hope. Maybe God considers them as *a lost cause*, their future shaped by *the fates* rather than faith?

As parents, Job, and his wife undoubtedly bore great pains when/as their children are crushed under the weight of a collapsing building. *What that alone would do to some folks, families, and communities*, I consider as a loss of incalculable costs.

“Have you heard from your children,” I ask the man with reluctance for both us.

“No,” is all he says, though one word seems sufficient to surmise that this is not his choice or desire. *What that alone would do to some folks, families, and communities*, I consider as a loss of incalculable costs—not because they are dead but because they *nothing more, but also nothing less* than taken from him without cause.

“Did the lawyer say-,”

*What irritated me most ...was the fact that I wasn't feeling humiliated, or annoyed, or even fooled.*

*Betrayal was what I felt, my heart broken not just by [someone] I was in love with, but also by, as I once believed, a true friend.*

- Danka V., *The Unchosen Life*

"To Hell with him," he fires back. "He talks but never delivers...does not

*You are going to break your promise. I understand. And I hold my hands over the ears of my heart, so that I will not hate you.*

- Catherynne M. Valente, *Deathless*

seem to care, to fight for me, for us," as the longest and sharpest response thus far after my several visits.

"Do you have a place to live, someone to stay with," I continue,

the attorney aside, askew, absent ambition or altogether.

"I think so...but can't say for sure."

Thinking of it now, another who is sincerely concerned told me that the man's wife,

"Put it to him," explaining some of details that pinned it on him. Stopping of idle gossip or any form of backstabbing, the plain truth was that she recently married the man, just weeks following the divorce, only to have the marriage annulled after apparently discovering that he is a womanizer.

*We met less than a week ago and in that time, I've done nothing but lie and cheat and betray you. I know, but if you give me a chance...all I want is to protect you. To be near you. For as long as I'm able.*

- Catherynne M. Valente, *Deathless*

"It's more than ironic," so says the sincere, "that she was unfaithful with an unfaithful, but then who am I to judge."

Considering most if not all of this to be true; the divorce, marriage, and annulment—never mind all the other antics—is that

betrayal begets betrayal just as lies lead to more lies.

"The human condition, I suppose,"

"Yeah, we can sure mess things up something fierce," I follow. "But that does not excuse our responsibility to do right and clearly, she did not."

*Betrayal is the only truth that sticks.*

- Arthur Miller

Such words, my last remark, may not be taken well as one might say,

"You're presumptuousness, " or "...bias, " or "...sexist", or any number of responses that are nothing more, but also nothing less than human for the both of us: on the one side is concern

and care about him, his children and their future, and on the other side is merely the modern mantra of, *I'm okay and your okay*. If something similar happened to "the other side" betrayed, they are sure to be less concerned about *the right words* and much more about the wrong actions or behavior, their betrayal, love lost and hopes shattered.

There remains the mystery of it all that comes down to the divorce, the failure of the marriage and the disparity of parent and child. As one professional on this subject says,

"With every social problem there are always proposed solutions and popular support—except for divorce, for which society despairs."

The man is not alone as divorce touches Stebbins Street and every street among and around us. To discuss the subject, divorce, is to possibly receive several views regarding this social and even spiritual problem. Who is right and wrong about it, in it and through it with all of the possibilities, does not excuse or remove doing right as *nothing more, but also nothing less* than a commitment far greater than the fact that *we're both just human*.

*"The human race is unimportant. It is the self that must not be betrayed."*

*"I suppose one could say that Hitler didn't betray his self."*

*"You are right. He did not. But millions of Germans did betray their selves. That was the tragedy. Not that one man had the courage to be evil. But that millions had not the courage to be good."*

- John Fowles, *The Magus*

“‘At its coming and going’, I don’t know what to make of it. “

“is it really that uncertain,’ I ask, possibly knowing the answer.

“Why do ask me when you really know,” he says, almost reading my thoughts. “Don’t you get depressed, down and discouraged?”

“Of course,” I say, honest but hesitant given my weakness, my pride to hide my faults, weaknesses.

*In the moonlight, which is always sad,  
as the light of the sun itself is--as the  
light called human life is--at its coming  
and its going.*

- Charles Dickens, A Tale of Two Cities

And God knows that I do, get depressed, and still I do not turn to the Scriptures, the Spirit or salvation from sin, but instead, other things that momentarily aid

but never abolish *the darkness*, addressing the symptom but never the cause.

“I am as *a tale of two cities*, places; on the one, as at least thinking like that at Philadelphia,” I begin. “I want for love—real love—against the hate and apathy that seems everywhere, the ethos of this earth.”

“You’re not talking about Pennsylvania,” he asks, confused.

“No, I mean as the ancient city,” referring to that in the Bible’s Revelation.

“And they loved?”

“Yes,” I tell him, “they pleased God unlike the other city.”

“Aren’t there more than two, churches?”

“Yes, but as I see it, the two will do.”

“What is the other city, then?”

“It is Laodicea; a city or church described as ‘lukewarm’.”

“You’re lukewarm?”

“Sometimes I am...and even more, really less.”

Watching his face, I expect the confusion, not sure of where I am going with this analogy.

“What does these two have to do with-,”

“Before I answer, a little more about these two cities,” I interrupt, aimed to accent the city-character analogy, comparison. “Laodicea was more than *lukewarm*, *straddling the fence between faith and fate, the here & now, and eternity*. it possessed much: banking, medicine, and textiles as the wealthiest city in its province.”

“Then they were generally well-off?”

“Apparently so,” I say, “But as wealth leads to *the love of money*, was it more a hindrance than help for faith, the faithful?”

“Howard, this sounds like a Bible lesson.”

“Yeah, I know, but I intend to move to my own emotional or spiritual health, the application. But for now, when I mention Philadelphia, think of the God’s pleasure with love, gratitude, and worship; but for Laodicea, think of man’s selfishness and pride, possessing much materially but unwilling to use it to minister to others, to help and give hope.”

“Okay, go on.”

With his approval, I continue, explaining that the character of Philadelphia is what I need to be—what God desires—but Laodicea is what I am or lean toward.

“When I think of Philadelphia—who notably pleased God—I think of the faithful, unconcerned or perhaps uncaring of all that the world has to entice and enthrall, and instead, pressing toward God’s kingdom, *The New Jerusalem*.”

“Then Laodicea loses out?”

He asks a good question, for which I have no answer; after all, Laodicea is still *on the radar* so to speak, but does seem headed toward *dangerous waters*.

“Loses out’, I don’t know,” I reply, “But I think that disregarding the message, to seek God, is blocked by all the earth has to offer for the current time. As it appears, this lot is weak beyond what wealth can buy or claim.”

*It is a far, far better thing that I do, than I have ever done; it is a far, far better rest that I go to than I have ever known.*

- Charles Dickens, A Tale of Two Cities

*It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of light, it was the season of darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair.*

- Charles Dickens, A Tale of Two Cities

*And yet I have had the weakness, and have still the weakness, to wish you to know with what a sudden mastery you kindled me, heap of ashes that I am, into fire.*

- Charles Dickens, A Tale of Two Cities



“And thus, Laodicea is in Hell.”

*He does not mince words, but the hard questions demand more desire to know and, maybe just maybe, to live by the same.*

How do we know where Laodicea is—as understood that this city, church, or character still exists on earth, alive and at least *getting-by* if not moving in the right direction, *calm waters* or not? I cannot know what becomes of any, including me, that *straddle the fence* or live in the margins when it comes to faith, live eternal. One might say,

“You must know, discern and understand,” but then “know...understand” where anyone or everyone stands in position to God, faith, and the future?

*I see a beautiful city and a brilliant people rising from this abyss. I see the lives for which I lay down my life, peaceful, useful, prosperous, and happy.*

- Charles Dickens, A Tale of Two Cities

*How can know anymore that what I read or perhaps, as I pray, what is revealed through the Spirit, I think.*

As cities and other geographic point go, some thrive and some die, while many others fall in between. I look around here, *close to home*, and I see a city once more beautiful, not a prosperous city like Laodicea, but better than now, this post-industrial age of decline, depression.

But the health or wealth of a place is not what I really aim to apply here, but more, those intrinsic attributes that lend to love others, to worship God and to be grateful for that which you do have. *I see these attributes at times but then I cannot say that the loss of one, health and wealth, does not lead to the loss of the other, love and all.*

My own life reflects this tale; that when *it's the best of times*, I am more likely considerate, conscious of others' needs, but when things *turn south*, I *crawl in my cave* and chant,

“Woe is me,” or something like that.

But then there is that other side, that other city, Laodicea; that in the so-called “best of times”, I tend to *slide toward Sodom*, full of pride and selfishness, without any sense of gratitude let alone love and worship.

“Sounds like sight is blurred,” the *straight shooter* says.

*He is right, I am reminded, that I do get out of focus, a cloudy and cluttered life of getting-by without getting on.*

Helping others helps me too—that I know whatever the actual outcome--but God wants more than that occasional or event periodic public service or contribution.

“And what’s in it for you,” he says, “as it helps you, so you say?”

“It helps me to get beyond the depressed, down and discouraged, darkness that comes and often clouds, closing in on me and shutting me out.”

“I agree,” he adds. “Giving is good!”

“But there’s more too,” I must tell you. “I think it is actually good to sometimes have the darkness, to be depressed, down and discouraged.”

“I am not following you,” he replies sharply. “Depression is never good.”

“Think about nature, the seasons and changes in the weather,” I suggest.

“If it does not rain then, aside the effect on nature’s growth and bounty, want the sun and its light and warmth be less noticed, appreciated, enjoyed?”

“And nature is a lesson too,” he begins, “but I get it: *with the sunshine there’s got to be a little rain sometime*,” he muses with some semblance of the melody, followed by a smirk.

“Right, yes, and nature serves a lesson, a reminder of why sorrow, despair or any other description of darkness must not only be accepted but it must be embraced too.”

“Embrace bad times, the darkness and doom, is self-masochism waiting to happen,” he says confidently, convinced that *bad time is bad news*.

But think about you all, that nature and our nature run somewhat in sync; for on those rainy or dreary days, are we not more down, discouraged? And conversely, the beautiful, sunny days that make us feel alive and well.

“Sure, there are exceptions or exclusions,” I tell him, “but no one can honestly deny that darkness is a fact of living our life on earth.”

*A day wasted on others is not wasted on one's self.*

- Charles Dickens, A Tale of Two Cities

*There is prodigious strength in sorrow and despair.*

- Charles Dickens, A Tale of Two Cities

*Not knowing how he lost himself, or how he recovered himself, he may never feel certain of not losing himself again.*

- Charles Dickens, A Tale of Two Cities

We each and all know, in time and experience, that darkness comes upon ever one, even Christ, *a man of sorrow, familiar with suffering.*

*A wonderful fact to reflect upon, that every human creature is constituted to be that profound secret and mystery to every other.*

- Charles Dickens, A Tale of Two Cities

“Alright, okay, your point taken; darkness comes upon everyone, some more often than others, but still, to ‘embrace bad

times’? What the Hell for?”

“I like your style—right to *meat of it*,” I tell him, embracing his aversions on scale with darkness as not something that we necessarily want but nevertheless must accept and, “Yes, embrace.,” need I say it again.

“I still don’t get it,” he says with implied impudence, a tone of disregard, disbelief. “I’ve been depressed,” he confesses, ‘and it was pure Hell!”

“And did you learn anything about yourself, the matter or for that matter, what matters?”

“I learned what I feel now; that I despise the darkness and every d-word that spawns from it. Again, it was Hell!”

“Agreed,” I say, “it is Hell but then, if we don’t know about Hell how can

*Nothing that we do, is done in vain. I believe, with all my soul, that we shall see triumph.*

- Charles Dickens, A Tale of Two Cities

we ever begin to appreciate and attain Heaven?”

“Your nuts, you know.”

“Okay, I’m crazy, but this I know: you can cannot begin to

appreciate love unless you suffer the pains of rejection and indifference, and you cannot truly respect truth unless you’ve suffered in lies—taken and given.”

*The cloud of caring for nothing, which overshadowed him with such a fatal darkness, was very rarely pierced by the light within him.*

- Charles Dickens, A Tale of Two Cities

“Okay, so to appreciate light, one must endure the darkness, right?”

“And more even,” I reply.

“There’s more?”

“Yes, you have to keep love, have love, and receive it too—not matter the rejection, the indifference or indignation.”

“As a sort of sacrifice, I suppose.”

But imagine if love lost. Consider the conditions and consequences where everything and everybody are indifferent or indignant. Think about the earth, troubled as it is, without love.”

“That I care for no one or body and then no one or no body cares for me,” he says, as a tale of two cities, churches.

*I care for no man on earth, and no man on earth cares for me.*

- Charles Dickens, A Tale of Two Cities

or characters. “That would be Hell,’ he says, *adding one more log to the fire.*

“It sure as Hell would,” I affirm, *warming my hands by his fire.*

I take the darkness, the despair and all that it brinks in the d-word, if I can also warm in the light and see the earth not as it is necessarily, but as it will be made anew in God’s glory. And as for Laodicea, may I not lie in the margin or tucked away in some convenient corner, but instead, love without ceasing. For what better way is there to live but to live for love, by faith, in worship and with gratitude.

*He knew enough of the world to know that there is nothing in it better than the faithful service of the heart.*

- Charles Dickens, A Tale of Two Cities

“In the human spirit’, there is an inherent need to be free,” the minister preached.

But what is “free”, I consider, and what is the price or cost to get it, keep it,

*Revolution is not something fixed in ideology, nor is it something fashioned to a particular decade. It is a perpetual process embedded in the human spirit.*

- Abbie Hoffman

protect, and defend it? Sometimes *free* is too much a price but then again, sometimes it is undervalued, unappreciated, as folks choose to forfeit *free* for presumably safety, security, and

such.

Looking back in time without a clear concept never mind conclusion, I consider that *free* costs much for the slave, less for the servant, little for the sojourner and perhaps nothing for social and financial elite, supreme.

*Life calls the tune, we dance.*

- John Galsworthy

*Free* is less an idea, more a practice, for those with power of one sort or another. An armed

authority is practically *free* to use force “when necessary” to defend or destroy. Professional politicians are apparently *free* to break to lie, cheat and possibly steal, depending on the circumstances that once committed—as potentially a crime—is largely concealed from the public, the citizenry. *How often are public*

*No politician should ever let himself be photographed in a bathing suit.*

- Adolf Hitler

*officials called-out or, in the convulsion of proclaimed justice, receive a free pass to avoid jail—or even charges for that matter!*

*Free* is relative, I suppose; the slave without it and the supreme with too much, but either way, when *free* is the excuse to lie, cheat or steal, then it is the abuse of *power* and consequently the cause for so many wrongs and

*“Oh, don't cry, I'm so sorry I cheated so much, but that's the way things are.”*

- Vladimir Nabokov, *Lolita*

wrongdoing. *Is it true that he lied,* I think, attempting to *pill back the first layer of the opinion* amid the tears? It may be is a crying shame

to you but to *the powers at be* it is conspiracy theory or, a smaller scale, hearsay.

"In the human spirit, is an inherent sense of right," the preacher continues, "though we are *born into corruption* and are apt to do wrong—and even like it," rings his voice in ever heightening volume.

*Sometimes it's best to do what feels safe, and sometimes it's better to do what you know is right, even though the cost may be high.*

- Deborah Wiles, *Revolution*

But we really know this; that we sin and love to sin and love sin so much that we keep doing it, especially if no one knows, *comes down on us* or *blows the whistle*. We generally understand that the abuse of power, corruption and all related *carrying-on* is not limited to *those folks* or *them* or anyone besides self.

*The truth is that you always know the right thing to do. The hard part is doing it."*

- Venugopal Acharya

"You know this," echoes my words, preaching and pointing, "and you know the consequences too."

*Is free like right; another idea or concept short of reality*, I wonder. What is *right*, or the *right thing to do*, and why is *right* always right?

"There is *the narrow road* that leads to life and *the wide road* that leads to death," he continues, though my attention less so, skipping like a flat rock across a pond or more like pockets of scum in idle water.

"Don't be foolish about a war for souls, and many will enter *the wide gate*—and have—we are told," he warns, his eyes shifting from The Book to *those folks*, *them*, and me. "You must gird on the armor: the belt of truth, the helmet, shield and sword," referring to Saint Paul's association of the clad soldier to a Christian, "and *fight the good fight*," outfitted with all the spiritual accoutrements.

*Knowing to do the right thing, but playing stupid to oblige to it, is still lying.*

- Anthony Liccione

Can you always be right or do *right* and be *free* at the same time? When does *free* block us from doing right, living right, and even being right?

"You shall know the truth and the truth will set you free," I think I hear him recite, another well-known scripture.

"You shall know the truth and the truth will set you free," I think I hear him recite, another well-known scripture.

I suppose that if *free* and *right* are inherent, then *truth* must be too.

But in truth, neither *free* nor *right* are always inherent, that is, if *man* is born into trouble as surely as the sparks fly upward—or comes from corruption. How long does history offer to prove that humanity has a date with Hell whether eternal or on earth, his

*The enduring attraction of war is this: Even with its destruction and carnage it can give us what we long for in life. It can give us purpose, meaning, a reason for living.*

-Chris Hedges, *War is a Force that gives us Meaning*

device, I consider in my mind, and while only a relative few may lite the fire, a Hell of a lot of folks embrace its warmth, dance and worship around it, bleed for it, glory in it and mourn when it comes home as monuments,

gravesites and gravitas. Though “war is Hell” and war is said to be the result of failed policy—as opposed to a success—it remains *a necessary evil* full of deceit and destruction where, in the end, few really wins.

Do folks want to be *free*? Do they want to the liberty to make responsible decisions for themselves and for those placed in their charge? Does the human spirit pine for *free* and seek it with all their heart, mind, and soul—or do casually pass it by offering only a glib gesture or slick statement such as,

“That’s cool,”

“What is ‘cool’?”

“Whatever,” as the end to something that never began, not really.

Oh sure, *free* is very popular, considered to be preferred with a possible exception, a threat to (or of) safety and security; inherent needs that trump *free* and turn liberty *on its head* rather than firmly planted, rooted in the *blood of tyrants*. How often is *safety and security* applied or implied in the onset of yet more controls, applied or implied, by *the powers that be*?

*If you want total security, go to prison. There you're fed, clothed, given medical care and so on. The only thing lacking... is freedom.*

- Dwight D. Eisenhower

“Stay safe by \_\_\_\_\_,” might sound reasonable or rationale except when such suggestions, more demands or decrees, are full

of contradictions—not the least of which is that it is applied or implied as authentic in the sense that it yields safety and security. But in truth, such

demands or decrees may reduce safety and security though the effect is excused as an externality or is completely edited out of *the voice of powers*.

"Just do as your told," *the powers* demand, decree, to infer promising, positive, endpoint.

*But do they really have our back*, I consider, or is more about control, *free tossed out with the baby water*, while we cry and kick—not for a *blanket of freedom* but for the *tit of tyranny*, *milk* rather than *meat*? Is it right to obey or comply even if not true, lies masked by all that the media can muster?

*Security and safety were the reward of dullness.*

- Hanif Kureishi

"We must place our hope, our help, in the Lord," the preacher charges as I listen once more.

Is hope and help related to safety and security? *Hope offers a sense of security*, I think, some sense of safety, *free from harm or risk*. *But if I am hurt then am also harmed?*

"The world is dangerous, full of hate," he continues with fixed stare. "You must find your hope and help from Heaven—not in the fading world with all the lies, bad and bondage."

If safety and security is the aim, a claim at present, then how the Hell is it possible when the world is going to Hell?

*Where does your security lie? Is God your refuge, your hiding place, your stronghold, your shepherd, your counselor, your friend, your redeemer, your savior, your guide? If He is, you don't need to search any further for security.*

- Elisabeth Elliot

"The world cannot produce peace and prosperity," he follows, "when wars and rumors of wars prevail, and *the love of money is the root of all evil*."

*Is peace and prosperity the same as safety and security*, I follow, my thoughts in and out of his oration?

"What the world offers is contraband, counterfeit claims underwritten with deception and deceit. Don't be fooled as the virgins uninformed, unprepared and then undone," referring to the parable of *the ten virgins*. "What then to do in the truth of the lies, and the demons that drive us to forfeit *free* and thus, do anything but what is right," he asks, his stare more intent than ever. "To be *free* is to know the truth, what is right."



He must be reading my mind, or maybe my heart torn between an unearned respect for “civil” government and the unearned *free* of knowing the truth and what is right. As it seems, there are risks either way; on the one, is

*Leaving what feels secure behind and following the beckoning of our hearts doesn't always end as we expect or hope. We may even fail. But here's the payoff: it can also be amazing and wonderful and immensely satisfying.*

- Steve Goodier

that, lie as truth be told, perhaps there is at least some sincerity in the sell for safety and security; but on the other are the costs for not cowering to the fears fomented by *the powers* for more control and, from that, what might happen to me, to you and to us.

“Many will go the way of *the wide gate*, the world’s way,” the preacher rambles, returning to the *well springing forth living water*. “And few will enter *the narrow gate*, though some as martyrs as started with the saints and continued in the cleansing of our souls, suffering and sacrifice in the course of sanctification.”

*Free* is not really a free or something hear, now, for with liberties, so too responsibility in and respect for the truth, what is right.

“Consider justice on world terms,” he poses. “What is justice to them but their interests, their power and prosperity,” he charges. “In its roots, what is it but ‘just-us’,” he quips with a laugh or two to the otherwise disrupt the solemn spirit that like a coming storm, looms—though more than low pressure and the portending of some meteorological monstrosity—but *that great and dreadful day* with all the groaning and labor before it.

*You can cut & run but you cannot escape*, so it seems, either way.

*We all flee in hope of finding some ground of security.*

- M.T. Anderson, *The Kingdom on the Waves*

“Men will try to evade the calamity, escape the crisis, seeking out caves and such,” the preacher prognosticates, “but it will not prove positive just as safety and security are merely words, a myth.”

So much for the bunkers and gated communities, the secret shelters and bugging-out, the stockpiles and all the supplements put in place primarily in and for by the supreme—who, I consider, *think that they’re above God*.

If *The Pilgrim's progress* took courage and vision, then the current and continuing regress, not as any often applied "reset", is ever sliding toward an individual and collective cowardness and cloudiness—made so by fears that undo love every step of losing the way.

*You all know," said the Guide, "that security is mortals' greatest enemy.*

*- C.S. Lewis, The Pilgrim's Regress*

"How shameful that folks given so much—and I don't materially—can find so many ways to waste it," he laments with downcast eyes, a shadowed face. "Can we wake up," he asks, "and I don't mean 'woke up' as yet another peddling of a word or phrase, but what I mean is to fears that cloud our minds and send us cowering as children?"

*When I was a child, I thought as a child...but as I became an adult, I put away childish things, seeking truth about life, our history, of good and bad, right and wrong, deception and direction, masters and slaves, faces and defacing, fearing and free. I learned and am learning that what you hear is not be trusted and what you read only half the time, and still to come in the human spirit is to embrace the truth, right and free.*

*The whole aim of practical politics is to keep the populace alarmed (and hence clamorous to be led to safety) by menacing it with an endless series of hobgoblins, all of them imaginary.*

...

*The urge to save humanity is almost always a false face to rule it.*

*- H. L. Mencken*

"I 'Felt him quite' scattered, in solitude, and sad about it.

Even in our town, on Stebbins Street, the lonely and alone arrive; not necessarily neighbors, or those who live amongst us, but the itinerant and dispossessed, from the once called vagabond to the present that still *fall on hard times*—which means that life and living that that fall or fell hard with nothing to

*People felt themselves watching him even before they knew that there was anything different about him.*

- Carson McCullers, *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*

buffet the blows.

On a personal note, I meet them from time to time and sometimes talk with one or more as I go, whether where they lay or if a need or want, ask me for money more than anything else.

"Hey," the fellow shouts as he shuffles toward me, his clip in concert with a hissing sound of tattered shoes. "Damn good to see a real person," he says, much closer now despite his occasional drift and misdirection. "This shelter-in-

*Let me tell you this: if you meet a loner, no matter what they tell you, it's not because they enjoy solitude. It's because they have tried to blend into the world before, and people continue to disappoint them.*

- Jodi Picoult, *My Sister's Keeper*

place is a crock of...but you seem like a *fresh canvass*—you know, the king that has no preconceptions of me and can see me for what I say and not something of the past that some sob probably said, accusing me of

something I didn't do or blaming me for something he did or something like that,"

"Fresh canvas," I finally make utter.

"Yeah, a stranger," he says, his eyes cutting sharply, hands and torso as though dancing. "Why, you could be Jesus for all I know, and could be standing on water or something. I could ask you to make a lake and you'd do it right over there," he says, turning toward a plot of dirt in front of the local library.

"Okay," is all I can say, nodding as though he might notice or really care what I think, say; his words way ahead of anything I catch let alone complete.

“Man, I miss folks,” he blurts out, “and I threw away my smart phone, threw it against a wall like that over there. I threw it hard and it smashed all asunder—done with the damned thing!”

He agrees with me, my attention just because that I “miss folks” too. Sure, he acts a kind of weird, is dirty and wreaks of alcohol, sweat or some blend of the two, but his heart seems to be in this, really an outcry without apparent hesitation that so many should make in the time of *social distancing*, *shelter-in-place* and other measures that *tear at the social fabric more than fraying its edges*.

“Are you from here,” I ask, at least suggesting an interest in this fellow that, like me but more willing, is seeking society if just one dude that is otherwise doing nothing but looking pointedly at a smart phone, a scientific creation and surrogate that connects us to the earth’s ethos, but still alone and likely lonely.

“I been living here since 2007, he declares, “, but never been married,” he adds *out of the blue or what his brain triggers*. “I guess I didn’t have it—what ever it is-. She, her folks are friends, said,

“Why do you want to marry him,” he murmurs, mimicking one or another of the never-to-be relations by marriage.

““You don’t deserve me’, she says, passing-on their opinion, no doubt.”

“I guess I don’t’t...,” he whispers, ‘But that’s okay—I’m probably better off for it.”

The lonely man continues, rekindling old courtships in mind and heart that, as with the first, *went south* or otherwise left him the single soul that he is to this day. And in his history, scattered as he shifts and shucks in body and mind, is my own history; married yes, but broken hearted more than once—as *the first cut is always the deepest* while such winsome wounds of the wedded or

*All over the world, people are being quarantined and are being compelled to practice social distancing. We are trying desperately to remain sane in a world that seems bordering on the insane. So, the time is just right for us to ponder, reflect, meditate, and discover the world within our own minds.*

- Avijeet Das

*2020... Many households went from, “It’s great to get this time together!” to, “Why are you chewing so loud?”*

- Steve Maraboli

*Same Old Same Old, so it was*

waiting never heal if just the dull pain of the scar, insensitive as it be to the touch, but a reminder as long as life holds.

"This is crazy times," he continues whether referring to marriage or more generally, *the current times* of isolation and the loss of individual liberties second only to 911 in the several decades.

*Do you have to be crazy to identify with his comment*, or is this just another day in the neighborhood; for as it is and has become, Stebbins Street and so many like it, are witnessing not the decline of the economy—once more—but the dismantling of private business, public life and personal ambitions driven by the notion that, *tomorrow is another day*.

"It's like that movie with Bill Murray," he continues, adding to his claim on "crazy times". Hesitating, perhaps looking for help, he continues, "You know the one about the groundhog—everyday, much the same."

*"Once again, the eyes of the nation have turned here to this... tiny village in [eastern Alabama].*

*There is no way this winter is ever going to end, as long as this groundhog keeps seeing his shadow.*

*I don't see any other way out. He's got to be stopped. And I have to stop him."*

- Phil Connors, "Groundhog Day"

"Yeah, that one-," is all I get to say before he cuts-in again,

"Every day is every day, a repeat of the day before and after; masking all made-up and this #@% smart phone supposedly to keep me connected—it's all bull and we're nothing more than sheep without a trusted shepherd, doomed to the cliff with the Lemmings, one after another to

the perilous purgatory without a thought or thinking, why?

*The most important kind of freedom is to be what you really are. You trade in your reality for a role. You trade in your sense for an act. You give up your ability to feel, and in exchange, put on a mask.*

- Jim Morrison

*Wow, how insightful*, I think, the lonely man's words rich as right.

"Do you wear a stupid mask, man," he shouts, his hand covering his mouth. "I don't..., the damned things are suffocating,

stifling in every way—not the least of which is good ole Oxygen."

"Do you work," I ask as one of the *go-to* questions between folks.

"Yeah, I got a job, working at that bar over there; that is, until they closed us down: closed for 80 days, opened for 20 and now closed for 80 and beyond," he explains, "because we don't have a food license."

"I didn't know-,"

"Yeah, but those guys over there," he charges, pointing to another establishment, "have a food license—which is why they're still open."

"I see-,"

"All they sell is a bag of chips for \$2, peanuts, or a few things from the air-fryer, but that's about all," he continues, obviously as an unfair action.

But then, what is *fair* mean, really? To me it's just another word, like the word *justice*, that is open for much interpretation and little of *right* in consequence. One laid-off employee says,

"it ain't fair for them to shut-down the plant," but another, an investor may react completely different, suggesting it is well overdue.

One private owner may argue,

"Why do they force me to close my store when the *big box stores* are open," only to left with ever-changing decrees or orders that doing nothing to define the problem but much to protract it.

Other company who see contradiction after contradiction, wonders if not voices,

"They tell us we should do *distancing* but then they allow them to violate it, coming and going. Why?"

"I saw that," another says, "and half those masks looked more like bandits, beside agitators and anarchists," another agrees, adding more details.

"Looks like another, 'Don't do as we do—but do what we say' dilemma."

*Politics: the art of using euphemisms, lies, emotionalism and fearmongering to dupe average people into accepting--or even demanding--their own enslavement.*

- Larken Rose

*When plunder becomes a way of life for a group of men in a society, over the course of time they create for themselves a legal system that authorizes it and a moral code that glorifies it.*

- Frédéric Bastiat

*Same Old Same Old, so it was*

"I had a sister," the fellow tells me, obviously reflecting more on his family. "She died of cancer, as did my mother some years back."

He continues sharing, telling me of how his mother moved them, he and his sister, cross country "after the divorce".

"She got married a couple of more times, but none seemed to *work out*," he explains. "My sister was smart and so am I," he says, followed by his academic achievements in physics in those *formative years*, of how he was the only student from his school awarded a summer internship at a state university for such advanced students.

"Did you continue, college?"

"No, I don't need college to learn physics," he droned, dismissive of either his potential or the possibilities that come from college.

"What did you do?"

*Life is like a chess game; you have to think three moves ahead.*

*Sadly, many people jump ahead and then wish that they could make six moves backwards.*

- Craig D. Lounsborough

*Life is like a box of chocolates; you never know what you're gonna get.*

- Forrest Gump

"I joined the Navy," he said, followed with his rank, rate and other related information such as this ship—a flag ship for the 7<sup>th</sup> Fleet—sharing as well a summary of "war stories" as a top-deck fireman for an amphibious, aviation unit.

"We live here most of time," returning to his pre-Navy days, "but one time my mom dragged

me all the way to Bangor, Maine, to go some seminary—but that didn't last long," he says, "God rest her soul."

The older I get, the more I realize how important a mother or mother-like person is in the life of a man, once boy. Often I match a man's misogyny—his deep fear of women—to a reckless and indifferent mother, scorned by this or that love that generally left her, leaving behind a *bitter pill* that she then *administers* to the boy daily. Some of the men are full of vitriol, admitting by their every criticism that she is still the master and they the slave, while others

magically, mysteriously, see her for what she was and was not, accepting that, while it happened, it is not nor was not their fault, their doing.

"She tried, I suppose, but she was *not right*," he tells me, closing the last chapter of his book on her, his late mother, in my company.

Nothing much more came from him after speaking at last of his mother, for what began as a deluge is a trickle, a slow and solemn drip still sad but beyond the present isolation and the uncertainty of his job, the future.

"I guess she tried, but sometimes I wonder, 'for who and for what'," he utters just before looking at his watch.

*Maturity, one discovers, has everything to do with the acceptance of not knowing.*

- Mark Z. Danielewski, *House of Leaves*

"What's wrong," I ask

"Got to get to work," he says, turning his body in that direction.

"I'm going that way and will walk with you," I offer.

"What's your name," he asks responding to my offer.

"It's Howard, and you?"



“They have ‘No self at all,’” she says to me. “There minds have convinced them that their bodies matter too little and too much.”

She is speaking of women who starve themselves, self-conscience beyond

*Implicit in human contact is the exposure of the self, the interaction of the selves. The self I'd had, once upon a time, was too much. Now there was no self at all.*

- Marya Hornbacher, *Wasted: A Memoir of Anorexia and Bulimia*

my comprehension; that they are too large, too wide, or too little and too much. Sure, I am aware of this illness but to speak freely and in passing, the other extreme seems much more prevalent these days. *Lots of folks have weight*

*problems but most seem more on the heavy side*, is about all can think without the least conscience or practically confidence on this problem of consumption, convenience, or other causes. Admittedly stupid on such, let me consider what she has to say to me, to us and you, not just about this particular health problem but in the larger canvas, a society consumed by consumption, largely anesthetized from (or with) what at least one has coined Affluenza.

“And while this is a real health concern,” she continues, “it is only one of an many related problems that riddle our society.”

Taking notes as best as my slow hand will do, please follow.

*Are these problems of health and diet concentrated among our working*

*class, many now under class, or do they occur among others too?*

*The members of the functional and socially mobilized under class must, in some very real way, be seen as the architects of their own fate. If not, they could be, however marginally, on the conscience of the comfortable. There could be a disturbing feeling, however fleeting, of unease, even guilt.*

- John Kenneth Galbraith, *The Culture of Contentment*

Of the group of a dozen or more, no one responds.

*It hardly seems possible that so many of us deal, not with Anorexia or Bulimia, but with undernutrition just the same, but the data and more dear-to-home, what we see about and among us,*

*is a lot of junk food—unlike generations past—and far less actual labor atop that. Too many calories and too much convenience is a bad combination—no matter your class, creed, or any other such category.*

*Fried food is a favorite of the south but, as we know, can be overdone—in more ways than one!*

She continues, more on the side of overdoing than underdoing, but either way, too little or too much as excessive, and exceedingly dangerous in yet more ways than one.

“You understand that travails of obesity,” she charges, from as many folks as you know that, let’s say, ‘carry more a burden than they should’, and end-up dying for more so from *their own devices*, choices.”

Still, I continue with my *notes*.

*And it’s not just our calorie intake either. We amused ourselves to death, apparently watching countless of hours*

*of videos and films—often fully aware or attentive but nevertheless stimulated by the sheer presence of company, voices, and a sense of connectiveness.*

“The media has replaced our families, friends and-,” says one to the others.

“That’s right,” she promptly replies, “Sadly, our best apparent friend is the *boob tube*. And the younger generations are not blameless just because they don’t watch television,” she goes on to say. How many hours do you accrue before that device,” she says—though the few young folks within listening distance are ironically preoccupied, appearing as *zombies* as she calls them out, down.

“What’s she talking about,” one younger says to another but for a moment, the other stupefied.

They have *no self at all*, this group and those of us like them. Their lives are not their own, but figuratively have been abducted, their souls absconded. You might say,

“That’s stupid, that “their lives are not...abducted...absconded.”

*America is the first culture in jeopardy of amusing itself to death.*

- John Piper, *Don't Waste Your Life*

*I feel about my phone the way horror-movie ventriloquists feel about their dummies: It's smarter than me, better than me, and I will kill anyone who comes between us.*

- Colson Whitehead, *The Noble Hustle: Poker, Beef Jerky, and Death*

But look closely and watch with a keen and sharp eye. Notice what most do when in a crowd or among other folks: the oldest will socialize because they understand the value of socialization; while many of the rest armed with a

*Smartphone is definitely smarter than us to be able to keep us addicted to it.*

- Munia Khan

*smartphone* are anti-social, their attention glued to the flatscreen with all the apps and accessories, are hypnotized, mesmerized, and bastardized by the blame things.

“Who’s your daddy,” so goes a saying, somewhat a supposition, a video game and still a song, rendering at least a smile as arguably a satire on the staggering statistic of single-parent families and fatherless children.

“But what’s that got to with this, a pop-phrase to a personal, healthy diet, exercise and simply said,

“Taking care of yourself.”

I suppose it’s just a thought, an aside to her purpose and point: that generation past, with drastically fewer options both in diet and exercise, *had it right* or at least better than today. For the phrase today of,

“Who’s your daddy,” the *generations* that I refer to, a good part of last century, would be more like to say,

“Where is your daddy,” given far more possibility not only to knowing who

you father is but also that he could/can be a positive, responsible source that just might lead or influence his family to, well, *live right*—or at least show some self-respect, *don’t let yourself go*. But more *notes* from one who seems to know.

*Confronting the endless desire that is at the heart of our individual overconsumption and global excess is the only intervention that can ward off the daily call to consume that bombards us on all sides.*

- Bell Hooks, *Where We Stand: Class Matters*

*Children left to themselves will indulge to be sure and so often without much parental oversight will, to be blunt, eat a lot of crap that, when taken on whole becomes a lifestyle from early age. Combine an unhealthy overdose of crap with the sedentary habit of endless computer time, video games, and other*

*non-physical occupations and behold, obesity as much more the norm than exception—let alone the other negative outcomes.*

Folks have a hard time accepting this as, for one, it may indict them in some way. Sure, we see it and perhaps occasionally recognize the problem(s), but then to *take it home* is or can be a *bitter pill to swallow*. Ah, but more *notes*.

*Sedentary people are apt to have sluggish minds. A sluggish mind is apt to be reflected in flabbiness of body and in a dullness of expression that invites no interest and gets none.*

- Rose Kennedy

*But it does not stop there as the apple falls close to the tree; ; your lifestyle reflects on them, that next generation, so as you charge headlong into the realm of over-consumption—in every way—so then do they follow.*

She warns or at least cautions the group on over-consumption, citing that our nation, though 5 percent of the world's population, consumes 25 percent of the world's resources.

"I suppose we are number one," someone says wryly.

But this is no laughing matter, of course, but in the contemporary is a concern in many places and for many reasons within and among classes; it is what some see in conjunctions with societal decline in all ways, spiritual-moral, educational-mental, and practical-pointed. And still, I take *notes*.

*For those especially in education, I write, the environment for effective learning is stymied with students that have poor attentions spans—not to mention record levels of learning disabilities seemingly dealt with by drugs while the lifestyle and routines are at the core of the deficiencies, the distractions.*

*I can't blame modern technology for my predilection for distraction, not after all the hours I've spent watching lost balloons disappear into the clouds. I did it before the Internet, and I'll do it after the apocalypse, assuming we still have helium and weak-gripped children.*

- Colson Whitehead

She continues, "The Internet is a great tool but a poor master; it greatly enhances performance if use right but otherwise, it can and does distract many with endless layers of *click bait*, amusement and entertainment that quite frankly is a waste of time."

*This “affluenza” in everywhere, and it is next to impossible to escape or evade, I write. From birth to death, day to night, we are bombarded with the illusions for happiness on one side and phobias on the other.*

*As with our colleges, so with a hundred ‘modern improvements;’ there is an illusion about them; there is not always a positive advance. The devil goes on exacting compound interest to the last for his early share and numerous succeeding investments in them. Our inventions are wont to be pretty toys, which distract our attention from serious things. They are but improved means to an unimproved end, an end which it was already but too easy to arrive at...*

*- Henry David Thoreau, A Week on the Concord, and Merrimack Rivers / Walden / The Maine Woods / Cape Cod*

“If you don’t buy this, get this have this, use this, eat this, drink this or embrace this, then you are a nobody, a has-been, secondary at best, relegated to a sub-class either to be pitied or maligned—or both,” are *the message* more or less.

Are you lonely or unwanted? Buy some love, company, companionship, or conversation.

Are you ugly or unattractive? Buy some beauty, charm, or magnetism.

Are you afraid or fearful?

Then embrace us and let us protect you from your fears that, incidentally, are more often your imagination than reality.

*We have no self at all, so goes my notes, when fear becomes the driver for/of our lives. Remember that “fear not” is so often the message from our Creator, this instruction of love in sharp contrast to “the world”.*

“What does *fear* have to do with ‘affluenza’,” one might ask, the answer of which lies in our nature, the struggle to survive but more to succeed and be satisfied. But then the question,

“What is survival, success and satisfaction,” is the base question for contagion sometimes called affluenza. Water, shelter, and food are “the basic survival needs”, but then with affluenza, *survival* is much more, a new base for “the basics”. Beyond mere *survival* is *satisfaction* and *success*, both of which are often align with capitalism although I prefer to think as *materialism* and *consumerism*.

“Where would be without these forms of worship,” is a analogues question, though raising the matter to more a mission, a ministry and even more, transcending any transcendence from all that this world applies to *survival, satisfaction, and success.*

*I know that I have yet to cover all that this subject entails, I write as she speaks, but this prosperity is finally not making us prosperous, satisfied or successful, but only wanting and driving for more—and then more.*

“Where does it all end, this ‘ism by any of the names offered, and lends to ‘no self at all’, and identity stolen as well as a soul sold in the pursuit of satisfaction, success?”

I suppose the answer is in the present state, all the distractions, deceit and disparity that is seen here on Stebbins Street as a sampling of society. Perhaps the “end” is more a process, the decline of all things important and division of wealth among fewer folks, the so-called “elite”. As with several generations back, this “end” may be *a blessing in disguise*, awakening some to the realization that *moth and rust* does

*indeed destroy the things of the earth—* along with powers who impose their will with the *turn of a lever or the push of a*

*button, the levy giving way, the drowning in debt, this ‘ism given out.* Yes, all these “things” that we struggle to possess do ironically possess us just as sure as distractions distract and deceptions deceive, *no self at all.*

*The world says: "You have needs -- satisfy them. You have as much right as the rich and the mighty. Don't hesitate to satisfy your needs; indeed, expand your needs and demand more." This is the worldly doctrine of today. And they believe that this is freedom. The result for the rich is isolation and suicide, for the poor, envy, and murder.*

- Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*

*O, what blindness does great prosperity cast upon our minds!*

- Seneca, *On the Shortness of Life*

“Curves of form,” is one way to express it, the shape of her sex, as this catchword catches my attention.

Looking back to my teen years, a song that comes to mind is the

*In the curves of her form I found the  
birth of Man, the creation of the world,  
and the origin of all life.*

- Roman Payne

Commodores, “Brick House,” though it hardly fits with his words, the differences of beauty and busty, perhaps eloquence to all things elicit, erotic or at least

lusty.

“We watch and want for ‘curves of form’,” he continues, “waiting for it and willful to get it, what we think that we want.”

He’s right, I realize once more, that lust is powerful and power; it drives us to do the unthinkable or more apt, the unspeakable. It’s one thing to look upon a woman as beautiful but another as sexy—yet this is what we, and I, will do no matter how old we are or aim to be.

“Did you hear the latest,” some older folk asks me, and before I can utter a reply says, “Three cheerleaders are pregnant,” referring to the local high school, of course, and further, some “passionate panthers”.

*My research continues to amaze and  
baffle me. As human beings, we are  
geniuses. What we didn’t get from the  
home, we find ways of getting  
elsewhere. It’s evident, then, when one  
looks at the stats, we don’t have a  
teenage pregnancy problem and we  
don’t have a street gang problem. I will  
even suggest that we don’t have a drug  
and alcohol problem, nor do we have a  
crime problem rather, these are only the  
symptoms that we are experiencing,  
and the real problem is broken homes  
that result in broken lives.*

- Drexel Deal, *The Fight of My Life is Wrapped Up  
in My Father*

But this is common, teen sex and sometimes pregnancy, and as young folks are more inculcated with sex in every way inconceivable, so too the trend.

But it is more than the media—as influential as it is—behind out-of-wedlock sex, pregnancy, single-parenting, abortion, contraception and all things pertain to *curves of form* that point to passion gone to Pergamon?

“The ‘curves of form’ are one thing, but the trends therein are another,” the fellow remarks, sounding something of a soothsayer, wisdom in/on the matter. “It begins with family,” he follows, “as a foundation of any good society and any good in general.”

It is common on Stebbins, the community, to find all the fractures and fissures of the family brokenness; financial and economic, health and wellbeing, spiritual and the sacred. Stebbins is *covered-up* with social problems—as with our society in general—so this latest rumor or gossip does not come as a shock any more than news of another plant closure or any recurrence. Whatever this news, it *hits home* as another run against our hope but for a gnawing and grim helplessness and,

“I know very dearly of these ‘curves’ among ‘trends’ and still the family, once a foundation,” I finally speak up.

“I know you do,” he says, “so you have all the potential and prospect to understand *where I am coming from*—as losing a thing often makes the matter that more precious, priceless even.”

To stop and think again, the turn of the story toward “trends” of this kind, and seemingly away from “curves” of her kind may seem too much *off subject*, but I believe that while “the origin life all life” is but from her, whoever the mother, it is still more, with her to support the family, families, as much her life depends and is dependent.

“Women are wonderful, a great partner for men and much more, the family,” he continues. “What would the world do without them, those ‘curves of her form’ as a foundation for the foundation’s family?”

He is right of course, the mystic and magic of mom’s and the like who so influence and inspire us to be better men.

*A family can be the bane of one's existence. A family can also be most of the meaning of one's existence. I don't know whether my family is bane or meaning, but they have surely gone away and left a large hole in my heart.*

- Keri Hulme, *The Bone People*

*See, I think there are roads that lead us to each other. But in my family, there were no roads - just underground tunnels. I think we all got lost in those underground tunnels. No, not lost. We just lived there.*

- Benjamin Alire Sáenz, *Last Night I Sang to the Monster*



I know men who describe their mothers as irresponsible and uncaring, and of those who seemingly had good ones; for the former, their sentiments are deep with resentment to the present, the future, while for the later much less

so. One man will say,

*A wise mother knows: It is her state of consciousness that matters. Her gentleness and clarity command respect. Her love creates security.*

- Vimala McClure, *The Tao of Motherhood*

"She was sorry," peppered with expletives deserving because his has earned the right, endured the conditions, consequences.

Another may will say to the opposite, "she is a saint," whether alive or passed, here or somewhere else. The bitterness of the first is foremost gotten what could be *the better of them*; that had they found way to *get beyond* this woman—as difficult as that may be—their lives would be better, beyond her. *And some seem do that*, I think, *whatever the details of their lives*, while others hold on to the hate thinking that it empowers them, failing to realize that it, she, or her spirit, is still ruining their lives.

But to be fair or at least considerate, those bad mothers may themselves be the product of yet more of the same as such is sometimes passed down, engrained in the girl, woven into the woman. This *generational curse* is proven to be breakable, to be overcome, but I am not sure how this is done given that

*So many lives are in bitterness today not just because of how their pasts were abused, but how they think they were innocent.*

- Ernest Agyemang Yeboah, *Religion, Philosophy and Life*

my mother was not bad, irresponsible, or uncaring. Still, among those men who describe bad mothers, this hate is manifested as to alleviate or acquit him from any wrongdoing, even wickedness, his bad mother

as the alibi or excuse for all his wrong whatever it is or to whom every it hurts. *In some ways, they seem to never have grown-up or matured as men*, I believe, reflecting on their lives as seen, heard, observed in some degree.

"But you are not trained to know this, however 'observed'," says a voice inside me. And to the statement, whether in my head, thought or expressed by another, is such acknowledged though I inclined to believe what I think I see

among some men who say they have bad mothers. Really, the point of that observed, drawing on my past and knowing men on both sides—and all places in between—is to underscore and emphasize the vital station of mothers in society. As families are a foundation for a society, so then are mothers in and at this *vital station*.

*Motherhood is near to divinity. It is the highest, holiest service to be assumed by mankind.*

- Howard W. Hunter

“But mothers or mothering are sorely lacking these days,” that voice of wisdom proclaims with equal if not greater extension than my own observed behavior from bad mothering. “It was bad enough, what men have done are doing,” he follows, apparently aware of the fallout, falling or failing of fatherhood, “But women have forfeited their part too, their ‘curves of form’ as no substitute for the stalwart and stubborn station of motherhood.”

Naturally all women are not moms, some to deal with any or all cause for never experiencing this station in life, but even so—and in agreement with the wisdom of this old fellow—is that

*Being a mother is an attitude, not a biological relation.*

- Robert A. Heinlein, *Have Space Suit—Will Travel*

womanhood can and should show their mothering no matter whether natural birthing, offspring, just one child or a dozen. Ideally, and in *the best interest of the children*, both parents parent, giving as parents should to the care and concerns of their children and beyond, but in the present reality is not only the absence of men, fathers, but mothers, good mothering.

“I never thought I’d see *the day* when mother’s abandon their children,” another says, looking down and nodding.

But mothers or mothering, as with fathers and fatherhood, have for decades been *under attack* on all front. For one, the media who seldom depicts fathers in good standing—or *good for anything*—with her then *left to do*

*She was free in her wildness. She was a wanderer, a drop of free water. She belonged to no man and to no city”.*

- Roman Payne, *The Wanderess*

everything; stressed, exhausted, enervated, while the “father” and husband reduced to some addle school boy or alternatively, in absentee.

As a second power against parenting, feminism as a force that while touting equality is in truth, as with any collective, preaching for privilege whatever the costs. I think or believe this *in that naturally it is impossible for*

*A feminist is anyone who recognizes the equality and full humanity of women and men.*

— Gloria Steinem

*the two genders to be equal in every way—it is simply not possible, even with enhancements, surgery, and the like. Moreover, collective politics is never about*

*quality—though it sounds good—but is always about privilege—which means that to gain is that other loss in the chessboard of class warfare.*

A third (power) with connection to the first two is *the state* or politics. As I once again express my opinion, supported by several much more qualified on social-political matters, *it is the state's interest to use its power to gain power, both the means and the end, and by reducing social power (i.e. the conventional family), the state is apt to gain. In this plot, more a program, is to*

*Through no-fault divorce, one parent can now declare unilaterally that the marriage has "broken down" and invite the state in to take control and remove the other parent without the parent having committed any legal transgression.*

*What the government then offers to the parent who invites it in is the promise that her invitation will be rewarded; the state will establish her as a puppet government, a satrap of the state within the family. This requires that not the faithless, but the faithful parent be punished.*

— Stephen Baskerville

*dismantle the family (social strength) by enhancing divorce and thereby weakening marriage as another, critical institution.*

Given these arrayed forces-powers, it was only a matter of time before the fractures and fissures spread to the mothers, motherhood, and the largely natural *curves of form* turned increasingly away from the vital, invaluable formation and foundation of society, the family.

Though long predicted by Carle Zimmerman in *Family and*

*Civilization*, the weakening of society and breakdown of the conventional family is made manifest and what's left is what we see today occurring over much of western society save and to this story, mothers and motherhood.

"Where do we go from here," the wise fellow asks, perhaps as a lead-in to his understanding expressed.

I see on Stebbins beyond not only fewer children playing but fewer in general. As with much of our society, birthrates continue to decline—despite single-parenting families on trend to increase. Men of marrying age are *bowing out* for one reason and another, while women wait or give-up, not always but often, on the prospect of marriage, sometimes settling for a live-in arrangement or, in this faster paced lifestyle, a mere *hook-up*. The young, teens who end up pregnant have options other than marriage but perhaps for good reason keep their baby, preferably with family support. Add it all up and what it means, as to where we go or are going, is that mothers are (or motherhood is) no longer viewed or valued as preferable despite the inherent calling, the *curves of form* shifting southward from good toward bad and then to worse.

Again, and for emphasis, the sons of a bad mother have much to overcome, the strong influence and inclination to distrust the women and from that to *pass on the seeds* of the worse, woman to woman. As God called upon a man to *stand in the gap on behalf of the land*, so too is woman called to the vital and valued role as mother, motherhood. May she with all her *curves of form* fulfill that role with Godspeed.

*I am your Prince, and you will marry me," Humperdinck said. Buttercup whispered, "I am your servant and I refuse."  
"I am you Prince, and you cannot refuse."  
"I am your loyal servant and I just did."  
"Refusal means death."  
"Kill me then."*

- William Goldman, *The Princess Bride*

*A wise mother knows: It is her state of consciousness that matters. Her gentleness and clarity command respect. Her love creates security.*

- Vimala McClure, *The Tao of Motherhood*

“He ‘Lived to help,’” one of his former students tell me, fighting back the tears.

He was a good man, I know, as he touched the lives of not only his students but others too, from Stebbins to the state line, perhaps more.

*I came to realize that life lived to help others is the only one that matters and that it is my duty ... This is my highest and best use as a human.*

— Ben Stein

“He will be missed,” I answered, thought he already is by me, them and many more. But

for all the folks he helped or tried to, there are but a handful here to today. And it seems strange that one so admired and revered has so few in attendance today.

“Maybe they thought of him as alive and this is too much,” I tell myself as I understand any reservations about funerals, dealing with death, mortality or just the moment.

On a brighter note, another of the few students says to the others, “Hey remember how he would drone on with the roll, not a habit really but more to annoy us,” he says, snickering despite death.

“Yeah, that was his trademark,” whispers another within earshot, “only to add to our sense of history as humdrum, and then to say something shocking or

*Screaming at children over their grades, especially to the point of the child's tears, is child abuse, pure and simple. It's not funny and it's not good parenting. It is a crushing, scarring, disastrous experience for the child. It isn't the least bit funny.*

— Ben Stein

beyond belief with the same monotone just to see if we were paying attention.”

“Sure, beats screaming,” says another, possibly referring to another history teacher at the school.

“He is some semi-crazy dude,” the other admits, that I seem to recall as either *done too many drugs* or been scorned and scarred by something or someone terrible.

“Yeah, Mr. Intolerable, but more like ‘Insane’!”

“I thought his name was, ‘Intolerant,” with emphasis on “rant”.

“Don’t every node-off in his class,” as a cautionary tale.

“Oh yeah, he can be brutal!”

Amazing how young folks can still shed the veil of the somber, more so expected from those a few years younger, and as we use to say, “let it all hang out”—even if it draws disapproval. *Perhaps it was (is or will be) Mr. Intolerable who as they also say,*

“Brings it out of them,” to say that he invokes and elicits defiance and, who knows, maybe dissidence to speak one’s opinion or to *lay it down*—even when *the tables are turned*.

When you *shout* you don’t have to actually shout and scream; no, you can *shout* by laying down a layer or two of fear. In the bout of the students versus Mr. Intolerable, a shout is power—not to teach or instruct—but to foment fear and therein *control the crowd*.

Whereas today’s beloved teacher is known for caring genuinely about the students, Mr. Intolerable is heretofore a despot of sort, a teacher in name but a tyrant in fame—who seems to relish in his ridicule.

But to the matter at hand, the ceremony before us, and the honored, memorialized; there is something strong to be said when,

“He served his community for almost 40 years,” the minister begins, elaborating on multiple community organizations and projects he participated in and with, highlighted with county, district and even state recognition. As a teacher, educator,

“He was nominated as ‘teacher of the year’ 5 times, receiving again, recognition and accolades within and across our community and more.”

*Happiness is being grateful for what you have and having an attitude of gratitude instead of an attitude of envy.*

- Ben Stein

Again, I wonder, *why are so few folks here given his life, contribution?* And in my mind, I am asking,

“Could it be envy, jealousy, or indifference?”

*I don’t know which if any,* I think again, but it does puzzle me more than I will admit to anyone else.

“Other accomplishments include...,” the minister continues, though so few to honor...with even members of his family missing and the schools’ faculty, colleagues and other presumed to be close.

*Same Old Same Old, so it was*

Still, and for some reason, my mind shifts back to the kids' conversation and in particular Mr. Intolerable or Intolerant. Musing on the matter, I wonder how he stuck-it out, I mean, with his own conduct, methods, and manner. *The guy is a loose cannon*, judging not only from what they say but what I've seen firsthand. When asks after 911,

"Are you concerned about what might happen, terrorism," Mr. Intolerable

*I don't worry about terrorism. I was married for two years.*

— Sam Kinison

remarked that he had been married and nothing could be worse than that. And while a few may have laughed it off, some

began to worry—as with seemingly all his students before and since—and it only seems to get worse!

I heard that a particularly daring dude ask him about drugs, inquiring about

*Folks, I've been straight for seventeen days...Not all in a row.*

— Sam Kinison

his use, views and so forth, for which he gave no clear answer one way or another, but did suggest he had done his share

going back to the late 60's.

No one would believe that Mr. Intolerable was once an ordained minster of a small Pentecostal church but somewhere along way veered or otherwise

*I got divorced, which was not a good thing for a revivalist minster. It did not go down well.*

— Sam Kinison

gave it up, membership and all. Maybe it had something to do with a divorce, infidelity or who knows what, but the end came whether his choice or the

church's.

"He is a conundrum," one of the more astute students offered, "who seems to march to his own drum,"

*I don't deny my lifestyle is occasionally pretty wild.*

— Sam Kinison

but even he has divulged on occasion his wild side apparently without a "modicum of discretion," says the bright kid

with a smirk.

Soon I would learn more on both men, first the deceased and then the devilish. I must say however that it always helps to get good, reliable information and not merely hearsay, rumor, or gossip—most of which is *garbage* aimed to *stink the air*. What I find as I get older, ideally wiser, is that *things are not as they seem*; that is, that you see (or more, I see) is not complete and thus understood.

I see or witness a teacher that is seemingly tantamount the best of not only that, to educate, but to model—and yet apparently without appreciation in proportion while In sharp contrast, Mr. Intolerable—as one of several applied pseudonyms, aptly given with his manner, methods and malevolence, berating students while exposing them to his controversy and contempt. And I wonder if just a thought, *would more folks attend the funeral of the Intolerable because of the morbid satisfaction of his demise? Is the number of folks that attend one's funeral a reflection of who they are or what they were and were not?*

*I did not attend his funeral, but I sent a nice letter saying I approved of it.*

- Mark Twain

Folks, to include me, don't look forward any funeral, this public showing of personal pain, grief or gladness, though there are some who seem more celebrative in the ceremonial with songs less somber, more festive or even fun, as I add to the thought. Among such might even be the satirical who look upon funerals as a sort casual farewell, fare thee well. Others go to great pains as somewhat a party, a grand affair for the one person that in the physical is unable to attend if even RSVP. For any who reach those senior years, much more may be made toward *the inevitable* sooner or later, going to great length as to expectations, event planning.

*No one ever told me that grief felt so like fear.*

- C.S. Lewis, *A Grief Observed*

There are the fears of our own demise, again, *the inevitable*, when our *great getting'-up* morning comes and we face eternity with the unknowns of what lies beyond, our destiny of or with *destiny*. And then some shame too, perhaps

*The fear of death follows from the fear of life. [One] who lives fully is prepared to die at any time*

- Mark Twain



*Same Old Same Old, so it was*

of anything thought to be left undone, incomplete, hanging or otherwise unattended to its end.

“If she would have...,” some may say,

*If anyone at my funeral says, 'it's what he would have wanted', I'll kick the lid off my coffin and throttle them. Or, if I've been cremated, I'll flip the lid off the urn and become a dust storm in their eyes. Only you know what you truly want. Anything else is presumption skewed through personal agendas.*

— Stewart Stafford

“He could have done more to....”, another remarks

*Why didn't they try to...*, others may think or wonder, but do they or most who say or think of such, know enough *to know, to question?*

Not too many generations ago, society *gave room* for grief, those “survived” to at least display this period in what was worn as well as their conduct, withdrawing and even isolating themselves, giving them time, grace, to be consoled, to recover as much as possible.

Sometimes sorrow or sadness is due to those survived that, themselves,

*Deep in earth my love is lying  
And I must weep alone.*

— Edgar Allan Poe

are grieved, so that others share in such a time though not due directly to the death, deceased.

This form of support is read, written, spoken, and suggested by some who attend the funeral, others in delay or beyond that day. Folks grieve for the grief of others, and then also their pets or animals in general—either returning in some form of living or languishing without much of a light to lead, follow.

But whether light is present or not, one must seek it and embrace it or

*And since we are speculating, we'll use those powerful pseudo-laws, the Principles of Mediocrity and Minimal Assumption.*

— Vernor Vinge, *A Fire Upon the Deep*

otherwise grope around in the dark, never climbing out of the cave of despair or for those looking on and presuming this or that, never knowing enough to even know they're wrong—if they

care at all! *It is so much easier to speculate with no dog in the fight, no price to pay or no burden of proof then to take the time to learn if possible, beforehand.*

Beyond the funeral and further comparison of one to the other, I learned more of each man, the two, past and present, which I now share for my own conscience.

Mr. Intolerable is a war veteran, medically discharged for combat fatigue or what is now called PTSD and, according to my sources, received the Purpleheart along with other commendations for valor, apparently saving others. That his conduct in class is possibly “intolerable”, a cause for consternation or criticism among others, may be inexcusable but *sheds some light* on his daring, deliberately disagreeable and dangerously droll. At least one of the sources said,

“He has come long way,” evidently knowing this man as a boy, another or unheralded heroes that made it back, albeit never the same or even close.

“He was a smart kid and a pretty good athlete,” another said, *though I would never think he was ever an athlete by his appearance, puggy and pale.*

“Straight as an arrow,” another said. “He aspired to go into the ministry like his father,” I was told, reflecting back on a pop song from the 70’s, “Son of a Preacher Man”.

*How little I knew, I realize, but how much he possibly tries to hide, understood given all he went through, the conditions and then his....*

As to the recent deceased, a champion for the community, I somehow missed a scandal involving an allegation of sexual misconduct; one case occurring two years ago leading to his resignation as a teacher and reclusion as an otherwise outgoing and omnipresent object of our community.

“It destroyed him,” one enduring friend tells me, ‘and they never proved anything, any wrongdoing!’

Some say that his accuser, a marginal student, received a failing grade and later told some of friends of her plan, more plot, to implicate him. *Realizing that real cases of this kind do happen—and are real—I still think “the system” is deeply flawed when it affectively condemns anyone without due process—but whom am I to question to authorities anymore than to understand how the horrors of war affect the mind. One lived to help and the other lives, helped but still surviving.*

*Same Old Same Old, so it was*

"We were the '**Strongest ever was**,'" the inscription reads on a

*Human will is the strongest will ever [was]. There are those who are born to succeed and those who are determined to succeed; the former fall into it, and the latter pursue it at all costs. They won't be denied. Nothing daunts them.*

– Sherrilyn Kenyon, *Invincible*

somewhat monument though it might well be a tree deep in the woods, an obscure place that *you don't know about unless you know.*

It is a bold statement still, "strongest ever was", but to know

who said it, inscribed, is to realize that they had much reason to say so and even to be so.

"Who was it," another asks me. "Who are they?"

"Why, they're the strongest,"

"I know that stupid," they fire back. "I mean, tell me who they are."

Since there is no date or timing, it would be hard to answer unless, as with the location, you have some background, some history on these folks. Just to cite the "title" without some history or understanding, one might easily think it about a ball team and around here, about football. But aside sports, the possibilities are *thin* except when going back before there was football or organized sports in *this neck of the woods* and religion meant meeting at the church, not the stadium, ministering fervency and not maniacal fanaticism. *Ah,*

*You have to quit confusing a madness with a mission.*

– Flannery O'Connor, *The Violent Bear It Away*

*I guess I digress, I think, though there is purpose in pointing the lay of this land, the distance from one ball field to the next.*

No matter that said, claimed and then carved, some doubt remains as whether they (or it) was the "strongest ever", for besides being the strongest from the past, so too then future, to *now* and beyond. More to consider is that to be the supposed 'strongest' would have to prove, maybe often and then some as any of the "undisputed" go. And still, there is the area to consider. Was this strength determined locally or did extend out to other counties, the state and again, beyond?

"Spare me the details," says those who just want to know who this is, never mind whether they really were or for that matter, even could be.

*When such claims are made, the necessary evidence is not always, well, necessary*, I think. Some may assume the claim(s) or if it favors them, simply say,

“Wow, they are the strongest,) or

“Who could be stronger,” or

“They’re the greatest,” given that strength, never mind what kind of strength, determines greatness.

There is always that desire or want for a hero, a champion, a marvel character of superhuman abilities and, preferably, a *good heart*. But a hero than a monster win, ravaging the countryside and taking all the fair maidens into captivity not to mention what it (or they) does to the men, the children and perhaps the livestock.

But we don’t live in such *Medieval* times with dragons, damsels, and dark hearts, do we? No, such fantasy and fairy tales are left to books and then films with *bigger than life* scenes, graphics and all other content expected in an epic story or at least a fable that if not in this sequel than in another, the hero wins and the land is spared, saved or restored.

What makes a hero is but one who wins and ideally lives to tell about it—to show folks what life is (lives are) worth fighting for, defending and challenging *the darkness* that fast approaches or hovers over us a dark cloud, and impending storm with a swath of destruction behind it. *However bad we may be—to mean “bad” in the true sense—we*

*Unconsciously we all have a standard by which we measure other men, and if we examine closely we find that this standard is a very simple one, and is this: we admire them, we envy them, for great qualities we ourselves lack. Hero worship consists in just that.*

- Mark Twain

*What makes a hero? Courage, strength, morality, withstanding adversity? Are these the traits that truly show and create a hero? Is the light truly the source of darkness or vice versa? Is the soul a source of hope or despair? Who are these so-called heroes and where do they come from? Are their origins in obscurity or in plain sight?*

- Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Notes from Underground, White Nights, The Dream of a Ridiculous Man, and Selections from The House of the Dead*

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generally want good to prevail or, more aptly, that which serves us, our interest.

*People are not born heroes or villains; they're created by the people around them.*

– Chris Colfer

But where do the heroes come from, go to, or come about? Do we need another hero, or have we become so discouraged as to

lose heart, hope of any hefty help, now or soon?

I look about our community and I see what remains in the decline of the last century when the city or county maintained a strong economy anchored in textiles, metals and several military installations; a combination that produced a strong working class that collectively ushered the town into an “All American

*I know, better than anyone else, that there are no heroes coming to save us. There are no good Epics. None of them protect us. Power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely.*

– Brandon Sanderson, *Steelheart*

City”. But those times are gone—and are not coming back, I think again...have come to accept. But in this vein of the thought is my own self scorn; the kind that says,

“Come on Howard, stop being so negative and depressing.” Times are harder, sure, but I’ve got to be strong, resilient and all else that looks this in the face and says,

“Bring it on,” or something that a hero might say or do, courage in a crisis.

*I am of certain convinced that the greatest heroes are those who do their duty in the daily grind of domestic affairs whilst the world whirls as a maddening dreidel.*

– Florence Nightingale

But then another aspect, a hero who is *unsung*, the folks that get-up each day and put their pants on one leg at a time; those, that simply carry-out their daily duties, taking responsibility and acting not just in their interest but

also that of others, the community let alone the *greater good*.

Hence, and in my helplessness to help myself, I look for heroes too, whether those of the past however obscure, claims marked on a dying tree or decaying stone, or those simply made-up, conjured out of the clouds, and formed into some sphere of influence if just from a book or film. *But is this a good thing to do whether for the day or longer, a distant hero*, I wonder.

While I raise this question and the whole matter of having heroes, one sort or another, is that to there must also be villains or anti-heroes. *If you have the “strongest” does that mean that the villain is the weakest, the courageous...that the “bad guys” are wimps?*

“What truly makes a hero *a hero*,” is important, for to one *a hero* may be the opposite of another regardless of who seems stronger, smarter, or even sleazier. In truth, some may claim *a hero* who is a liar up and down—and a damned good one—but at least he, she or they do it well! Afterall, lying or deceiving is indeed *power*, and *power* is very alluring, attractive not to mention *a dandy* of ambition. But in this vein are the vain that, adoring themselves as undeclared narcissists, worship themselves—which is not a hero—as a self-absorbed admirer, one who accepts that *the world revolves about them* and adores the reflection of what they believe they are—and are not. And you, me and all who embrace them, a caricature more than one of character, does so as *a last ditched effort*, a desperate action for seemingly desperate times.

*So long as men worship the  
Caesars and Napoleons, Caesars  
and Napoleons will duly rise and  
make them miserable.*

- Aldous Huxley, *Ends and Means*

*But no man's a hero to himself.*

- Ray Bradbury, *Something Wicked This Way  
Comes*

*What I wanted to express very  
clearly and intensely was that the  
reason these people had to invent  
or imagine heroes and gods is pure  
fear. Fear of life and fear of death.*

- Frida Kahlo

At the local precinct, one voter turns to another and says,

“My vote is for him, her or them,” with all the confidence mustered, while the other replies,

“But you don’t know what you’re getting,” to which the one boldly says,

“No, but I know what I’ve had!”

Can it be any worse or the opposite, any better? Can one caricature be more lively, likable, and lucid than the next, one’s conceit to be less than the last, a legacy? *No, I think, simply because they are never as the appear—as we perceive them to be—but are much more, much less the man than any folks can fathom, conceive let alone accept, ambitions and all.*

Heroes come from different places, of course; some from sports, others from public life and still more as dramatized in the media, amateur or professional actors. *The greatest of this kind are often those who excel at least*

*People are not born heroes or villains; they're created by the people around them.*

– Chris Colfer

*two, first an actor and then, well, an actor.* As the old fellow so simply puts to the field, farming,

“Boy, he sure can shuck it down—down to the cob!”

Yes, and in the modern age of media, modern medicine (to include cosmetic surgery), and make-up, even a pig without lipstick is morphed into a matriarch, as a marauder into a magistrate or a murderer into a minister, or God into merely a god. *It is not what is but rather what appears—even if entirely a show, stag, theater, a comic opera.*

*She preferred imaginary heroes to real ones, because when tired of them, the former could be shut up in the tin kitchen till called for, and the latter were less manageable.*

– Louisa May Alcott, *Little Women*

“Hey, did you hear the one about (choose your party or affiliations),” the one says to another, more comedy in the opera.

And so the humor has it, *tongue & cheek, more than meets the eye*, are dangerously close to reality save the satire, a smirk or some other signal that what is said in jest, though *not too far off* from

*As you get older it is harder to have heroes, but it is sort of necessary.*

– Ernest Hemingway

at least the possibilities if not realities, behind of layer of lies, curtain of corruption and cameo of caricatures.

But we must have them, make-up and all, just because they offer to

*He did what heroes do after their work is accomplished; he died.*

– Leo Tolstoy, *War and Peace*

convince us that life is more the mediocre and that, should one truly aspire and strive toward their ideals, beliefs and commitments, they may just get

in, get there if just enough to *ride off into the sunset, basically to die.*

They claimed in some measure to be the “strongest ever was”.

“But who were they,” says the persistent one.

They were an indigenous tribe of American Indian, the Creeks, part of the Cherokee Nation. They held on for some time, concentrated to the north end of the county. Their chieftain, Ladiga, bartered a deal for a parcel against the balance of the land that *his people* vacated, more were evicted. The inscription is thought to be at a time shortly before the last of these folks were moved-on to the West.

“And they were heroes,” is perhaps a question in doubt.

I believe that they were (or are) heroes if just their efficacy, their endurance against must greater powers. They did not “win” in the end—not really—but they stayed their course and to this day retain at least some of the heritage, what led to survival for who knows how long. What is true is that these people were true, not only historically but also hereditarily, certain of who they are—and are not—win or lose.

*Men have to have heroes, but no man can ever be as big as the need, and so a legend grows around a grain of truth, like a pearl.*

- Peter S. Beagle, *The Last Unicorn*

*Real heroes are men who fall and fail and are flawed but win out in the end because they've stayed true to their ideals and beliefs and commitments.*

- Kevin Costner



“Life everywhere is...’,” and where there is life there is hope.

There is much darkness about me, much on my heart and that I write about. But on the brighter side, is life and where life is, so too is hope.

*Life everywhere is life.... There will be people near me...no matter what misfortunes befall, not to become depressed, and not to falter – this is what life is, herein lies its task.*

– Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*

It is far less frequent that folks marry and, marriage or not, have children as more than a key statistic, but the *lifeblood* of any nation. In this declining rate however, a new arrival is that much more appreciated,

acknowledged, perhaps special.

More distressing perhaps is the justice system, accurately appraised as “warehousing” an unprecedented prison population, a figure far disproportionate to our declining crime rate but yet there largely because of the “Drug War” declared some decades ago. *That the justice system is just, justified, is merely a matter of words on paper (or digitized), underwritten by “might makes right”, their meaning of the word.* Meanwhile, our local county

jail is swollen, a sampling of the state’s system and, more generally, the nation’s dilemma of too many inmates, not enough bars.

*I'd watched too many schoolmates graduate into mental institutions, into group homes and jails, and I knew that locking people up was paranormal - against normal, not beside it. Locks didn't cure; they strangled.*

– Scott Westerfeld, *The Last Days*

Couple those *behind bars* with the other institutionalized in some degree another; a culture

inculcated with psychosis that, for some, begins as early as grade school—the world’s largest percentage of children *on meds*—and what you have is (are) sick systems. Sadly, much of the supposed illness is driven by *big pharma*, an industry that has surpassed petroleum in profits, prosperity, as the prison systems have become increasingly *for profit*.

But there is life as I look my window on the crisp, cool autumn day, taking in the beauty of this view, a gap in Coldwater Mountain less than a mile away and the colors of sunburst beginning to show. There is life and that is hope,

and though the dead of winter is to come, still, there is serenity in walking a trail on a cold day, the leaves crunching and that occasional sound of a bird overhead, a whitetail or other creature that passes by, or the sheer sound of silence except for the wind or flow of creek nearby.

There are *dark days*; those behind me and those ahead, no doubt, and I suppose that many of us have them, some more than others and then those who stuck, no sunshine or light to speak of, hope if help is too late. I must say thought that these and those *dark days* do, to sound cliché, make the better days better. *If not the dark days,*

*My dark days made me strong. Or maybe I already was strong, and they made me prove it.*

- Emery Lord, *When We Collided*

*dreaded as dread is, would the brighter days be brighter, the light more brilliant as not just tens of stars but billion, not just a song but music, not just a sound but a tone that touches a tender place.*

*But this world is very confusing and confused, forgetting where it comes from and where it's going to,* I suppose.

Careless of and for the past, history, much less the future, but more and more fixed on the moment, here and now, even the peripheral dissipating as with a retina detached.

*His life cries for an unknown land of joy where sadness lingers between border lines, His discolored steps towards the decoy misconstrued as the mystery declines.*

- Munia Khan, *To Evince the Blue*, from the poem, "Sonnet for A Man (Part II)".

"Maybe it's the dark days, blocking the view in all directions" as a possibility.

"Maybe most are sluggish, sleepy and slumbering," as another, with or without meds.

"Maybe it has to do with age; that like an old dog that lies around and struggles ever more, the only relief is sleep and a dream now and then of *when it was*," I say again, scratching my scalp for no reason in particular.

But there is life even in the *dark days* whether time bound or limited by something detached or simply the aging that some endure—even the dismal that some delight in—when we consider all things, past and present, and are

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memories make well of two distant ends, *love* and then *fear*, for which our reasoning may ask,

“Which one, today, then, now and to come?”

*Don't give in to your fears. If you do, you won't be able to talk to your heart.*

– Paulo Coelho, *The Alchemist*

For which I say, “I don’t know...I am not sure...how?”

“You fight fear but loath love; in the first, you *lose heart* and in the second, you refuse it,” a

*reasoning* replies, with *will* close behind, encouraging my discouragement,

“You do as it pleases, this *love* and *fear*, for a broken-heart is heartless and a seared one is stubborn, so much the more.”

*I have not broken your heart - you have broken it; and in breaking it, you have broken mine.*

– Emily Brontë, *Wuthering Heights*

“What are you telling me, *will*?”

“I am telling you to follow your fears and let *love* lie, your long suffering.”

“But the dark days don’t go well when-,”

“But then, who wants to hang-on to a hamstrung heart made so by her whoever or wherever, that only compounds the palpable, those palpitations racing to the red-line.”

“Then *the heart* must go,” I try to *reason*. “You’re suggesting that I scrub the heart?”

“Sure, do it, for when you’re numb, the whoever and wherever don’t matter,” the *will* claims.

“Then the question, ‘What is your heart telling you,’ will never be raised

*Somewhere, far down, there was an itch in his heart, but he made it a point not to scratch it. He was afraid of what might come leaking out.*

– Markus Zusak, *The Book Thief*

again, an attitude without acrimony but also without action, an answer, alone in with my fears.”

“And that’s a bad thing,” the *will* offers, obscuring *reason* with

an onerous occupation of life without heart, breath without a beat, a stoic in the making—or something similar.

"What does *reason* have to say about the heart," I raise the question while *will* takes a break.

"I am not sure how to handle this one," *reason* begins, "for reality is not always sensible and sometimes is downright insane!"

*Sure, I have my knocks—I realize—but I'm still standing, I think, dark days and all.*

"And another thing; I've tried to help before and, honesty, you just don't listen let alone do as I advise, as logic would have it."

*The heart has its reasons which reason knows not.*

- Blasé Pascal

*Reason is right on this one, but I'm not a Vulcan that always goes logically, green blood steady as it goes, or a droid, humanoid, dispassionate in all degrees.*

"That is a problem sometimes," *reason* replies.

*Talk sense to a fool and he calls you foolish.*

- Euripides, *The Bacchae*

*As though I don't know it, my up and down life, the dark days with or without daylight. "Sure, I got problems—that's the point—but will seems to think that losing heart is the solution."*

"Yeah, I listened to the spill, suggesting you spill all my red blood."

"Okay, so what's your plan, *reason*?"

"I have thought about this and still think about it. Why, have thought on it so much that it makes the head hurt, let alone what's it doing or has done to the heart. *Dark days* are common enough and quite frankly can creep up on us or just hit us at our blindside, wham, bam and boom! Even I, *reason*, cannot come to terms sometimes—the plain truth that folks lie or the that prisons are far too filled or that conflict and contention is unceasing, continuous; all of this and still more to cause the *dark days* to last and languish while the light and bright *takes a backseat at best*. It is more than heartache thought that you've had and surely more than you bargained for—even believed possible—and still, in ain't over!"

"Accurate assessment, *reason*, but what's your plan," I persist, impatient for an answer that outlast the *will*.

“Well, in truth,” I am here and have been for some time now, and that counts for something, *reason* reliable, ready, and willing—but not woefully *will* alone.

*I do not feel obliged to believe that the same God who has endowed us with sense, reason, and intellect has intended us to forgo their use.*

— Galileo Galilei, *Letter to the Grand Duchess Christina*

“So at least you are available, accessible, and in all other ways absolute, absent *will*?”

“Seems like your assessment of *reason* is reasonable, logical. And as to *will*, a word of caution.”

“Caution,” I repeat, careful not forget that *will* has its faults found somewhere amid my broken heart and come to think of it, my seared one too. Relying on *will* alone is like trying to outmatch a double agent. But then depending on *reason alone means me less than human, heartless and perhaps hedonistic, “devil may care”*.

“Well, at least you have the part about *will* right; a life bound for Hell!”

Still, there is a part of life, our lives, that for neither *will* or *reason* alone is able, capable, and clear, and that is *faith*.

“*Faith*,” says *will*, “faith in what, who?”

“But that’s guesswork,” adds *reason*, “and your guess is as good as *will*’s recommendation.”

*I do not expect will or reason to understand, to comprehend this concept, for to do that is to possible violate will and reason—at the same time!*

But that’s so uncertain, *will* follows, “and risks always leads to more loss, more heartache, more heavy, *dark days*.”

“And to add to that,” comes *reason*, is that lacks logic and-,”

How can or should I expect *will* and *reason* to understand when there is piece of my experience that transcends both, my will and then reason, which I believe is faith; and so, I suppose that I *believe in belief*, faith, as a welcome in *dark days* and ideally all days; gratitude for the good and bad, the light and the dark when or whenever such times.

*Faith is not the belief that God will do what you want. It is the belief that God will do what is right.*

— Max Lucado, *He Still Moves Stones: Everyone Needs a Miracle*

Without it, *faith*, where might I be but gone, decidedly defeated, and dead in all ways as *will* decides, left to its devices, and *reason* calculates, logic to conclude. Without *faith*, the *dark days* take me down dark paths on a dark journey to a dark place for which no light remains, defeated, and destroyed.

*Faithless is he that says farewell when the road darkens.*

— J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Fellowship of the Ring*

Life everywhere is hope but it is faith that secures life as not just here and now, past, present but more to come and then to come.

I am “**Fascinated with**” with *curves of form* but also that which make curves, hugging and rounding them with control, slide, spin, in or out, but through it and beyond it, snaking the serpentine.

Never been a fan of NASCAR though attending a few races at Talladega as a volunteer, a fundraiser, was enough to convince me. Went to one drag race but that was primarily to see all the vintage Volkswagens. And then car shows, more than I can count, and always with interest, all the detail and often painstaking effort at modifications, restorations, and that sort. *How folks take such pride in their wheels is remarkable, my fascination at theirs....*

When I imagine the 50’s in particular, all based on films and TV, a picture

*All human males were as fascinated with cars as they were with breasts.*

– Anita Clenney

comes to mind of a young buck who seems to have it all at the moment; the fastest wheels and the *finest* woman or girl, he is the

coolest—more so than any, all and even the athletes if that were possible. *What is with wheels and women, when to have the later, the guy must have the former, no wheels and no woman, more women.*

Unable to fully separate fantasy from fact, I sketchily recall from high school the thought-to-be twilight of the *muscle cars* (Camaro, Mustang, etc.) with the smaller newly arriving imports from Japan (Celica, 240-280Z, etc.).

*I think that cars today are almost the exact equivalent of the great Gothic cathedrals; I mean the supreme creation of an era, conceived with passion by unknown artists, and consumed in image if not in usage by a whole population which appropriates them as a purely magical object.*

– Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*

*Perhaps the oil crisis of the mid-70’s had something with both sides of this, but most certainly the later.* I still remember a few students lucky enough to drive one or the other and for one who had no wheels and no women, dealing with envy at or for both—on just one! But I also remember

than even the modest of rides, like a VW Beetle, could be the ticket for a ride, a date, and thus, any wheels seemed enough as long as they roll and often as she needs a ride, a meal or maybe a movie and thus once more, that I was not part of that scene, action and all other, wheels and women.

Eventually that would change, such that I could afford a car at least on a part-time basis. Much to my disappointment however was that wheels, part time or not, do not ensure a woman or women; no, one has to have more of which I never quite figured-out and possibly didn't want to—though the envy and yearning for the *cooler side of life* flared-up every now and then. Also, and as a development not too recent to the times, was the women had their own wheels, adding insult to injury with an independence that gave the other gender more *than a leg up* and more, less of need for a ride. Maybe this would help, for on more than one occasion, a cute woman or girl gave me a ride—not a date—and that seemed at least a step in the right direction. *But I am not the first without wheels to alas get a ride and, under such scarcity, suffering*

*I invented nothing new. I simply assembled the discoveries of other men behind whom were centuries of work. Had I worked fifty or ten or even five years before, I would have failed. So, it is with every new thing. Progress happens when all the factors that make for it are ready, and then it is inevitable. To teach that a comparatively few men are responsible for the greatest forward steps of mankind is the worst sort of nonsense.*

— Henry Ford

*and sacrifice, to experience the ride of my life in the best sense of it, no kidding.*

And in the other gender's rise to the highways and byways, the parkways and the parking lots, the carports and seaports, came or comes at least wanderlust if not car lust; for as with guys, the gales will also go to great lengths to get a ride, wheels, a means to go somewhere, any and everywhere that a tank of gas will take them if just to the "Redneck Riviera", Panama City or the like. *Yeah, girls did not take a back seat to any guy when it came to pressuring their parents for a car; maybe not a muscle car but less so a fixer-upper and more so something reliable and ideally new, right off the lot.* Understandably, most of them knew nothing about mechanics or

*She had originally agreed to appear naked, but on seeing the cars informed me that she would only appear topless—an interesting logic was at work there.*

— James Graham Ballard, *The Atrocity Exhibition*

repairs but then, neither did most guys. If you can change a tire, as a



*Same Old Same Old, so it was*

requirement for driver's ed and optionally change the oil, then *your off to the races* barring no blocks from folks that so often had to sacrifice to put their sixteen year old on the road. This however is *The American Way*; an automobile, made so by Motor City, Big Oil and an ever-expanding complex of county, state, and Federal routes. Nevertheless, not all roads are paved and as not all vacations take one to The Redneck Riviera either.

*From North Carolina to Spokane, Washington, bootleggers during Prohibition used "souped-up" automobiles to stay ahead of federal agents and local police while transporting illegal whiskey on back roads in the dark of night.*

*The idea was fairly simple – take a car that looked ordinary on the outside, modify the engine for greater speed, remove the floor boards, passenger and back seats to store as many cases of liquor as possible, install extra suspension springs to handle the weight, a dirt-protecting plate in front of the radiator and run the prohibited booze to customers by outsmarting or outrunning the authorities.*

*To elude federal Prohibition agents, sheriffs and cops on the road, these daring "runners" needed sharp driving skills to speed and maneuver along dirt, gravel, single-lane, and occasionally, paved roads after dark and at times with their headlights turned off.*

– Prohibition, An Interactive History

NASCAR has roots among bootleggers during Prohibition, driven to drive the fastest wheels from the shine still to sales, preferably well ahead of the revenuers—never mind any women who would only get in the way of the mission at hand; Point A to B, C or D, free from any obstructions or otherwise, interference in these most desperate and despairing times. It was one of several occupations available, *the times* as they were, most memorably expressed in the film, "Cold Miner's Daughter," when a character says, "You can either coal mine, moon shine or *get on down the line.*" But there are more depictions of these daring, determined to deliver, while "the manufacturing of illicit whiskey...is not dead—far from it," so say the Foxfire Students from their mountain print or the

locals in Ballplay, those folks who came from North Carolina bringing with them this corn liquor among the homegrown.

Proven as Panama City might be, as a regional Riviera, it is far from the only day's ride as the Stebbins Street community and much of Alabama are similarly convenient to the Appalachian, shine, or no shine, and similar local fare such as Cheaha Mountain to, again NASCAR, the Talladega Superspeedway. And reminiscing back to high school once more, I remember a few students that not only went to the races but perused "the infield" and other points the nights before, fascinated with the sights and yet another *coming of age* experience, *women gone wild*.

"You wouldn't believe what they do," one would likely say, no doubt baiting the others while holding at least a moment at center, the focus on the female.

"Huh, you're dreaming," another might say, sparing you any of the sorted details about her, her features, and all other things related but commonly left unexposed, less flaunted, and far less revealing.

"It's a Sodom, I tell you," he continues, while a pool of drool collects about them.

*Oh, and yes, I did hear him though ashamed just the same—so much as to wish a few things repeated for the record, hearing an echo of one from the then current soundtrack of Grease, the refrain, "tell me more" from "Summer Nights".*

But these were their Talladega nights, not to be confused with the much more recent parody by the same name, "The Ballad of Ricky Bobby". And though "the race" or *wheels* are the *center attraction*, still, where would the event be with the side-attraction of topless women, tantalized men in making?

*Guess how fast we're going now.*

*-I don't care, I'm having a baby!*

*Hundred and five miles an hour, you believe that?*

*Reese, you just passed the hospital! -  
The baby's coming, he's coming now! –*

*All right, all right, hold on.*

*-Okay, but I think he might be stuck.*

*-Grab onto something. Ready? One,  
two, three!*

*It's a baby boy.*

– Talladega Nights: The Ballad of Ricky Bobby

*Same Old Same Old, so it was*

Looking back, I am fascinated with NASCAR, not because of the speed and skill, the race or anything racy, but by patrons who wearily watch these machines go around a circle hundreds of times, intermittently interrupted by a technicality or the morbid excitement of a crash, more so *The Big One*. Meanwhile, and perhaps over several Talladega nights, the young and even younger seek out the shameful to tell tales or at least hold a memory, more so the big ones, set or pair.

But I am more fascinated by nature, the natural, whether the view from Bald Rock on Cheaha or simply the mosaic of color that returns each Fall, the grace in which the hardwood foliage dies and the tree retracts to its roots to rest. *No, I would not have thought so in high school, far more focused on*

*I'm so glad I live in a world where there are Octobers.*

– L. M. Montgomery, *Anne of Green Gables*

*myself—how I measured up—but as we age, we change just as the hardwoods, seasonally and over time.*

I am more fascinated by a baby or child, not because they too are selfish as a reminder of *where we come from*, but because they are simply precious, plainly honest, often untouched and tainted by all falsehoods, foibles, and

*This is a place where grandmothers hold babies on their laps under the stars and whisper in their ears that the lights in the sky are holes in the floor of heaven.*

– Rick Bragg

failures that mark time and experience, our *better angels* in conflict with our *darkest demons*. *And he's right, Rick Bragg, that the aged and unaged are often the so close, connected, leaving the*

*rest of us to struggle and stride in between—too busy to even look up let alone wonder with awe, our souls mastered by the world and its worries.*

I am more fascinated by music, not all, but the kind written for and about folks, folk music. *Sure, it's not*

*All of my words, if not well put nor well taken, are well meant.*

– Woody Guthrie

*often complex, the score or composition, but it bares much character of the aged and unaged; unadulterated, from the heart and*

*true to life with all its challenges and conflicts, communion and community, cares and concerns.*

I am fascinated by God, Christ, The Bible, and *body of Christ, the church*: for the first two, they're love, mercy and might; for The Bible, the message(s) and meaning, describing the creation, objectives and outcome, then to now and beyond; and for *the body* who believe and more, stand and deliver, being found faithful even as an *end* comes and the new begins again.

That in this, these things, which I am fascinated may there remain intrigue and interest, as a child and more, much faith in what awaits and forgiveness in what occurs.

*If we find ourselves with a desire that nothing in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that we were made for another world.*

— C. S. Lewis

I tell you that each is “Fallible”; no one is without their faults.

*Of course, I know that as should anyone of age*, I think on reading this while playing the fool, pretending that I forget this about me, those self-righteous tendencies.

*You are human and fallible.*

— Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre*

How easy or less conflicting might it be if I didn’t forget this—as apparent as it is—that we each have faults and further fail by not admitting it, acknowledging it or affirming our *lust of the eyes and the flesh* and then most attenuative, *the pride of life*.

One may be rightfully proud of another’s achievements or accomplishments, sharing in their success, and giving due for what they did or are doing. *Yes, this is the right kind of pride*, I think, *that says*,

“Good job,” or “I am proud for you”, or “Congratulations..., best wishes” and similar.

Then there is the other, that *pride of life*, that may not speak but still is convincing, pressing us each to that, as summed-up in a phrase, *I have arrived* or, as play on a few prior, popular tunes, probably from the 50-70’s era,

*From where I’m sitting,  
I AM the center of the Universe!*

— S. Young

“I’m just too good to be true,  
can’t take my eyes off of me,” or

“I am so beautiful—to me—  
yes I am,” or

“My eyes adored me. Like a million miles away from me...I adored me,” and so many more that for any sold on themselves as being *above it all*, might find such song plays as well, quite right.

And *pride of life* can go much further than the flesh, skin-deep, entering the realm of psychology, one’s mentality and emotions with all the attendant complexities of broadly separated into nature and nurture. One does not have to be *drop-dead-gorgeous* or dashing, let alone perfect, to experience an unhealthy case of conceit thou ironically, any who believe that they are without it, conceit, are in fact very so much, *stuck on themselves*—though apparently without any awareness, admission and so on.

Pride, conceit, vanity, self-adulation, egoism/egotism (as possibly the sanctioned forms) are all related we are or were at one time.

One may say of another,

“He is so conceited...I can’t stand to be around him,” but then use the appraisal as an alibi to criticize practically everything the “conceited” do as driven by this weakness, this strength.

*If a man thinks he is not conceited, he is very conceited indeed.*

— C. S. Lewis

*Sure, conceit by any other name, is a weakness—but a strength too—for what one decides is conceit, another may acclaim as self-confidence, security, or something strong,* I realize. There is that *fine line* between conceit and confidence, between *pride of life* and anything appearing adverse but is an attribute. And to *muddy the waters* more is that such conduct or character may be both.

*... there’s nothing wrong with believing in you. You should always feel good about yourself and believe in you. The problem only starts when you take it to a whole different level and your confidence goes into overdrive – causing you to believe that you are literally the best. That, my friend, is conceit.*

— Mohit Soni, “The Fine Line between Confidence and Conceit”

Once again reminiscing, I recall a minister that preached at our church for what is called, “Revival”. *Not that the purpose is so important or even the person, but only to point out that this man had played college football and a lineman, fit the profile as an bigger-than-average pastor—which is relevant to something he said about conceit.*

‘When folks use to greet me, some would say, ‘Stay humble’, upon which I would slump my shoulders and try to look humble.”

Of course, looking the part does not do it; illustrated as he mimicked a humble, modest face coupled with a stooped posture. One must sincerely be committed even while sensing a spell of conceit coming-on however clever or concealed it may be. One must understand that the *pride of life* leads, as has led, to many a downfall as possibly the sinical statement suggests,

“How the mighty have fallen,” or something like that.

One condition of conceit, possibly foremost in the fall or falling, is the *know-it-all*; convinced that they are not only “educated” on matters but then is an expert and thus, is *the final word* after others’ guesswork.

*The more a man knows, the more willing he is to learn. The less a man knows, the more positive he is that he knows everything.*

– Robert G. Ingersoll

“I don’t know,” or

“I am not sure,” or

“Maybe someone else can offer-,”

But if his view is *straight-on*, definitively described, the possibility is that

*Do not intermingle with people who act like " they know it all". If you do, you will wind up as lost and lonely as they are.*

– Christine Szymanski

“Our you impressed?”

“No, I am infuriated,” he fires back. “Talking with her reminds me of elementary school, she the teacher and me an addle schoolboy.”

“But she’s not perfect,” I ask, more to *clear the air*, the smoke and fire pouring out from every orifice on his head.

“Of course not,” he says with a sigh. “She’s fallible just like the rest of us.”

*I met an old lady once, almost a hundred years old, and she told me, 'There are only two questions that human beings have ever fought over, all through history. How much do you love me? And Who's in charge?'*

– Elizabeth Gilbert, *Eat, Pray, Love*

“She always has an answer to everything,” he says, “and she hardly anything!”

Why does she do this, give an “answer” for everything, he and I think alike. Does she every say,

this it empowers her as much of what drives us finally apart, the pursuit of power without.

“On the other hand, maybe she is just trying to impress me,” he offers.

I must add at this point if just for your amusement that this woman is or was his wife.

“I loved her,” he said, “and she needed a lot of love.”

And though I might think the opposite, that she needed no love

from him, the fact is, or facts are, that she was in someway trying to control him, them.

“And you loved her,” I ask, question or comment, but reinforcing what he already told me.

“Yes, and she wasn’t so easy to love,” he adds, “why with all her ways, putting me on my high horse and setting me off like that.”

And not to be a know-it-all myself, but it is she who rode the “high horse” and, so it seems, he who dutifully followed along on foot, maybe a mule carrying some of the burden.

*It's weird, marriage. It's like this license that gives a person the legal right to control their spouse / their 'other half.*

— Jess C. Scott, *Blind Leading Another*

“Oh, she had other ways too, but I don’t feel right talking about now, these years after she’s gone,” he says, a tear appearing.

“I understand,” is all I say, not really having an understanding, that is, enough to *hold up in court*.

But I do understand in part because of reverence for the dead and even more for those who could or should be dear to us. One courts a relationship for their own desires or wishes and, as conceited as that might be, can end up in love, deeply committed to the other who they hardly knew at then and still, with more time, accept that the mystery remains.

“But she acted that way with others too,” he continues, carrying on with what I see as something of control as a bad choice in dealing with her insecurity.

*For a control freak, love, and the desire to control others are synonymous. Once they lose control over the object of their desire, hostility takes over in full force.*

— Natalya Vorobyova

“She used to infuriate them too, so much that she might go months without talking to them, scorning her siblings as stupid or something like it, and it *played hell* on me, on us too.”

I could or can ask him if he ever talked to her about it, them, or her behavior, but I am reluctant, more reserved to just listen if that’s possible.

“She was never wrong about it,” he continues, “Never!”



Which means that everyone else is “implicated” in the ordeal, right, wrong, or indifferent but, apparently for her, just ostensibly they, the wrong.

“And *Katy bar the door*, a family feud if you can see it,” he describes it despite his earlier hesitation, reluctance.

And for the those of you unfamiliar with the phrase about “Katy...”, it means to *honker down* and take precaution because there’s trouble coming down.

*Attempting to constantly control everyone and everything around you is not only exhausting...it is also futile. The only real power you can achieve in this life is being in control of yourself.*

– Anthon St. Maarten

“The worse it got, the worse it got, and before you know it, the whole thing was far beyond exaggeration.”

“Did you ever see anyone about this,” insinuating a counselor or physician, somebody qualified to evaluate....

“Sometimes her sisters would just laugh about it, while other times cry,” he explains, possibly true of his reaction.

“Did you talk to them, then?”

“Oh no, I didn’t dare, the chaos of it all.”

“What do you mean, chaos?”

“Besides the rift between her and them is this kind of protective ring, this sisterhood *as solid as an oak*. When an *outsider* like me tries to raise the matter, well, they go silent too, as to say, ‘This isn’t your concern’.”

But it is, or was and more so, that they were married and, as it turned, committed in at least the appearance of marriage, their wellness left to what he calls, “chaos”. *The trouble with attempting to control everything is that*

*Relationships with narcissists are held in place by hope of a “someday better,” with little evidence to support it will ever arrive.*

– Ramani Durvasula, *Should I Stay, or Should I Go? Surviving a Relationship with a Narcissist*

*eventually it leads to this chaos in the impossibility.*

“It was like the weather when a storm is always looming”

“Bad weather?”

“Yes, even if things looked great.”

He explained that this *coming storm* came *out of the blue*, but that over time became routine, “the norm” so to speak, though he knew all along that it was anything but normal.

*Narcissists withhold affection to punish you. Withhold attention to get revenge. And withhold an emotional empathetic response to make you feel insecure.*

– Alice Little, *Narcissistic Abuse Truths*

“You have to adjust, I suppose,” he followed, though more resignation, I believe.

“I just had to get use it, that whatever drove her, I could not steer and whatever ailed her, I could not fix, let alone troubleshoot. And if I could not figure that out on my own, she would be sure to show me that I never measure up—as none of us did. If I didn’t know how fallible I was, or am, she could sure let me know in a hurry and often.”

“Is he happier now that she’s gone,” is somewhere between love and a *pride of life*, somewhere between commitment to a relationship and the margins of *committing* someone—if just to keep loving them and keep living.

He “**Learned to fake**” it and to fake it well, first who he was and then what was or was not.

*Fake* is seldom a favorable word or attachment unless the one doing the fake or faking, perhaps because their otherwise and straight-up inferior or overpowered, gains an advantage, some way to possibly *get the edge* over the opposition, an obstacle and that sort.

*The media’s so central to our lives that we believe what we see onscreen is real. In fact, it’s more real than reality: emotions are heightened, drama sharpened, issues simplified.*

— Steve Shahbazian, *Green and Pleasant Land*

Some folks will call the news “fake news” when thought to be false, or if it needs to be discounted merely on their word, assessment and so forth. *Fake*

*news* has become a convenient classification for anything contested by, contentious with, or critical of one’s interests, intentions and actions; a convenient way of disclaiming another’s claims—never mind the facts, details and anything else of relevance.

“More *fake news*,” the senator scoffs.

“But senator, they said that-,” the correspondent continues.

“I know what they said but it’s all fake,” he returns sharply, implying that it’s false, fraudulent, etc., and is simply said, “End of story!”

But is that enough, to simply *write-off* something with a word or two, a declarative supported by *might makes right*? Can one observer say, “The scoffing senator’s quip *does not hold water* either,” because it has no basis, no evidence, no explanation—but just a remark?

But then this senator is far from first to follow such a course, for any with

*Hitler loved to describe any newspaper that exposed him for what he was as “Luegenpresse”, which is German for Fake News.*

— Oliver Markus Malloy, *How to Defeat the Trump Cult: Want to Save Democracy? Share This Book*

access to power, possessing power, can use it to nullify negative news as nonsense, the claims as counterfeit, the story(s) as a sham; any and all as hype, hullabaloo and hubbub.

“You know that it is,” the senator follows, putting it back on the correspondent, with a grin.

“Can they get away with that,” another asks.

“Who are your referring to, the senator or the news’ source,” the correspondent follows.

“Does it matter,” another follows.

“Does it matter if it does not matter,” says another

Both, all of these questions are in keeping with the *layers* of lies and loopholes that give rise to *might makes right*; that all that finally matters is power—not proof—and *history is written by the victors*, however vile or villainous they truly were, are, and want to be.

*History is a set of lies agreed upon.*

—Napoleon Bonaparte

There are lies, “damn lies”, and statistics that, though data, calculations, and its illustrations, are not exempt from err, intended or not.

*A half-truth is the most cowardly of lies.*

—Mark Twain

What’s more, and in the *manufacturing* of facts or truth; lies looped across the array of media sources; a message on *the matter*, or what is intended to matter, repeated at such as rate as to make *the matte* matter most; the listening audience convinced if not from the power of the politic then it’s *echo* chamber, the media, with all manipulation, multiplication and maneuvering.

*Cram them full of non-combustible data, chock them so damned full of 'facts' they feel stuffed, but absolutely 'brilliant' with information. Then they'll feel they're thinking, they'll get a sense of motion without moving...*

— Ray Bradbury, *Fahrenheit 451*

“They know how to,” one remarks regarding this media.

“How to do what?”

“How to make lies believable, and truths irrelevant,” comes the answer.

“Why do they do this?”

But we know, because *information is power*, and controlling information or “news” is tantamount to controlling minds, what and how we think, what we do—or don’t do.

*A nation of sheep will beget a government of wolves.*

— Edward R. Murrow

*Same Old Same Old, so it was*

"It's about deception, ain't it," says another.

And more, it's also about division, *divide & conquer*. That by creating chaos using information and other means of manipulation, the mass is divided,

*If I can determine the enemy's dispositions, while at the same time I conceal my own, then I can concentrate, and he must divide.*

— Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*

divorced with deep-seeded cause and effect; an *engineering* of dissent one against another with the intended consequences, more central control and less individual liberties, community, and commons. As long it works, our division, so too does their conquering continue, the attrition of a diverse but divided folk with the consequential,

*Whoever controls the volume of money in our country is absolute master of all industry and commerce...when you realize that the entire system is very easily controlled, one way or another, by a few powerful men at the top...*

— James A. Garfield

calculated concentration of power among an exclusive, elite group who hold *the levers of power*, the control of currency and commerce, and all that fall beneath them.

But to fake or faking-it, who is who and who is not. First, this thing called currency.

"What of it, money?"

*Dollar bill: people spend their whole life seeking to earn it but won't spend 10 minutes seeking to learn it.*

— Orrin Woodward

"is it real?"

"Yeah it's real, as sure as my wallet and the-,"

"It's tangible, paper, but the question is more about it's value,

worth and that which it is supposed to represent, currency."

But *money is what makes the world go round*; that is, until "it ain't worth a Continental," and the only value it holds is for fire starter, busted currency, and combusted heat. If money loses value, the only way to *keep the world turning* is to print more in exchange for less

*Banks do not create money for the public good. They are businesses owned by private shareholders. Their purpose is to make a profit.*

— John Rogers, *Local Money: What Difference Does It Make?*

goods and services as inflation, the so called “hidden-tax”.

“Hidden-tax,” says another, with emphasis, “tax”.

Yes, and “hidden” in more ways than one—as the metric, the way inflation is measured. And it, inflation, can continue to grow at an accelerated rate with the corresponding, more initiating, devaluation of the dollar.

*Mere inflation—that is, the mere issuance of more money, with the consequence of higher wages and prices—may look like the creation of more demand. But in terms of the actual production and exchange of real things it is not.*

—Henry Hazlitt, *Economics in One Lesson: The Shortest & Surest Way to Understand Basic Economics*

“Who wins and who loses,” is a good question for any who hold dollars, the current and longstanding currency? *The more you have the more you lose*, as a thought that applies universally in matters of loss, life. But before I go too far with this subject—which is not far at all—and rant for the sake of hearing myself only, let me return to the central idea: what is real and what is fake.

“Money is not fake after all,” this matter without closure, given back for more exchange.

I suppose it’s real, as tangible, but it does change, losing worth over time as described above, the value vanishing *into thin air* only to be replaced by another, new & improved unit from and of the state.

“And life goes on for the better, right?”

*There’s only one way to improve society. Present it with a single improved unit: yourself.*

—Albert Jay Nock

Ideally perhaps, but such a system generally supports those who created it and then manage it, the money-makers and their minions, the state and banking, big business, and that sort. Some win—and win big—but more often many lose, and especially the powerless, impoverished to working class and so on.

“Like us, here on Stebbins Street?”

*Indeed, as this long era of de-industrialization shows intermixed by cycles of boom & bust, high times and bad times*, I suppose. But finally, it is the person that counts, what they *bring to the table* as community, *the commons*.

"But I thought it's the money that makes the world go round," as more of the same old, same old.

Money is again the creation of the state, a way to control commerce and country, underwritten by the states' dictate and demand. Money may have intrinsic value as a precious metal but as paper or cheap metal, *it ain't worth a Continental* unless the demand continues, the dictate holds.

"I'll take it even if it's fake," says another. "It's not gold or silver, but it's worth something and that's something!"

We learn or *learned to fake* because it's power; the power to get things and to believe that such is truly ours to hold, to keep, unless or until we realize that it is temporary at best, *here one day and gone the next*. We need money, as the system has it but will love money even if fake—as within anyone or anything else that is a fake, false and a fraud.

"Are we fake," asks another.

We learn or *learned to fake* from other folks, *faking it until we make it*—whatever "make-it" really is.

*Share your weaknesses. Share your hard moments. Share your real side. It'll either scare away every fake person in your life or it will inspire them to finally let go of that mirage called "perfection," which will open the doors to the most important relationships you'll ever be a part of.*

— Dan Pearce, *Single Dad Laughing*

When folks fake, they cannot trust or be trusted, for what they perceive in others reflects from them, on them. Call it a *Catch-22*, a dilemma, but it is their insight of their fake that leads to perceiving others as same and thus, distrust on all sides.

"I cannot or will not trust because of my fake," says another, reiterating my narrative with a single line of dialogue.

"What's that fake got to do with the fake money," asks another.

"This is where *fake* is somewhat offset or excused," I begin. It is obvious that paper and cheap metal is worthless but it is accepted, more demanded, that it count for something; thus, it is the power behind the fake money, the array of forces that dictate and demand it—never mind its diminishing worth or indeterminable worthiness.

"And fake folks too," begins another.

Yes, power offsets fake folks too. Consider politicians and their ilk—those often profiled as purveyors of *fake*, falsehoods and fraudulent.

“Sounds about right,” another says with a grin.

*When one gets in bed with government,  
one must expect the diseases it spreads.*

—Ron Paul

Whether they are or are not, fake, what is true is that power offers excuse for their indiscretions, overlooked as the punchline of a joke or accepted as stock & trade. But it is not latent power as much as active power used to foment fear, an emotional or psychological force, *fake* as we are and fake as it is. We learned and then learn how to *fake* because of power, preferably on our side, not against us. We fake for power and we fake because of it, and we trust so little and much more ourselves, *fake* as we know we are and true as we know we are not, born into corruptions and apt to become so; *fake* at first and then false and fraudulent first to ourselves and then to everyone and everything else.

*The mistake you make, don't you see, is  
in thinking one can live in a corrupt  
society without being corrupt oneself.  
After all, what do you achieve by  
refusing to make money?*

— George Orwell

*It is true that nobody is above the law,  
but power can make somebody  
invisible.*

— Toba Beta, *My Ancestor Was an Ancient  
Astronaut*

“Can we fake faking-it,” is a key question.

Yes, we can each be true, but to see and be seen, power must go.



They were “Human or something”.

“But that don’t explain or excuse what they did,” I say to myself, but then realize that being *human or something* is more than and not just *all that it’s cracked-up to be*.

*“Been completely at a loss my whole life.” He hesitated. “I think it’s called being human, or something.”*

– Terry Pratchett, *Sourcery*

“Folks are complicated, a conundrum from the cranium on down to the crevice of their crawl, head to heart and still beneath

and beyond the limits of the blood, it’s flow internal and external, the mind with its unlimited potential.

For what I think I know, some of which is certain to not be, is that for the longest time the *human or something* became human and then bequeathed his humanity, all that he is and is not. On the one hand was something good, a gift

*We can know only that we know nothing. And that is the highest degree of human wisdom.*

– Leo Tolstoy, *War and Peace*

or token of love and affection, but on the other was something bad, even evil, aimed to hurt, disable or destroy the spirit of another if not their whole self, and in

between these two hands, heart, mind and soul.

In the oldest of accounts, the Bible, is a central question in a psalm as to purpose and plan for man: What is man that you are mindful of him, the son of man that you care for him? Worthy to be recited, repeated, the same question occurs much later in Hebrews but also much earlier, the earliest, when Job says, “What is man that you make so much for him and that you set your heart on him?”

“There is a figure that fascinates me more every time I read it,” I say to myself, the story of Job, the most spiritual of souls that preceded even Abraham and whose name is the most ancient of the ancient scriptures.

“Why does Job fascinate you,” you might say if listening, caring. “What does Job have to do with *human or something* and all you previously said, the good, the bad and the ugly?”

I know Job does not seem to apply to Stebbins Street or much of the stories herein, the plight and pitfalls of folks of West Anniston, but be patient.

Job is the first of stories and is, in all ways, as we are, *human or something*, experiencing the *present world*, from the pleasures to the plight, albeit thousands of years ago, another time but a similar plight with pitfalls.

“Was it human to endure all that he did, the good and bad, and still acknowledge God, sovereign,” is another question specific to the last, for what Job retained was both a heart for, and of God. Was he *human or something* more than human?

As a think back and around this kind, this character faithful under much testing and loss, some folks come to mind around here; those passed or if still alive, are

*Character cannot be developed in ease and quiet. Only through experience of trial and suffering can the soul be strengthened, vision cleared, ambition inspired, and success achieved.*

—Helen Keller

probably aged too, wise after their many years. *I know that sometimes my thinking is off, that persons are not who want to believe them to be, but I consider these folks as at least probable however imprecise my perspective, out of this character they are or were*, I consider, careful not to exalt them as flawless but still faithful.

“What makes such character,” call it courage or some deeper desire or destination that, conscious or not, comes and then stays? “Is it humility,” as another question in series, acceptance of one’s limits, powerless in and of oneself?

*All men make mistakes, but a good man yields when he knows his course is wrong and repairs the evil. The only crime is pride.*

—Sophocles, *Antigone*

“Then Job was humble, humility as the key to character,” as another consideration. *I don’t know*, thinking of it at the moment, though clearly he was powerless to stop or even slow what took place, Satan unfettered to prove a point; that even the greatest of faith is nothing more than some *gentleman’s agreement* or informal contract predicated on God’s blessings, good fortune and so forth. *If the measure of a man*

*The measure of a man is what he does with power.*

—Plato

*is what he does with power, what does it mean for one without it, power?*

*Same Old Same Old, so it was*

"I don't know offhand," I say to myself, "except that the temptation, to abuse *power* is seemingly not," and thus humility, no pride absent power.

But Job was forced, the conditions and calamities levied on him to prove

*[If] you are proud you cannot know God. A proud man is always looking down on thing and people: and, of course, [if] you are looking down you cannot see something that is above you.*

— C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*

God wrong, culminating with physical pain and illness, his body covered in boils—as there is no pain more difficult in the moment, no condition more certain to break the will and bear one's true character, even the counsel of

others well intended or not.

Beginning with his wife's urging that he curse God and then die, her heart bereft by the same, her true character still in question though at least momentarily malevolent. He

*How much more grievous are the consequences of anger than the causes of it.*

— Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*

however is not willing or able but reminds her of the good and the bad—as is *the world* we live in though attempt to avoid, avert.

He stands while she does not.

Similar consequences and contradictions arise here and now; one in a family will stand firm while others drift or even drowned under *the pressures*, playing out that parable of *the seeds*, some that grow and others that die before maturity if germinating at all. One blames the other and, testing as they are, one folds and another holds, one is strengthened in their weakness and another weakened by their strength, *power* wherever and whatever the sources.

And if the murder of marriage is not enough, Job is then confronted by

*Love burdens itself with the wants and woes and losses and even the wrongs of others.*

— Fulton J. Sheen, *Life of Christ*

several well-intended counselors apparently aimed at *the root of the matter*; the causes for his affliction as a judgment regardless of his principled past and

presence, his argument to the contrary. *I suppose the severity of his condition*

*offered no other explanation, let alone evidence to the contrary, I think. Naturally, we want to be right about other's wrongs as a matter of pride, a self-righteousness that precludes any consideration of even the possibilities let alone realities that we often overlook or outright avoid, avert. It goes without saying that those who "have arrived", assuming a life of relative ease, are most apt to presume with righteous indignation, I am reminded when Job says,*

*The deceitfulness of the heart of man appears in no one thing so much as this of spiritual pride and self-righteousness.*

—Jonathon Edwards, *The Religious Affections*

"Men at ease have contempt for misfortune as those whose feet are slipping."

If it is not enough that Job's body is wretched with pain and his heart with grief, contempt arrives via his counselors so willing and yet so wrong. And this pride is of power too and thus corruption, even evil, though shrouded by acts of sympathy and words sacred. *How can one so wretched and wrangled be right while others so willing and winsome, wrong?*

But power and its cohort, corruption, has that effect; a combination inseparable when power is unchecked by: either folks that either don't know, don't care or are too afraid or passive to call it, what and who it is; and/or by despots that duly punish such folks, those who call it what it is, "despots", and call them what they are, "despotic".

*Despots prefer the friendship of the dog, who, unjustly mistreated and debased, still loves and serves the man who wronged him.*

—Charles Fourier

*Power* is powerful; when and as it is applied, *power* moves things *human or something* to work and, in the abuses of power, to produce gains for the powerful while the powerless are *kept low*, lessened, oppressed or used to exhaustion, despair and death. But for Job, *power* as applied by the counselors does not bring him further down, destitute—since he is already *at rock bottom*—but rather reinvigorates him, steadfast and stubborn is his innocence or, before God, and understanding in the common question for any crisis or calamity, "Why?"

Laying aside the battle of words between Job and his counselors is much more, the want for understanding, an answer for “Why?”. But God does answer, at least not Job’s satisfaction, and still he remains tormented in pain,

*The greatest hazard of all, losing one’s self, can occur very quietly in the world, as if it were nothing at all. No other loss can occur so quietly; any other loss - an arm, a leg, five dollars, a wife, etc. - is sure to be noticed.*

—Søren Kierkegaard, *The Sickness unto Death: A Christian Psychological Exposition for Upbuilding and Awakening*

grief and despair, so much so as to loath his life, to wonder with his contempt on his birth, a reason to exist at all. Obviously, his losses are horrific, possibly his marriage but certainly his children, property, and other possessions. But even more if/as that is possible is to lose oneself; who

you are, or were, and then once again the question of “Why?” unanswered, Job confessionally forlorn, unduly forsaken.

God is sovereign and this alone remains Job’s position; that while *human or something* exist in corruption, yet God remains true to his creation, just and righteous in all things without comprehension of or covenant to an unction of answers for urgent questions. *What must have that been like; to go from such stature to so low a status, despised and even rejected, all the while enduring the combination of contempt and carelessness?*

But was Job earnestly blameless; was he innocent, acquitted of even accusations let alone the test and trials brought to bear? *No, of course not, which is really the whole point of the story; that all have sinned and for short of the glory of God, and that though God be mighty—power beyond death—so too he is merciful, jurisprudence in the application of power, granting grace to*

*Took me a while to get the point today, but that is because I did not know what the point was when I started.*

—William Safire

*those underserving, that which is unearned, often unacknowledged-underappreciated.*

Job was and remains righteous, not because of all that

he had material or as even family, but because his faith in God’s power never waxed and waned, never wondered. Contrary to the sentiments or statements of the counselors, who chided him for questioning God, the irony is that his

questions—even arguments—gave and give credence to his faith, God’s mercy and might.

*The story ends well*, I think, not because his livelihood is restored as described, but that his life is spared from his own expressed desire to die, God’s mercy and might then again able, Job rising literally out of the ashes.

*You cannot conceive, nor can I, of the appalling strangeness of the mercy of God.*

– Graham Greene, *Brighton Rock*

But of all the chapters and verse therein, the one that resonates most often when my livelihood is stalled and my desires dark, is,

I know that my redeemer[a] lives,  
and that in the end he will stand on the earth.  
And after my skin has been destroyed,  
yet in my flesh I will see God.  
I will see him with my own eyes—I and not another.  
How my heart yearns within me!

I “Suffer with bigger stuff”, he admits, his stories yet to share, his shame and guilt too much to bear and thus, too much to care (about).

“What is or was ‘the bigger stuff’,” is a likely question to follow; that is, for

*We are human, and we suffer... and it doesn't hurt more or less if God caused it or could stop it, at least for me. I am definitely of the school that believes God has bigger stuff to worry about than me.*

—Jon Katz

anyone who gives a care about the his suffering, the “stuff” that is best not said or if mentioned, not elaborated.

“Who wants to hear about another’s woes,” or get wet under their *dark cloud*?

*Suffering is something to study*, I think, for while few of us want it, to suffer, so many if not all do at one time or another; yes, suffering is the human experience as even the once wisest and wealthiest, King Solomon, suggests.

While physical suffering may be the worst, so suggested Saint Augustine, it is not only of course. One thought be in love suffers or pines, another suffers scorned, whether truly so or solely thought to be, and then there is envy, jealousy, and any one or more of the seven sins from lust to pride, greed and

*What is hell? I maintain that it is the suffering of being unable to love.*

— Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*

gluttony and so on. *There are always things to suffer but when more is received or expected, more to suffer too*, I think.

Should I hear him out if he wants to talk, tell me about it,” I say to myself. *Am I prepared to listen, really listen, caring and trying to understand, even show sympathy?* But to ask the question and to think about my feeling on it, oh him, is with a sense of dread and maybe anxiety or even fear; that if I do listen, he may want more or worse, for me to bear some burden too—however relatively small it may be.

*It is terribly rude to tell people that their troubles are boring.*

— Lemony Snicket, *The Blank Book*

What if I speak-up and say the wrong thing; something like,

“I know how it you feel,” or some similar cliché shared

impulsively, presumptively, as though I really know enough to know....

“What if don’t interrupt at all or, after his account, I opine that often orated on such occasions, “That is terrible...you must be miserable,” or something said when nothing else comes to mind or even heart.

What I am getting-at is that it is hard so suffer for or with others ; it is hard to really try and then try again, the measure of which is the capacity to love if not the person at least the expectation of what we sense when we hurt, when we need someone to be there. *It is hard to care either way; the one suffering, for someone to...and the one or more that could care but choose not or otherwise are compelled by this or that, them or him, or those....*

There is also those often-innate differences, to differentiate from that learned or developed regarding sympathy or how we care, love. Men care or love *in their own way* and women too, at least most, ideally with appreciation for these attributes of each rather than concern or worry of some sexist remark, discriminating or other such possibilities of *modern times*. Sure, there are always exceptions, but then the intensifying pressures to ostensibly deny differences—which as I think about it, *is just another deceptive approach of one collective attempting to gain privilege at the expense of another, albeit against our the natural*. Ask rather than stated and since suffering is not going away from the earth as it is,

*The mark of man is initiative, but the mark of woman is cooperation. Man talks about freedom, woman about sympathy, love, sacrifice. Man cooperates with nature; woman cooperates with God. Man was called to till the earth, to "rule over the earth"; woman to be the bearer of a life that comes from God.*

— Fulton J. Sheen, *The World's First Love: Mary, Mother of God*

“Aren’t you glad for that woman are more sympathetic, more caring by their nature?”

For where would we be, humanity, without such beauty but worse, miserable, suffering because of suffering, never to scare or heal but the hurts left unattended as *festered open wound*, infected and infectious? But thank God for this special care of many women that have, do, and will do, even to death, offer their lives in and for care for *their own* and still for others too.



“What about your mother, did she love you,” if I should have to ask him rather than him describing her, ideally a person of such care. But more important to this mature man is a wife, a companion or mate, for which he can

*We don't heal in isolation, but in community.*

– S. Kelley Harrell, *Gift of the Dreamtime - Reader's Companion*

care for and be cared as no other person, preferably. And finally, the others who influenced him *along the way* from his father to other men and then God, of

course, *the father for which the earth has yet to fully acknowledge*. Anyone and everyone we elect to turn-to in times as these, that borne by some, possibly birthed by others, but shared as a common cause.

It is more than a pity when the sufferer is alone and more than pathetic when he demands so, *crawling into a cave* to sulk or *setting out into the wild* with intentions to never return. Sure, it sounds swell, *a noble savage*, but it is running away...hiding in seclusion, not solitude for which we each need, suffering or not. One may go off for a time to avoid or avert *going off*, getting away to defuse or to decompress, but *fleeing* is fueled by fear, not courage, and gives yet more opportunity for self-pity as a form of pride.

“What if somebody slandered him, malicious words and malevolent intentions, telling tales to *tear him down* and more, bring on the law,” I ask myself, for nothing is more maligned than a false witness who spreads lies and manufactures allegations, creating a crime by calumny and then the courts.

“Is there a warrant...his attempt to flee...a fugitive,” as a follow-on, learning of the case, a mark on him—even before an arraignment let alone any hearing—that is indelible, indefinite condemnation.

*How did I escape? With difficulty. How did I plan this moment? With pleasure.*

– Alexandre Dumas, *The Count of Monte Cristo*

“How do you know all this,” another asks. “about him and the law?”

Well, as to him, speculation, but as to the law,

“Consider the community beginning on Stebbins Street and beyond,” but mostly the west end of town and the county jail nearby, always over capacity as

representative of the jail system, state prison and whole of it, our nation's warehousing of prisoners.

"Is it not enough, such statistic inversely proportional to violent offenses but still a figure as no other on earth, our penal system of indefinite punishment," I continue, a seething scorn rising in me.

"Sounds like you have an axe to grind," the other follows, perhaps my alter ego.

"An axe to grind' would mean a selfish aim," I tell the other or myself, though I do have a grievance—not for me so much as for us, what has come to be though overlooked or ignored as a crime of crimes, a system juxtaposed to justice, intentionally inverting of *due process*, abuses without accountability let alone admission. *How wrong that the wrong are not wronged*, I think.

"Tell us how you really feel," says the other or my other, your passion about prison painful to bear more than to hear or see.

"This is about his suffering, not mine," I clarify, though contradictory; for when we each suffer for or with others, we suffer because we know and have known such times with all that such time allows, our growth enabled and endured by it, through it and even beyond it. Still, I should not be sidetracked by these things I cannot control, but for the best of

us, what I can, given the tendency to *wallow and in the mud* like a pig—and like it be that as it may. *Misery loves company* only when the cause is common, shared by the other or others who *knows the life or has gone down that road before or walked in their shoes*. It is well known that to really know, to really care, the other or others must have *been there*.

*It is said that no one truly knows a nation until one has been inside its jails. A nation should not be judged by how it treats its highest citizens, but its lowest ones.*

—Nelson Mandela

*The darker the night, the brighter the stars, the deeper the grief, the closer is God!*

— Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Crime and Punishment*

*If pain doesn't lead to humility, you have wasted your suffering.*

— Katerina Stoykova Klemmer

It seems to me that when the sufferer knows of the other's similar experience, perhaps by past association or *through the grape vine*, the other or others don't have to say much; that is, their standing is credible with no need or necessity to speak-up or speak-out or to even *stand their ground*. No, their own suffering is a single qualifier to suffer with or for another of the same.

But then he the sufferer may not be willing to talk no matter the other or others, their experience, their potential to help. The other or others may press him to talk about it, to *get it out*, and *blow off some steam* or at least exhale,

*I have learned now that while those who speak about one's miseries usually hurt, those who keep silence hurt more.*

— C. S. Lewis

"You need to open-up and *get this off your chest*," to suggest that talking is at least a good start toward *dealing with it*, healing and all that comes in his woe,

from their well-spring, and the *win-win* possible.

"Then I'll pray for you—or with you," the spiritual may offer whether said or not, knowing that God cares beyond our faith let alone our human frailty, our fears.

"I don't want to pray and I don't care about God," the sufferer may sharply reply or suggest, unsolicited or not, to at least make it known that he holds God responsible, cruel and calculated. *If God really cared, this would not have happened*, he believes with or without some shared sense from the other or others, well intended as they can be. And even if they understand his immediate notion, is it best to call him out, to chide or condemn him because he is angry at God?

"I was the same way," the other tells another. Angry at God, holding him responsible for everything despite the scriptures, the life of Christ and the martyrs and anyone and everyone else that endures tragedy or hardship in the chapters of life. *Maybe that's okay; that God is after all in control and no matter whether I will or not, allows things to happen*, I remind myself from time to time.

But then, there is bitterness; that overtime and without any move toward forgiveness and gratitude, what is left but in a such a direction, a disposition beyond despair. *I have known and know folks that are bitter and while they each have story, still, the end of it is bitter.* I know that it impossible to wipe the bitterness altogether, that now and then it arrives from deep like acid-reflux, and burns all the way up until you taste it and say simply,

*Bitterness can be corrosive. It can rewrite your memories as if it were scrubbing a crime scene clean, until in the end you only remember what suits you of its causes.*

— Fredrik Backman, *Beartown*

“This is too bitter,” or you savor it, holding onto the hate, this power. *The trouble about bitterness, “this power”, is that it works against your best, driving you deeper into a world of despair and further from repair, your heart forever forlorn and all thing bright and beautiful left forgotten.*

‘This ‘bigger stuff’ got the best of me,” he tells me. “It took the best of me and always seems intent to take the rest of me,” he continues, contemplating suicide or something to end it.

“What to do,” I ask myself more than he, the sufferer, to remind me that it can make more of you than you ever thought possible, that part of you made better than beauty, bliss or bounty.

We “go on being ‘*Deceived...deceiving*’”, celebrating rather than regretting these ways,” I read and read again, our nature as it is and always has been. We deceive and are deceiving whether conscious or somehow beyond,

*I am convinced that human life is filled with many pure, happy, serene examples of insincerity, truly splendid of their kind-of people deceiving one another without (strangely enough) any wounds being inflicted, of people who seem unaware even that they are deceiving one another.*

— Osamu Dazai, *No Longer Human*

our conscience, not sense of wrongdoing, fault, or shame.

“But why...when the whole of it is a lie or lying,” is a single, simple way of arriving at truths about our *deceived...deceiving* ways.

“How long can I get away with this,” the conscious or *heart* may

conjure-up only to be dismissed by the effect a drug, *power*, as the end objective or anticipated impact, a distraction, rationalization or justification?

Here, on Stebbins Street, it happens; one lies about another and then resentment or some measure of revenge, retribution, or restitution.

“An eye for eye,” is sometimes the ide, stemming from old testament, that somewhere lays the basis that every wrongdoing, intentional or not, can or should be countered by some similar action; and even if not an action by the affected, still, *what goes around comes around*, expressed as one,

“He’ll get his,” or in the past tense, “He got what’s coming to him.” And in this belief or idea is that somehow, someday, by some means or method,

*Time reveals the truth.*

— J. R. Rim

every effect of a lie is met by an effect, so as to foil the plans of the one and redeem the costs to the other, others. Said another way,

“Time has a way of revealing the truth,” to suggest that given enough time, *deceived...deceiving* is at least exposed however the effect on the one or the other.

“I knew he was lying from the moment I set my eyes on him,” another confesses given time, where *hindsight* is 2020, possibly aimed more at consoling that one rather than others that, my implication, are gullible or naïve.

The truth is that lies hurt and lots of lies hurt lots; it is one thing to tell a lie but another to lie about lying, *the layering of lies, deceived...deceiving.*

"Get real," goes a remark, giving pause to the fact that facts may be all that can be expected if that, while *truth* is more *a pipedream*.

"I don't care about the truth," she remarks. "I just want to know the facts," she follows with a commanding voice, her authority of no account. But then, and what if, so called "facts" are finally *manufactured*; not validated or vetted, but rather accepted unmerited, as convenient for expedience or such.

*Lies sound like facts to those who [are] conditioned to mis-recognize the truth.*

—DaShanne Stokes

"What if the facts you demand are not what you want to hear," is, I think, a reasonable question. The truth is that we each have preconceived notions or opinions that, if expressed, go something like,

*Facts are too busy being true to worry about how you feel about them.*

— Paolo Bacigalupi, *The Water Knife*

"You know he must be lying," or "She has a habit of telling the truth," or any other statement that, when tested, only has a chance of being right, the fact about facts, even as "a source of truth".

There is that desire to trust or be trusted—which is really what drives us toward truth, the facts, whether presuming, assuming or just by faith—blind as it might be.

"I trusted him," she says, now scorned by her once thought love.

"But who lied or who fooled whom," is a question that probably goes unanswered in full, for if it's the truth that *all's fair in love and*

*Trust no friend without faults, and love a woman, but no angel.*

— Doris Lessing

*war*, why should facts be expected, adhered to, versus the alternative of *twisting the truth*, suggesting or implying or as said when confronted, challenged,

"That's not what I said," or "you misunderstood me," or some similar possibility though not certainty of cause, blame or guilt.

"He was no good," another offers as a consolation. "He doesn't deserve you," she further offers on the possibility to *end this thing once and for all*—that it never would have worked anyway as a lover but no friend.

"A friend is a person with whom I may be sincere," begins Ralph Waldo Emerson, never mind the delusions, illusions and appearances justified by our aims to *have and to hold, even till death do us part*.

*How is the young heart comforted, and especially from the scorn of a first love*, I consider for now though it is crossed occasionally, my own experiences or another.

*We're paying the highest tribute you can pay a man. We trust him to do right. It's that simple.*

— Harper Lee, *To Kill a Mockingbird*

"You trusted him because you thought that you could...that he can be trusted. What's wrong with that," another follows,

suggesting that there is no wrong or mistake in trusting, for the truth is, or facts are, that we trust as a primary need for survival whether the natural or the supernatural, whether him or them, doubt or no doubt.

"It's was his choice and, well, I think he chose poorly," she adds, passing blame or wrong from trusting to trustworthiness, from *the wronged* to *the wrongful*.

"He said nothing to suggest," she cries out. "I thought that-," she screams, more of a refrain or rhyme than a revelation, let alone resolution given his haste, her hurt.

"I know, I know," the comforter confirms, "but he made his choice for him, not you," she follows at the risk of some *bitter truth* unacceptable, denied still.

She, the scorned, wonders if he regrets what he did; that somehow,

*"What's wrong with people?" she says, almost too quiet for me to hear. "Were they born with parts missing or did it fall out somewhere along the way?"*

— Isaac Marion, *Warm Bodies*

*coming to his senses*, she believes, he will at least affirm the wrong. But rejection is or can be cruel beyond any admission or acceptance, as the heart is wounded, not to be healed by *an*

*understanding* that he was rude, ruthless, and/or a rogue, notwithstanding that he neither respects her or respects what she thought they were, in love.

*But what are the chances..., contrition, I think, coming from experience, some personal knowledge that folks are soon to forget any commitment, contract or even covenant pronounced, promised, and punctuated. Indeed, such matters become cloudy at best, the reality covered over by a calloused heart, conditioned in and by deceived...deceiving, two or more sides of smoke and mirrors.*

*I suppose that most desire to be on the better side, but then, which side is better and then, better than what or who?*

*There are two sides to every issue: one side is right and the other is wrong, but the middle is always evil.*

—Ayn Rand

Conflict and contention at levels of life lend to realization that peace and goodwill is not complete on the earth as is; that no matter how much we try, agree, compromise or conciliate, both truth and facts overwhelming lean toward the inevitable breaching and breakup whether no matter the legalities or formalities subordinate to the realities. But then, as said more than once,

“Peace is not the absence of conflict,” but goodwill and gratitude are sure to temper our differences, inviting forgiveness if just to save ourselves, to free us from the wrongdoing or the wrongdoer.

*Peace is not the absence of conflict but the presence of creative alternatives for responding to conflict -- alternatives to passive or aggressive responses, alternatives to violence.*

—Dorothy Thompson

“Will she ever get over this,” one asks another of the scorned, *shredded to pieces*.

“Did you,” the other bluntly responds, *deceived...deceiving* as one can be despite their own opinions.

The point is that we each and all at least dabble in deception if we don’t drown or indulge, leaving of trail of disappointment, disheartenment, and then daring for the deliberate, *who go on deceiving and being deceived. Trust is power* but when abused is then corrupt, corrupted, but then,



“Who wants to face the truth; that trust, their trust, is lax, lost,” I ask myself, to myself, about myself, being truthful about lying to me, about me or probably more often, about myself.

*We are all hypocrites. We cannot see ourselves or judge ourselves the way we see and judge others.*

— José Emilio Pacheco, *Battles in the Desert Other Stories*

The scriptures instruct us to “rid” ourselves of it, hypocrisy, along with all malice, deceit, envy, and slander of any kind. As hard as it is to call ourselves

*We are all in the gutter, but some of us are looking at the stars.*

—Oscar Wilde, *Lady Windemere’s Fan*

righteous, *no not one*—but that does stop those with *power* of abusing it; *deceived...deceiving*, abusing others by taking *power* from them either willingly or unwittingly.

It is about perception really; that what others see, or what we think they see, is reality? But then the problem: perception and reality are not the same;

*The world is full of magic things, patiently waiting for our senses to grow sharper.*

—W.B. Yeats

the first as the appearance, or show, and the second as reality, *behind the stage*. One or more, a group, can exert untold effort on or at perception, going beyond extremes to enunciate and elicit *the right image*, impression, and impulse. Vast amounts of resources collaborate to *condition* the viewer in some sense—usual fear—that produces a perception. But is this exerted effort, “to *condition*” a lie or worse, *deceived...deceiving*? And what if the effort is not an absolute lie; that is, it contains what are called “half-truths”, or some semblance of the facts and figures?

But more than the validity of the content, the message and it’s perception, is the often overwhelming; not the evidence perse, but the message, a

Hypocrisy is in a *league of its own* when it comes to the games or sport of *deceived...deceiving*. How much harder is it to accept our own lies about others, much less about our ourselves?

on self-deceit, maybe because we lean toward self-justification, how then do *rid* ourselves of all this...of any kind? After all, none is self-

the first as the appearance, or show, and the second as reality, *behind the stage*. One or more, a group, can exert untold effort on or at perception, going beyond

constant or frequenting *looping* of “the story” complete with images, interviews, endorsements and all else essential to *condition* the audience. *No, not to sharpen our sense(s) but to dull them*, I think.

One, concerned about *the message and its perception*, considers the question: “Are they justified in this, to *condition*...and am I conditioned, fooled?”

One, concerned about hypocrisy *of any kind*, considers the question: “Am I a hypocrite, and if so, how do I *rid* myself of this, that, all and *any kind*?”

One, concerned about *the scorned*, consider the question: “Is he that sort of person, that *blows off love* and *rides off into the sunset* thinking he’s a hero?”

I think that each question begins with *power* but then follows my reply.

*We all see only that which we are trained to see.*

— Robert Anton Wilson, *Masks of the Illuminati*

Those concerned about *the message...perception*; yes, they are justified, not because it’s right or good, but because it serves them, their interest and finally their prospect for, and plunder of, *power*.

Those concerned about hypocrisy of any kind; yes, as each of us is...but then the wonder of recognizing our own lies and any delusion or detriment *of any kind* is that, if taken to heart, can brings us each *down to earth*, humbled and then not *high and mighty* to presume or pronounce the other—other than ourself.

*Above all, don't lie to yourself. The man who lies to himself and listens to his own lie comes to a point that he cannot distinguish the truth within him, or around him, and so loses all respect for himself and for others. And having no respect he ceases to love.*

— Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*

Those concerned about her, *the scorned*; it happens, of course—but then *time*, not only for truth but also light to heal, to help and to hope.

*When it's gone, you'll know what a gift love was.*

— Ian McEwan, *Enduring Love*

She is “Unhappy, ungrateful” and so much more but then, how could she be less?

“I just want to see her happy again,” one or another may say sincerely. But

*The more I understand the mind and the human experience, the more I begin to suspect there is no such thing as unhappiness; there is only ungratefulness.*

— Steve Maraboli, *Unapologetically You: Reflections on Life and the Human Experience*

then the question, “What is happy?”

If there is “no such thing as unhappiness” can it also be conversely that there is no such thing as happiness? Or, if one says, “I am happy,” whatever they

really mean by it, for how long? One may consider happiness as a relative moment or single experience while another may think it is supposed to be *for the long haul*, a general feeling of contentment, satisfaction, or pleasure. As we live, so often today for the moment and most certainly pleasure, is it wonder that happiness is, well, overrated.

*What can I do with my happiness? How can I keep it, conceal it, bury it where I may never lose it? I want to kneel as it falls over me like rain, gather it up with lace and silk, and press it over myself again.*

— Anais Nin, Henry & June

She, the young woman, was apparently happier before, but does that mean that *life was then a bed of roses*? Is she sad or sullen because that happiness is gone or missing or is it something more? Does she or anyone—

including me—realize that happiness for whatever it really is cannot always be, otherwise how could or can we value it, the small or few moments of pleasure without pain, laughing until we cry those happy tears? And in keeping with this

*The sense of unhappiness is so much easier to convey than that of happiness. In misery we seem aware of our own existence... []. But happiness annihilates us: we lose our identity.*

— Graham Greene, *The End of the Affair*

duality is that in such happy times we are lost, swept away by the magic and mystery whereas with the other the pains are poignant, yes, but also are pointed, the harsh words and harangue as we

beat up ourselves or others for *blowing-it, dousing the fire or raining on the parade*.

I am not a *killjoy* on the value of happiness with all the purpose in it, for it and by it; no, I don't want to the guy who says,

"Happiness is not all its *cracked up to be*," but then, we are *sold a bill of goods* that just can't *get her done*. Happiness is overpromoted, over pursued and over promised as a symptom, not a cause, for just about everything and anything considered good, right, or fair.

"He makes me happy," the young lover proclaims without realizing that this apparent happiness is more likely a sense of being wanted, cherished, or adored.

Gratitude comes in knowing that being wanted, needed, is a gift and what better to know...is to experience rejection or otherwise, to be disregarded or discarded as, well, worthless.

"She was happy," another says of the lover, now unloved or at least broken, to make any who care think or say,

*Let us be grateful to the people who make us happy; they are the charming gardeners who make our souls blossom.*

—Marcel Proust

"Will she ever be happy again," though the thought or question relies on the notion that someone else makes us happy and further is responsible for our happiness,

"But are they," comes the next in a series, for whoever decides or depends on someone else to make them happy is really *fooling themselves*; first, that happiness stays and second that it stays because those thought responsible stay too.

"If only it would have worked-out," another laments, nodding their head, to suggest that happiness is possible but only if it—whatever "it" is—works out. So then, happiness is conditional; if some conditions happen and remain then happiness does too whereas if the conditions don't

*You can't be happy unless you're unhappy sometimes"*

— Lauren Oliver, *Delirium*

happen or remain, so too goes happiness without any sense of where or when it will happen again. But in truth how can we know happiness unless we know unhappiness, how can bask in the sun if we don't get drenched by the rain or freeze from the chill of a winter day?

"I can't believe he did that," goes another of care, concern, considering *who did what, to whom*. "Does he even realize what's he's doing, done," stopping short of describing his actions, behavior, that seemingly started this

*How can I be reasonable? To me our love was everything and you were my whole life. It is not very pleasant to realize that to you it was only an episode.*

— W. Somerset Maugham, *The Painted Veil*

unhappiness, her grief and anything but gratitude. If not grateful then for what she apparently had, can she be grateful now, the loss as a painful lesson?

"I hate him," she says with still more tears to follow, her weeping undeniable warranted.

"You are too good for him," says another as a cliché often applied to ease the pain, *take the edge off* or even help replace *the past* with some resolution that says,

"He did not deserve me."

But this is no time to try to reason with her, hurt as she is, unhappy beyond consolation. This is no time to say,

"But you loved him, didn't you," to suggest that one cannot go from love to hate on impulse, triggered by the break-up, betrayal, or other *blow*. Bu this is no time to say,

"You still love him no matter what happened. You 'hate' what he did or what happened, but you cannot hate him," though this possibly is *splitting hairs* as said—since he did what he did, choosing to leave when he could have

*You fell in love with a storm. Did you really think you would get out unscathed?*

—Nikita Gill

stayed, loyal to some understanding, promises, or a commitment. But this is no time to say,

"He was somewhat a wild one with a reputation," or

"He has done this sort of thing before," or the sometimes *catch-all*,

"After all, he is a man!"

But this is not time *to rub salt in the wound*, to *add insult to injury*, or to try to help by more rationalizations as to why *it didn't work*, going ss far as to say,

"I knew it wouldn't work out," as a post-event favorite of the *know-it-all* most oriented to their opinion, their rightness in the wrong. But this no time to dither or to differ, to conduct an analysis of the *who done what to whom*, the guilty and innocent or anything in between.

As with any conflict, no one wins in the end except for the so-called "victor" and their account. *If he is the victor however, where is "the story" from his standpoint, the supposed way in went down, so that at least we have the other side—if not the only*, I think.

As it is, in the aftermath of the matter of another story about another couple that *could-have-been*, happiness is once again proven to be momentary; a word that masks as joy, satisfaction or gratitude but is nothing more or less than pleasure, entertainment. or fantasy. Aside from happiness or even love, as both words are often overused, is that she trusted him—she believed that his words were true. But this is not time to ask,

*The worst pain in the world goes beyond the physical. Even further beyond any other emotional pain one can feel. It is the betrayal of a friend.*

— Heather Brewer, *Ninth Grade Slays*

"Did he love you or did he tell so," for who know what the answer really is given the outcome. She might say with some pause,

"He showed me love," or she might say in her defense,

"He said it once—I know it," or

"I don't remember," to mean that the answer is meaningless now.

But more to the matter might be,

"Some of us have been through this and understand what's it's like to lose trust in another," because that is what matters, trust.

"It is," she asks, her cry ceasing for a moment.

Yes, and trust is everything, for without it there is no path

going forward. Sure, you have a good time, the adventure and suspense, but *after the ride is over*, what is left but the thrill unless you trust.

"You too," she says, relaxing.

"Yes, and it hurts something awful," the other replies.

*To be trusted is a greater compliment than being loved.*

— George MacDonald

One might wonder at this moment, *can we trust those who know what losing trust is all about, hurt and scared as they may be?*

"Do you still have choices," the one continues, consoling *the hurt*.

*We always see our worst selves. Our most vulnerable selves. We need someone else to get close enough to tell us we're wrong. Someone we trust.*

— David Levithan, *Naomi, and Ely's No Kiss List*

"I guess," she answers hesitantly.

"What I mean is can you trust again knowing the pain of losing trust, of losing happiness?"

"I don't know," she says, though in truth she is trusting this very moment, the counsel of one who evidently cares.

"But if I had never-,"

"Oh, how many times have I said something like that," the other interrupts. "The regrets, reservations, and rejection that I think would not have happened if only I had done this or that or something."

*Trusting is hard. Knowing who to trust, even harder.*

— Maria V. Snyder, *Poison Study*

"Are you happy now," *the hurt* says to the helper.

"Don't get me started on that," she says with a sign.

"But I-,"

"Trust me, you don't want to chase after that one," she cautions. "Everyone I know who knows...understands that happiness is not a given—not even close—and I don't say this because I have altogether given-up either. It's just that-,"

"It's overrated," *the hurt* hollers out.

*Cultivate the habit of being grateful for every good thing that comes to you, and to give thanks continuously. And because all things have contributed to your advancement, you should include all things in your gratitude.*

— Ralph Waldo Emerson

"That's it," *the help* confirm. "But gratitude,"

"What about gratitude," she breaks-in. "How can I-,"

"It is a habit, really; a practice of considering all things—not just the bad, wrong or right," she explains. "All things to consider and then thanks, trusting that-,"

"It will last?"

"No, the truth is that we don't know..., the experience as enough. That like trust or trusting, gratitude is necessary to have any chance at a meaningful life."

"And times such as this," *the hurt* asks humbly.

"Especially now, for as hard or impossible as it may seem, you will find some benefit through and from it—but only with gratitude!"

"How can anyone be grateful for losing, being lied to or about-,"

"Perhaps you will have to experience that too, the benefits, but I can tell that you now know more than ever that trust is a precious thing; a thing not to assume, abuse or violate. Sure, there are times of misunderstanding, say 'unintentional', but it is the deliberate or malevolent that I am thinking of, abuse and all that."

"I can," *the hurt* follows.

"And you must."

*In normal life we hardly realize how much more we receive than we give, and life cannot be rich without such gratitude.*

— Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*

*When it comes to life the critical thing is whether you take things for granted or take them with gratitude.*

— G.K. Chesterton



They are *above-it-all*, “**Separate, something less**”, those that hold on to notions of superiority, their point of *power*.

Here, now, and I nearing the last of my stories on Stebbins Street, in a view

*It is blasphemy to separate oneself from the earth and look down on it like a god...it is dangerous. We can never be gods, after all—but we can become something less than human with frightening ease.*

— N.K. Jemisin, *The Hundred Thousand Kingdom*

of *power* once more; the exclusion of the many for the exaltation of the few; that in the history of humanity, there is always those who view themselves as superior, a elite and finally, *the chosen*....

They, *the chosen*, delude themselves; their thinking that in some way they are *above it all, the prime over the primal* of the present day, disregarding the truths *that there is none righteous—no not one!* In the *rank and file* or echelons of the earthbound, they are the *crème-de la-crème*; the grandest of all and as such, gods of their own making.

“Do you mean the folks that live on *the mountain* or that gated community,” says one, listening to my diatribe.

*Clowns to the left of me, jokers to the right, here I am -- not stuck in the middle, but hovering above the entire farcical spectrum, weeping as I behold my fellow man's devotion to political illusion and self-destruction.*

— Robert Higgs

“Maybe...but there is more.”

“More...more folks?”

“What I mean is they may think themselves so, but *power* occurs in degrees, of course; for what one thinks as supreme is to another inferior, beneath them and so on. Sure, they have their

presumed property and possession, but who should believe that it cannot be taken from them, life and limb?”

“I can say that I care about those folks,” says another, “but I cannot conceive how they might lose what is their own, these things, anymore that I lose what little I have.”

“I trust that you are aware of such seizure in history, albeit left to your own inquiry, but in truth there is such; the confiscation and conquest of personal property beyond that taught or studied, beyond the pale and that of reason.”

"And those folks are not beyond this-,"

"No, is the simple response; for in the finality of *power*, *the last man standing* is hardly superior or successful given that much of society—scorned for being inferior—is gone or missing and thus leaves *the last* but last, not more."

To interrupt the dialogue, this is not a common conversation among folks. Yes, poverty, welfare and other government subsidies are all a part of us, from the children of broken homes to the disabled and elderly, many who live on some form of subsistence. Here, in this story, I am speaking of the realities of a class society so much—as who can argue the facts—but I am speaking of the illusion of class that goes so far as to say,

*It's okay. We aren't in the same class. Just don't forget that some of us watch the sunset too.*

— S.E. Hinton, *The Outsiders*

"I am a sinner but at least I am as great a sinner as him or her or them."

For in the truth of who and what we are, all human, is the reality that no one person is better than another left to themselves, led to some illusion based on color, creed or the cost of their property and possession.

*For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.*

— Romans 3:23

"But this is who we are," another begins, from the Westend to *the mountain*, from the failing city schools to the college prep school, class is undeniable and unresolvable.

"is it though," I say to myself, given the once foundation of Christianity that not taught that *al have sinned* but that among our greatest call is to *love our neighbor as ourselves*.

"But am I confused, the message, ministry," that the Gospel supersedes the division of classes, the degrees of materialism or other factors that lump one from another, the least to the most and more? It's idealistic really; that a message, though powerful beyond doubt, can *remove the railroad tracks* that separate the town; that though two churches may worship the same, their leader and savoir, yet back on earth, the *tie that binds* is not, well, tied.

But history once again cannot be denied; and thought *power* publishes our supposed history, yet the stories of legend and length do stay as an alternative at the least and a contradiction at the most. Notions of equality and

*Thus, did a handful of rapacious citizens come to control all that was worth controlling in America. Thus, was the savage and stupid and entirely inappropriate and unnecessary and humorless American class system created. Honest, industrious, peaceful citizens were classed as bloodsuckers, if they asked to be paid a living wage. And they saw that praise was reserved henceforth for those who devised means of getting paid enormously for committing crimes against which no laws had been passed....*

— Kurt Vonnegut, *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater*

indiscriminate are but ideas too—though these are far less founded and openly contradicted among and between *power*.

“But socialism is not the answer,” an informed student follows. “Look at-,”

“No, I don’t believe so either,” I interrupt, although this country and socialism are not strangers at all.

“Was the *Great Society* or the *New Deal* socialistic,” I ask myself more than the student or others.

And what about the labor movements of the early 1900’s, the struggles of the *working class* to earn a *living wage*?

*The few own the many because they possess the means of livelihood of all ... The country is governed for the richest, for the corporations, the bankers, the land speculators, and for the exploiters of labor. [Most of] mankind is working people. So long as their fair demands - the ownership and control of their livelihoods - are set at naught, we can have neither men's rights nor women's rights. [Most of] mankind is ground down by industrial oppression in order that the small remnant may live in ease.*

— Helen Keller, *Rebel Lives: Helen Keller*

Every town has its’ railroad tracks, every country it’s classes, but it the denial of it that I find so repulsive and repugnant; that the phrases of equality, equal rights—or any rights for that matter—are afforded by all. You don’t have to *go far* to feel the inequity and disparity *slap you* in the face—that is, if your face is exposed and your conscience distracted by

statecraft and *the show*.

"There were better times, when the working classes were, well, better," one points out. Better jobs, better chances and a better economy, community."

"Was that true for all, everyone," another asks, rhetorically, referring to racial inequality, the prevailing prejudice pronounced regionally, slavery and then *Jim Crow* and so on.

Even now, on the eve of yet more "equality" per our government, are those EEO questions as a standard of any application: race-color-ethnicity; gender and then a few others pertaining to military service and disabilities.

"But these questions are key to-," another responds, evidently *sold* on the equities of equality, at least as it applies to these standard questions, the applicant's class and so forth.

"But does the job (posting) require or otherwise necessitate, one or another class," I ask. "Does the job description read: 'Applicant must be \_\_\_\_\_ race or \_\_\_\_\_ gender, or any other relevant to the standard questions.'"

"No, not in words, but-,"

"Then why make such questions required," I ask. "Why discriminate based on your class," or can anyone really believe that such questions are merely *for the record*, to be logged for some agency or institution to regulate, report?

"What's your point?"

"My point is that government discriminates...as it serves their interest to institutionalize racism and sexism—divisions and classes among the folks. If and as with *power*, a divided society is as equally preferred as a distracted or deceived one. Classes are critical, class conflict to justify controls under the

*What sense would it make to classify a man as handicapped because he is in a wheelchair today, if he is expected to be walking again in a month, and competing in track meets before the year is out? Yet Americans are generally given 'class' labels [based on] their transient location in the income stream. If most Americans do not stay in the same broad income bracket for even a decade, their repeatedly changing 'class' makes class itself a nebulous concept. Yet the intelligentsia are habituated, if not addicted, to seeing the world in class terms.*

— Thomas Sowell, *The Vision of the Anointed: Self-Congratulation as a Basis for Social Policy*

*Same Old Same Old, so it was*

banner of security and safety...allegedly alleviating fears though in reality fabricating and fomenting it.

*In every case, however, the government seeks to turn public fear to its own advantage. Directing fear in a society is tantamount to controlling that society.*

— Robert Higgs

Indeed, *power* is both the means and end, first to construct the classes and then to convince *the masses* that all such division is the result of the individual mores or

will—and not for the purpose of institutional and state *power*.

*Separate, something less*, is not about community or about *the better angels*, the Gospel and God's will for his creation, but rather is finally about *power* over persons, *the masses*. *Separate, something less*, is not about *power*

*People who dismiss the unemployed and dependent as 'parasites' fail to understand economics and parasitism. A successful parasite is one that is not recognized by its host, one that can make its host work for it without appearing as a burden. Such is the ruling class in a capitalist society.*

—Jason Read

to protect these masses but rather is about *power* abuses; first, to pose as the purveyor of peace and protection when in fact the perpetrator and instigator; second, not about calling out supposed *parasites* among *the masses* but rather about covering-up *power's* parasitical nature—*sucking the life*

*out of lives*—under the guise of good government or a sound state.

"As to the "health" of *power*, that is-,"

"War," the student speaks up, evidently familiar with the claims that *war is the health of the state*.

And the health of the state is all about us from the military post, to the depot to several memorials honoring not all Americans but German and Italian POWs, amid a cast of fallen and still alive, living-out their service or duty. But even then, in times of war, as never ending, is more *separate, something less*, that serve under the rubric of a republic or some other name implying liberty and all, aimed to protect and defend it wherever they can, should or will—never mind the economic interest as the underlying cause and calculus.

"Another point then, is-,"

*"Power is at its peak in times of war," and with it as another claim, that truth is always the first casualty of war and thus, those that make the ultimate sacrifice do so without an understanding of either the cause or the cost of war, the masses intentionally left ill-informed and the intelligentsia, the bidding of the elite, the economically advantaged, the players in the grand chessboard.*

*I began to appreciate that authentic truth is never simple and that any version of truth handed down from on high—whether by presidents, prime ministers, or archbishops—is inherently suspect.*

— Andrew J. Bacevich, *Washington Rules: America's Path to Permanent War*

*Separate, something less are the masses, that though they form their own pecking order, yet finally they must (and will) come to accept a lowly, humble place in the order of things. The vast majority—those who have survived—will truly be awakened with tears too many to count and time too little to care about the way it was and worse, the way that they lead us to be.*

*The consolidation of the states into one vast empire, sure to be aggressive abroad and despotic at home, will be the certain precursor of ruin which has overwhelmed all that preceded it.*

—Robert E. Lee

Choose then what you prefer, “Creativity, then conformity”, for who is capable of both?

Another day of 24 hours, 1440 minutes or 86,400 seconds is either to rest,

*The human spirit lives on creativity and dies in conformity and routine.*

– Vilayat Inayat Khan

to create or to conform. What to do?

When we rest, sleep or lay flat, we are more apt to create

than conform, more able to focus than to fear—as to comply with *this or that*, an order, decree or some apparent law that now does *this or that* for reasons that sometime defy reasoning let alone the legalities of the matter.

We should know, not only on *Stebbins Street* but far beyond, that any nation the legalizes murder, the systematic purging of pre-birth humans, can legalize or otherwise force anything—and I mean,

“Anything!”

For those in authority, the kind of humans with political *power* are seldom accountable, *deceiving...deceiving*, deeply darkened by the excess endemic among and between them. Not that such folks don’t do good, but then the question,

“But what is ‘good’?” and then, “Good for whom or what?”

*Making America Great Again* sounds great, as slogan’s go, but does this undertaking really include *creativity* or is more, *conformity*, say to,

“World government, an international currency and finally, a human deity?”

*Real courage is doing the right thing when nobody's looking. Doing the unpopular thing because it's what you believe, and the heck with everybody.*

– Justin Cronin, *The Summer Guest*

*Draining the Swamp* is another of those *feel-good* ideas; the kind that, as with the old Western, there is a hero that rises *out of the dust* to clean-up the town and to restore decency, the

decadence dead or driven-off like cattle. Whether the hero demands with words as, “We can do this,” or not, nevertheless, *his actions speak louder..., his intention evidently good*. But beyond intentions is the outcome, and thus far, *the swamp* is more *swampy* than it’s ever been, layers and layers of muck and foul-smelling rot, teeming with snakes and all kinds of venomous and vile

creatures, the amber water diluted with the blood of those who gave their *last full measure*.

*Creatively* comes to those who see it differently than it is or has been; it comes with the intent of not only doing something differently but making something different, better perhaps, but varied and valued by some measure. It takes *daring* to be inventive, innovative, imaginative, and illicit—anything but *conformity*, a passivity that likens to *status quo*, the conventions of “order” and all that is used to destroy our thinking, our thoughts made illegal.

*Conformity* is so much easier because it requires nothing to consider except everything fueled by fear, and to say it,

“Fear.”

They love fear. And tough these two words seldom mix well, *love* and *fear*; still, *love* and *fear* in this context are, as complete in form and function,

“They love *power* and with that, use *fear* as both a means,” and thus the two so intertwined as to cause those overpowered to intermittingly feel fear and love, danger, and security. Think of it like extortion, but *kinder* and *gentler* at times, where in the perplexity, *the overpowered* or outmatched pay for protection on threat that if they don’t pay, *conformity*, then danger awaits them. Yes, in some sense, they are *damned if you do and damned if you don’t*, fearful all the way around, the only love as the gains, *power*. *Conformity* may save a life, still functioning, but in such cases, *the outmatched* may say in despair,

“I have no life,” to mean that living in fear is the worse “deal”, all *creativity* driven-off like cattle to the meat market and no love left to rest in or on, the *tie that binds us to our better angels*.

*We have to continually be jumping off cliffs and developing our wings on the way down.*

— Kurt Vonnegut, *If This Isn't Nice, What Is?*  
*Advice for the Young*

*When you understand the mechanics of stress and master the techniques to manipulate someone's fears and dreams, you will be powerful.*

—Gregory Hartley



But then the alternative, *creativity*, which perhaps is a plan or idea to detain or defy “the deal”, acting as *innocent as a dove* but in truth, as *shrewd as a serpent*—which may actually work for at least the moment.

*They feared me because I feared nothing.*

– Lydia Lunch

In such a fix, the outmatched might, on impulse, refuse saying simply, “No,” only to pass fear or fearing and the way down, no chance of returning, to *the bottom*. Still, to refuse might just work, *calling a bluff* or otherwise, *testing the mettle* of this mafia-like deal, and sending the brut or goon squad to their next potential *conformity*. Thus, *creativity* comes at or with some risks, not the least of which is your life.

What is worse than a brut or goon squad is authority without accountability; the *power* given full immunity in all matters of criminality and corruption, aptly characterized as “The Teflon Man” or in the phrase,

“They could do no wrong!”

Of the strains of *power*, one of the most insidious is the arbitrary form(s), for in such instances and incidences—never “cases”—no justification (or justice) is necessary other than what the *power* prefers, any limitations merely

a point of view. Expressed in words, arbitrary *power* says,

*There can be no greater stretch of arbitrary power than to seize children from their parents, teach them whatever the authorities decree they shall be taught, and expropriate from the parents the funds to pay for the procedure.*

– Isabel Paterson

“It is just because I believe it is so,” with the implication: authority without accountability, a use or abuse of *power* beyond the limitations of the law or any other sources of oversight or order.

Returning to an earlier subject of this story, the systematic murder of preborn children, the so-called justification, more rationalization, defies science but dismissing the earliest of the unborn as not yet human and therefore, “the choice”, not that of murder. Completely conclusive however is that science declares that any such offspring, born or unborn, are still that species, that form of creature.

"How can *power* defy science," one might ask given the above details, to which the answer is,

"Arbitrarily," or without any limitations including the conclusions of science; for otherwise, the killing of these children would be murder and more, genocide.

"Who or what would do such a thing, genocide," I ask and then answer,

"Power given conformity."

But is their more, to this *conformity*, or can there be—not

that genocide is not gruesome enough to make the point, *power* abused beyond security? And as I think about, *creativity*, I say to myself,

"Having arbitrarily dictated when life begins, abused *power* can also dictate when life should end, genocide beyond infanticide."

Everyone has a price, right? What I mean is that, as with slavery, a utility or value is placed on life, lives. Whereas one effort to save a life may account for untold costs, financial and otherwise, another may simply be discounted to valueless under the guise of *choice* but by direction of *power* gone awry.

*Creativity* is not completely removed by *power*; in fact, and as a rule, if *creativity* serves *power*—or practices *conformity*—it is well received, rightly sanctioned, financed and funded, and richly rewarded, even renown.

"What kind of *creativity* is this," you might ask, besides that which serves *power*, to which I say,

"The kind that feeds their appetite, their lust for *power*."

"How can *power* lust for more...?"

Remember the "love and fear" mix, that *fear* is loved by *power*? As there is a love for fear there is also a lust for power, more power. The *love for fear* wants fear to flourish, for with that, so comes *conformity*, control...*power*. The greater the gap between *the fearful* and *the power*, the greater the *conformity* and the less *creativity* in the best sense. But I am not yet done with the two.

"The first time it was reported that our friends were being butchered there was a cry of horror. Then a hundred were butchered. But when a thousand were butchered and there was no end to the butchery, a blanket of silence spread. When evil comes like falling rain, nobody calls out "stop!"

— Bertolt Brecht, Selected Poems

*Conformity* and *fear* are close, very close—the “opposite of courage”, so says Rollo May. As with the murder of unborn children, *conformity* is best accomplished by masking it as individual choice, an appeal rather than an agenda to rid society of some significant part of its population. That the mother suffers from the consequences of her decision, as well as the complications of such procedures, is largely ignored or overlooked in view of objective, to cull the herd.

*A prison becomes a home when you have the key.*

– George Sterling

Creativity is not without the combination of love and fear, as for example the nature of a mother to protect her offspring, spontaneous fear driving her sacrificial love, their safety. *Creativity* is of course her nurturing and preferably her desire to raise responsible, creative, caring individuals—often against *conformity* that as a system, desires compliant, obedient collectives.

*Doors are for people with no imagination.*

– Derek Landy, *Skullduggery Pleasant*

Never in history has *conformity* been so possible, so systematic with the concentration and centralization of *power*, the unparallel fabrication of fear(s). The media, films, and other modes, can and do portend of this *conformity*, programming viewers to unconsciously or unquestionably embrace *the inevitable* often under a banner of “the greater good”, safety and security and world peace; that just as systematic murder or infanticide is masked by “your right to your

*But human beings are not machines, and however powerful the pressure to conform, they sometimes are so moved by what they see as injustice that they dare to declare their independence. In that historical possibility lies hope.*

– Howard Zinn, *You Can't Be Neutral on a Moving Train: A Personal History of Our Times*

body”, so too are other pernicious and punitive points of *power hidden behind the curtain* of some grand wizard or god-like figure. Few may disagree that *power* does not, as a practice, lie, cheat and steal, and yet many figuratively but dutifully lie prostate before *power* without so much as a question let alone issue. Few may disagree that *power* is *deceived...deceiving*, and yet many are

too distracted to give a care so long as they are not inconvenienced or uncomfortable. Some may say,

"We're taking America back," convinced that *the inevitable* and the attendant *fears* will pass, in essence denying that God is supreme, the scriptures inherent.

Further and more fantastical is that some may say,

"We're draining the swamp," (with "the swamp" characterizing the limitless depth and breadth of government, *the state*), convinced that an apparent "outsider" is *just the man* willing and able to get it done; a superhero to defeat the dastardly *deep state* and all that which has racked-up the largest national debt to date and this year, largest fiscal deficit, in history—the world over!

Promises are merely words to *power*, merely a way to placate folks with dreams of privilege as that of *sugar plumbs* to the children of yesterday's Christmas. Slogans, banners and other such devices are worthy to consider, unlike "fake new", and if you just believe as a another act of *conformity*, then you too can realize the dream, all *creativity* cast to the wind—never mind *the inevitable* or any existing basis such as trust, the foundation for any healthy relationship. But unlike *creativity* which asks, "Why, what for, or where from," *conformity carries the day*, denying all intuition, intelligence, and individualism in lieu of a lie.

*The American system is the most ingenious system of control in world history.... It is a country so powerful, so big, so pleasing to so many of its citizens that it can afford to give freedom of dissent to the small number who are not pleased. There is no system of control with more openings, apertures, leeway, flexibilities, rewards for the chosen, winning tickets in lotteries... none that disperses its controls more complexly through the voting system, the work situation, the church, the family, the school, the mass media--none more successful in mollifying opposition with reforms, isolating people from one another, creating patriotic loyalty.!"*

— Howard Zinn, *A People's History of the United States*

## “What most of us long for?”

By the title of the first of two epilogues, is the daunting effort of representing “most” and then, what most “long for”; but still I try in less than a

*To be human, that's what most of us long for. It is the human which has become myth to us.*

— Anne Rice, *The Queen of the Damned*

single page, roughly 300 words.

“What does it mean to be human,” is a question that one or more may consider on occasion.

The person appalled by the images on the screen, an apparent event, may understandably say,

“That is not human” or at least, “...not right”, moral, ethical, or fair. And after a moment to care, the person *moves on*, preferably to something more positive, promising or at least palatable, laying aside the inhumanity or humans, a cruelty that makes man his own worst enemy, his greatest predator. With more such media of graphic violence and brutality, whether staged or truth, the person increasingly is desensitized, the death of outrage replaced by morbid curiosity followed potentially by sheer enthusiasm, entertainment; that like the Romans who cheered in the spectacle of the coliseum, so too this person that, from the convenience of a screen, virtually views such that *the real thing* is hardly if at all distinguishable, his sensitivity seared, *conditioned*.

To be human is to not abhor the images but also those that promote and produce them—aimed to degrade humanity to some place beneath all other creation, the want and will to destroy itself.

To be human is to desire the truth in all ways, hearing and speaking with the intention of reserving and respecting it, while equally, detesting lies, intentional distortions, delusions, and deceptions as abusive, adversarial.

To be human is to transcend beyond the confines of our physical being, our flesh, to the supernatural, the spiritual, within and beyond the soul of *the created to the creator*.

To be human is to know that there is a creator and that we are each the created, intended to be human but woefully inept left to ourselves or the *powers* beneath us.

## “It’s never too late to be what you might have been”

*It is too late*, I think, disappointed in moments of my own life, my failures and limitations, insufficiencies and indiscretions, weakness and wonders of it all

But then I consider the day,  
today, and possibly tomorrow. I  
consider that while I am only *the*  
*created*, still there is *the creator*

*Change and changing is a given, but the  
how, when, and where?*

– George Elliot

who is mighty, merciful and most of all, able....

Can the created change himself, create *changing*? Sure, that is shown, but then the question,

“Change to what, who,” or “*changing* for whom or to what,” for cause or objectives are critical, crucial to the whole experience, results.

A person can be (or was) the worst of his creation and, though rare, change—experience *changing*—in a radical way, *once lost* in the degradation and destruction of his own but *now found* in their preservation, salvation. Such *changing* is rare even peculiar, as so often *the worst* get worse as *power* pursues power and lies beget lies.

Change or *changing* for the better is much more common and considerate when a person is compelled—as we realize through our individual human experience—though it may not *stick*, the supposed change more chameleon, the *true colors* resurfacing somewhat analogous to *a dog returning to its vomit*, their nature.

Compulsion to change, *changing*, is driven by fear, by love or both, as *the created*, whether child or childlike, learns ideally through genuine care, selfless and sacrificial. A person can certainly be forced by fear alone but not without anger and resentment, visible or repressed. Driven with love however, *the created* takes comfort, receiving and respecting change, *changing*, with gratitude, affection and even adoration.