1962 • 1965 • 1973 • 1982 • 1992 • 2003 • Bags • Bureaucracy • Cute • Dining • Domes • Laundry • Resorts • Criminals I've Known • Living in Paris • A Visit to the US Consulate in Paris • Two Train Rides • Vincent's Bedroom • America, America • Thanksgiving • Viva Las Vegas • Collecting • Small Change • What I Want • Work • Say We Are a Revolution • A Unified Theory of Acceptance and Letting Go: Parts 1 & 2 • The Sea and Memory

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JEFF RIAN

Purple Years

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PURPLE YEARS

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Contents

5 INTRODUCTION

YEARS
11 1962
15 1965
19 1973
23 1982
27 1992
33 2003

CLICHES
39 Bags
43 Bureaucracy
47 Cute
51 Dining
55 Domes
59 Laundry
63 Resorts

EXPERIENCES
69 Criminals I've Known
73 Living in Paris
79 A Visit to the US Consulate in Paris
83 Two Train Rides
87 *Vincent's Bedroom*

HISTORY
93 America, America
97 Thanksgiving
101 Viva Las Vegas

COMMENTARY
109 Collecting
115 Small Change
121 What I Want
125 Work
131 Say We Are a Revolution
137 A Unified Theory of Acceptance and Letting Go: Part 1
141 A Unified Theory of Acceptance and Letting Go: Part 2
145 The Sea and Memory

Introduction

A few of these pieces appeared, in somewhat different form, in *Purple* magazine, as it was called between the summer of 1998 and the winter of 2004 — but was originally founded in 1992, by Elein Fleiss and Olivier Zahm, as the magazine *Purple Prose*. Most of the others have appeared in *The Purple Journal*, a more recent spin-off, published by Elein Fleiss, where I'm a regular contributor. The title of the book reflects what might be thought of as my very "purple prose." The essays draw upon significant years I lived through, clichés that evolved during those years, personal experiences, my curmudgeonly view of history, and a bit of wary commentary. Cosmically, they derive from a personal drift between worlds — the world of playing music, which from my early adolescence I strongly pursued, playing live in nightclubs, often six nights a week, and later recording CDs, and the world of art, which I eventually wrote about for magazines, catalogs, and monographs. Except for one, however, the essays are not about art. But they do reflect my natural tendency toward improvisation in life. I am basically cynical about life and history on a grand scale, but I like people and I lean toward optimism, especially when I think about evolution as opposed to history. It seems to me that adaptation, like improvisation, is a more hopeful metaphor for life's struggle than survival is. In this vein I am an ardent follower of recent science writing by neuro-

scientist Steven Pinker, evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins, and Neo-Darwinian philosopher Daniel Dennett, and I consider evolutionary biology a deserving replacement for the grand narrative I grew up with, which turned around American-style free-market capitalism and the descendants of Karl Marx, capitalism's most famous critic. I position myself somewhere between the two. So these pieces pose open-ended, adaptive-oriented questions and they reveal how my related reading in history and evolution have influenced my writing — almost in the order of my reading, as I have been reminded of by my close friends, Dike Blair, Mark Fishman, Marty Vickers, and Lewis Baltz, each one of whom has in one way or another influenced my reading and my writing.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I've been writing regularly for publication since 1987. I've worked at Purple as writer and editor for over 15 years. Currently I'm also an associate editor for *Purple Fashion*, which Olivier publishes. Clearly Purple has gone through many changes, and I've been lucky to be a go through them all. So I owe much more than a mere thank you to both Elein and Olivier. But I must pay special gratitude to Elein, who first invited me to participate in the evolution of Purple, and by doing so significantly advanced my own evolution. She also laid out this book, for which she deserves my sincerest thanks.

I often edit my published work myself, something I don't recommend. I re-edited these essays, and had them corrected by Marty Vickers, a copyeditor friend who is also my current musical collaborator. This is also the first publication where "I" regularly shows up as a pronominal frame of reference. In this regard I apologize to any author I've misread, misinterpreted, or have inadvertently stolen from.

Jeff Rian
Paris, November 2008

YEARS

1962

It was us a year of us versus them, the good guys against the bad. The world shrunk to the size of a TV set that was about to explode.

I was growing up just outside of Washington, D.C. For a while kids from families fleeing Cuba had been attending the private Catholic school I went to for eight years. I had a crush on a Cuban girl named Beatrice. We won a twist contest at a school dance that year. She wore a red polka-dot dress with enough starched-lace petticoats underneath to make it look like a shelf. The more we twisted, the more I saw of her burnt-caramel legs.

Every Friday our school held air-raid drills. We'd crouch under our wood-topped metal desks, our hands clasped over the backs of our heads, which was smashed between our knees. Up until October of 1962 we hadn't taken the drills that seriously. The escalating crisis played out that month between the US and the USSR changed our attitude. High-altitude American U2 spy planes photographed Soviet missiles on Cuban soil, 90 miles from Florida, and 1500 miles from the Pentagon — a primary Soviet target about five miles from my house. We'd be fried to a crisp in a missile attack.

Many of my classmates' fathers worked for the government. Mine worked with government secrets. I didn't know that at the time, and I never found out what my father really did — whatever *real* meant in

those days. At dinner he'd talked — brag really — about an "underground White House" buried deep in the mountains of West Virginia that he had visited a number of times on "business." He traveled to New Mexico, Florida, and California, places where secret government projects had required high levels of Federal funding. In 1958 he brought home a scale model of the Vanguard satellite, barely a month before the rocket that was set to launch the real one into orbit collapsed upon takeoff. The mission was a total failure, millions of dollars up in smoke — and the Soviets looked like magicians in comparison. But millions of dollars meant nothing to a country as wealthy as America.

In 1962 the Space Age and the Nuclear Age were converging, and with the impending doom of the Cuban Missile Crisis, as it was called, the mood was dark. What little I knew about it kept me awake on the night of October 26. The window next to my bed framed a starry night's vista, through which I imagined missiles streaming in — from Cuba, from submarines that were who knows where, and from that unknowable world behind what Churchill called the Iron Curtain.

The morning of October 27, 1962, *The Washington Post* headline read, "U.S. Hints New Action on Cuba; K tells Ships to Avoid Blockade." A subheading read, "U.S. Ponders Move before Cuban Bases Can Force Blackmail," and a journalist wrote: "President Kennedy and soviet Premier Nikita S. Khrushchev are approaching knife-edge decisions of war or peace, far more ominous than the ship blockade in the Caribbean." Further over was the headline, "Never before had the Cold War been so hot."

My father read all the major newspapers (I read the comics); he had a telex in his office and on the rooftop of the building where he worked sat an enormous radar antenna. Everyone talked about Soviet ships, the Soviet blockade, nuclear bomb tests, the White House "hotline" — a telephone link to the Kremlin — and the Soviet-built Berlin wall. It was only a year after construction on it had started and already people were trying to tunnel under or sneak through it hidden in the undercarriages of cars and trucks. Converging images included phalanxes of B29 bombers, silent nuclear submarines, and the Space Age's new Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles (ICBMs), which launched from submarines and underground silos in the hinterlands of the US and Soviet Russia. They were aimed at major cities, seats of governments, and major military installations. Civilians became primary targets. And spies were everywhere: in the news, at the movies, in the comics, and living nearby, and maybe — for all I knew — in the bedroom next to mine. What I knew about Cuba was a combination of shy, wavy-haired Beatrice and

photographs of bearded Fidel in his army fatigues — both people were incomprehensible to me, but for different reasons. Sides were drawn, contrasting Good and Bad. And we sure knew which side we were on!

The morning of October 28 arrived, and with it came the sun and the Sunday morning funny papers. My father shrugged off the political insanity. It was fate — unchangeable, and therefore not worth worrying about. He always seemed to know something we didn't know, and to this day (now in his 90s) he refuses to go into detail about the work he did. Fortunately for us all, the looming clouds of Armageddon evaporated and the Cold War's hottest moment cooled down. Monday would be another Monday.

But a far-reaching paranoia would emerge, along with a public demand for greater freedom of information and increased civil liberties. Forty years later there is still nothing done about misinformation or the surrendering of civil liberties resulting from the incoherent protection policies designed by President George "Dubya" Bush to protect America from the interchangeable foes collectively called Terrorists. As scary as it was back in '62, we were freer. And I still wonder about Beatrice.

1965

On Sunday night, July 25, 1965, Bob Dylan brought on an electric band to play a short set with him at the Newport Folk Festival. He and the band had hardly started playing when they began to be booed and hissed at by folk music enthusiasts who'd come to hear their music as they thought it should be heard: in its purest state, acoustically, straight from the heart, with the lyrics discernible for the entire audience. The heathen Dylan had sinned against the truth and brandished Satan's sword, the electric guitar. When the bass and drums kicked in, Pete Seeger, one of the most important figures of the American folk music revival, thought the sound was so bad he wished he had an ax to cut the power cables.

History is told in epics borne in single fiery events. Reality is like a myriad of brewing kettles that go unnoticed until one of them boils over. Dylan was the messenger of a boiling-over that had been brewing everywhere. His "plugging in" shocked folk enthusiasts and he became the target of their attacks. But in reality the electric guitar had already taken the world by storm.

I worked at a family owned, fast-food restaurant called Burger Villa that summer. By August I'd saved enough money to buy a Silvertone Twin-12 amplifier at Sears. In a local newspaper ad I found a second-hand 1959 Fender Stratocaster with a rosewood neck and sunburst fin-

ish. The amp and the guitar each cost $160, and to buy them it took all the money I'd earned flipping burgers, along with all I could borrow (and never pay back!) from my parents.

I myself had been a folk fanatic. Several years earlier two friends from my Boy Scout troop and I played traditional songs, songs by political folk singers like Pete Seeger, Odetta, and The Weavers, including by Dylan, as well as by the more commercially known folksingers like Harry Belafonte, The Kingston Trio, Peter Paul and Mary. My voice hadn't yet changed, but we played at school events, private parties, at the pool our families belonged to — anywhere that would have us. We admired those little chin beards called goatees and we'd heard about drugs called pep pills. "Blowin' in the Wind" seemed so timeless that I was shocked to learn that Dylan had written it in 1962. What did I know? Once I started playing the electric guitar I stopped caring. I was off of folk music and "into" a new evolving passion: American blues and English rock — bands like the Stones, the Animals, the Kinks, the Beatles, etc. Dylan was still riding the crest of the folk music wave. We all started listening to "the Blues," played by whites and blacks, which tells you something about the role of music in the politics of an age finally dealing with Civil Rights. We dreamed of our Mecca: Greenwich Village, The Scene that all the little clubs being opened in Washington, D.C. (clubs where we would go with our fake IDs to drink beer) was inspired by. And Greenwich Village was where Dylan lived. It seemed absurd to us that he was lambasted: the whole world was electric in 1965.

The word *electric* was appended to every aspect of our lives: to our hair (synonym for Afros); to our kind of Kool-Aid, a punch laced with psychedelic pharmaceuticals; to experiences that seemed psychically charged; and above all to rock music. Pre-Raphaelite clothes, psychedelic drugs, crazy hair, four-track tape recorders, stereos, and FM radios were also reformatting our lives. We didn't know the industrial world was on the verge of becoming electronic. We were in the throes of electrifying experience.

The dark side of the electric brew was the Vietnam War. In February of 1965 the North Vietnamese launched a surprise attack on the south during the Tet holiday, escalating America's "police action" in Vietnam, and necessitating the imposition of the military draft for American men between the ages of 18 and 26. A young man named Bill Sutton, who was my best friend since I was six, would be killed in Vietnam. Folk music enthusiasts unilaterally opposed the war. Soldiers listened to rock music and took psychedelic drugs. Senator Frank Church of Idaho said "the systematic and sustained bombing of North Vietnam can only lead us into war." The bombing operation was called Rolling Thunder, as if it was a rock group's tour. Church and George McGovern (loser to Richard Nixon of the 1968 presidential race) said Americans wanted a "negotiated peace," a term that would haunt us — that still haunts us. Nixon dragged the war out until 1973.

On February 21, 1965, Malcolm X was assassinated in Harlem, causing a rift in the more militant arm of the Civil Rights Movement. In March, Martin Luther King led 25,000 peaceful activists in a march from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 had addressed race problems, but some states simply ignored the ruling. California tried to circumvent law with Proposition 14, which blocked the fair-housing section of the act. On August 11, 1965, Los Angeles's South Central neighborhood of Watts exploded into the greatest race riot in America history.

On October 15, the student-based National Coordinating Committee to End the War in Vietnam organized the first public burning of draft cards. Within eight days two American war protesters set themselves to fire, copying the self-incineration of Vietnamese Buddhist monks in 1963. Dylan's prophetic song from 1963, "The Times They Are A-Changin'," became the antiwar anthem of what The Who called "My Generation."

The dissolution of the past had been set in motion long before 1965; America was only tenuously held together by President Johnson's concept of a Great Society, a fatalistic combination of war and social progress, seemingly made possible by cheap oil and busy American industry. Dylan's "going electric" appositely signaled the world's plugging in. The war and the riots signaled a falling apart. Many thought a social Revolution was underway. The jolts of social energy lasted until 1973 when a dimming economy pulled us down, and down we linger still.

1973

In his introduction to the 1984 reissue of his essay, "The Literature of Exhaustion," originally published in 1967, the American novelist John Barth called the period from 1965 to 1973 the "American High Sixties." Was it ever: the Vietnam War, psychedelics, acid rock, political activism, free sex, FM radio, hippies, fusion jazz, stereo music, and even the artistic career of Robert Smithson. Those eight years ushered in the lowering of American middle class economic power and, according to historian John Lukacs (*A Thread of Years*, 1998), they defined the end of civilization at least as it was known before the Age of Television. You can't always be aware of events as they occur: 1973 was a concluding year, and events were propitious.

Richard Nixon started his second presidential term on the 20th of January, one week after the Miami Dolphins completed a perfect football season (16 wins/0 losses, a record as yet unrepeated). Two days later the Supreme Court ruled in Roe versus Wade that women could not be prevented from having an abortion during the first three months of pregnancy (a ruling now hotly contested by Republicans and conservatives). The next day a ceasefire in the Vietnam War was announced in Paris, but hostilities dragged on for a year. By mid-February American prisoners of war began to return home (John McCain among them), but the "last man" never would come back. On April 8th Picasso died.

On May 17th Senator Sam Ervin began the Watergate hearings that would end the Nixon presidency with impeachment proceedings. The suffix "-gate" would enter the national vocabulary, to be appended to the names of many forthcoming scandals. On October 6th war between Israel and Syria and Egypt erupted; on October 17th OPEC began an oil embargo against the West; and on the 24th the Arab-Israeli war ended with the Egyptian and Syrian armies dejected and all but destroyed. On December 6th, Nixon's second-term vice-president, Gerald Ford, was sworn in as president (on October 10th Nixon's first-term vice-president, Spiro Agnew, had been forced to resign for tax evasion).

The Watergate scandal resulted from Nixon's paranoid attempt to control information. He was worried about discoveries of illegal funds he'd received for his 1972 reelection campaign, specifically the $100,000 (a major sum at the time) he'd been given by billionaire Howard Hughes (then a hermit living in a hotel in Las Vegas, Hughes was horrified of any kind of germs, and only trusted Mormons). Nixon's handpicked henchmen, called the "Plumbers," broke into the offices of psychiatrist Daniel Ellsberg, a former government employee, and into the office of the Democratic National Committee at the Watergate Hotel, and on June 17, 1972, were caught by a Watergate security guard. Several were later jailed. Nixon was impeached in 1973 but left office before any proceeding. The Watergate hearings were shown live on television, from morning till night.

We all watched Tricky Dick Nixon's destruction, many of us gleefully. After the OPEC oil embargo gasoline prices shot up from around 25 cents per gallon to nearly a dollar. Lines formed at gas stations. People worried about rationing. In Japan, where oil stocks were kept to only a one-day surplus, panic set in. Shortly thereafter economies around the world weakened. New York City went bankrupt. Purchasing power would noticeably decline and a new term was coined: *stagflation*, meaning low growth with rising prices. The war in Vietnam was ending just as the problems in the Middle East were heating up. Hippies cut their hair. New pop albums included Marvin Gaye's "Let's Get It On," Elton John's "Yellow Brick Road," Roberta Flack's "Killing Me Softly," and John Lennon's "Mind Games." An eight-year window of possibility that began in 1965 was closing. Postmodernism, designer jeans, nouvelle cuisine, and new wave would take over in the New Age. Paranoia in the American High Sixties ran high. Youth were afraid of the police, the government, and the Vietnam War. The age of information was reaching fruition (the C-programming language was used to reprogram Unix, simplifying computer language). But the era's true

culmination was the Watergate hearings and the possible impeachment of a President. The as-yet-named baby-boom generation was just entering the workforce, demanding a golden age of materialism and comfort, one just like their parents had enjoyed. They (we) would go on to create one in a landscape of debt and credit cards. And so the sun set on one civilization. And rose on the tribal world of the present.

1982

You can't predict the future and you never really know how the past affects you. The past drives us like it's a cosmic vehicle from inner space. The future waits up ahead like a cop, a priest, or a killer. You try to clarify memories as they stream past, guiding you into the future, but it's like driving in the dead of night with a flashlight for a headlight (to borrow E. L. Doctorow's metaphor for writing a novel). In darkness you project a story, heedless of the cop, conscious of the priest, and blind to the killer. Fantasies come on like advertisements in the jet streams of desire and hope, urging your experiences toward their best route. When you reach the age of 80, somewhere inside you're still 15, 27, 45, and 60, if those were the ages of your greatest actions and your life's most fateful events, its emotional highs and lows. Like arguing pallet bearers, memories launch you forward, change your emotional direction, remind you who you are, where you come from, and what you've done. In the end maybe it doesn't matter so much what you did, as who you are.

The ride is about time and numbers — our greatest inventions, ones that fine-tune galactic eons into nanoseconds. Time's meaning accrues as the numbers mount, incrementally up, down, and around history and destiny's grids and ladders. Snakes abound. The one thousands recently segued into the two thousands, which may have been

an eye-shocker to the people who saw Stanley Kubrick's 1968 movie, *2001: A Space Odessey*, when it came out, in 1968. Such numbers seem to focus memory's cloudy images, those only vaguely real in everyone's mental cosmos. In terms of cosmic time, humanity's era is a blip, close to nothing. But with numbers we can reel in the cosmos (like the band Steely Dan's metaphor, "reeling in the years").

Any date from the last millennia is a false number in a make-believe calendar. I chose 1982, an abstraction stamped on an Earth cycle by the proprietors of history. In the unimaginable future (so far off it's like a fairytale) the year 1982 will be a member of the subset of nineteen hundreds. I type 1982 on a computer keyboard based on that of a nineteenth-century mechanical typewriter. In the year 1982 I typed on a second-hand IBM Selectra, the preferred machine of the Fluxus art movement and of most office secretaries in the 1970s. Back then photocopiers were relatively new and carbon paper still came in handy. The little writing I did I edited with tape and scissors (old-school cutting and pasting that would be replaced by computer keystrokes). But in December of 1982, change was afoot: *Time* magazine's Man of the Year wasn't even a man, but a computer — inhuman, but certainly our progeny.

My computer owns me. I can't imagine retyping from scratch. My handwriting is increasingly illegible.

Microsoft had 100 employees working in a single building in 1982. Within a year Apple Macintosh came out with the computer mouse. Other creations of 1982 included the first CD player (Sony), Chicken McNuggets, Mandlebrot's book *The Fractal Geometry of Nature*, Maya Ying Lin's Vietnam War memorial, Michael Jackson's "Thriller," and the films *ET* and *Blade Runner*. Grace Kelly, the Princess of Monaco, and Werner Fassbinder died that year, and in Poland Solidarity's leader Lech Walesa was let out of jail. Bill Clinton was elected governor of Arkansas, and the Federal Center of Disease Control warned of an epidemic of Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome, which affected mostly gay men — 200 were already known to be dead from AIDS and many more were dying, friends of mine among them. England waged a small war against Argentina over the Falkland Islands. Ronald Reagan was President, and on August 18 the New York Stock Exchange topped $100 million as 132 million shares were sold, beginning a five year Bull Market (which lasted until the Crash of October 1987). So much happened then that still remains in action.

If you were born in 1982, this number may very well be the most repeated in your life, defining you in driver's licenses, application forms, certificates, documents, first dates, etc. If you were 15, 27, 45, or 60 years old in 1982, its meaning is linked to event-memories that took you up or down, inward or out, like a hitchhiker you took for a ride. Just 18 years short of 2000, 1982 is inconsequential in the grandest of schemes, but yet it's still important if it was eventful for you.

Things happened in 1982 that drastically affected us: computers, Aids, and radical conservatism took hold of us and then mutated into new strains of themselves. But what people mean by "the 1980s" is that five year Bull-market period in the middle of the decade, from 1982 to 1987, the years when baby boomers (like me) entered the world market, donned designer outfits, sniffed coke, and profited from junk bonds, leverage buyouts, and money-market accounts. We seeded the Great American Debtscape. Japan covered us then, as China does now.

If two words could sum up the eighties, they might be *biotechnology* and *mutant*, which together regenerated the cop, the priest, and the killer into a Cyclops. It's only a generation ago, but already we can only wonder if the eighties will be remembered as an age that framed a movement in the way the nineteen-tens framed modernism, a movement whose creators — those born around 1882, like Picasso, Joyce, Pound, etc. — stripped nineteenth century ideas to their bones, thereby making room for airplanes, cars, cinema, electricity, radio, therapeutic psychology, and conceptual art. The mutations that began around 1982 would merge biology and mechanics, yielding the potential to make machines out of atoms. We became more aware of how diseases can mutate, enabling them to pass from animals to humans. Conservatism turned revolutionaries into stockbrokers. Debt loomed. Those born in 1982 are still young. Maybe they will define a new age. We in mid-life can only watch and wonder.

1992

Five hundred years after Christopher Columbus sailed the ocean blue Western Civilization was splintering, and there was heated debate about the future. The Berlin Wall had come down, beginning in 1989, and the Soviet Union had broken apart in 1991. In 1992 the Maastritcht Treaty for a European Union was signed as a hedge against Shakespeare's Brave New World and its god, the All Mighty Dollar. Draft-dodger Bill Clinton — too intelligent and friendly for paranoid conservatives — became the first junk-food President. *In The Age of Extremes: 1914–1991*, Historian Eric Hobsbawm wrote that by the early 1990s the world "entirely lacked any international system or structure … dozens of new territorial states have appeared without any independent mechanism for determining their borders." Hobsbawm, who turned 75 in 1992, had lived through the birth and death of the Soviet revolution and for most of that time had been a diehard Marxist. He also witnessed the novel way in which wars like those in the Persian Gulf (Iraq, January 1991) and ex-Yugoslavia (beginning in 1992) would be packaged for the media, especially television. Most television watchers were more shocked by the English Prime Minister John Majors' announcement that Prince Charles and Lady Diana were officially separating than by televised images of warfare.

In 1992 amateur magazines, including *Purple Prose*, where I've worked as writer and editor since 1995, began to appear, almost in droves. These were the magazine versions of independent cinema and "indie" rock. Apple Macintosh (a computer named after a bitten fruit) and its Graphic User Interface (GUI) — a device called a mouse — took text manipulatiion beyond the photocopier and into the photo-reproduction process. It is one of the greatest personal communication tools to come along since the pencil, which was invented around 1564, the year of Shakespeare's birth.

In 1987 Bruce Benderson, who later became a regular Purple contributor, helped me to get my first job in publishing, which was working as a textbook proofreader, a job I was — and still am — really bad at. (We called correctors like me graduates of the Helen Keller School for Proofreaders.) I became an in-house freelancer, which sounds like an oxymoron, but it was a company's way of hiring employees without giving them health benefits or security beyond an hourly wage. Being a freelancer meant I could stretch or compress my working hours to suit my needs. I'd sashay in at around eleven with my coffee and banana, and leave between four and five. I did half the work at home. This gave me time to travel and to write about art.

Five years later I was working as a copyeditor, writer, and rewriter for a few different publishing houses, still in-house ("outhouse editor," as we called ourselves). That year — 1992 — all the publishing houses I worked for started buying Apple computers for their designers. The business departments kept their PCs, which was weirdly male of them; we were more like their secretaries. One publisher asked a few of us freelance project editors to learn formatting, or page layout, so we could do it in the office. (As a project editor, I oversaw manuscripts right through to the printer, working with authors, editors, formatters, and proofreaders.) We were taught how to use QuarkXPress, and how to scan and import images and texts (a waste of time). I already knew how to read specs: "10/12.5 fl-left Garamond b/b" means to use a ten-point Garamond type in 12.5 pica leading, measuring from the imaginary baselines of the capital letters (base-to-base), one line above another, with the initial word flush left.

Before they used computers, designers pasted images and texts onto what were called "boards." These were cardboard flats, which were photographed for offset lithographic presses. Computers cut out the photography step. Pages were formatted electronically. Overnight, designers had to learn to use a Mac or get another job. Many were frantic. Some were too old to change. The pressure to go electronic was

intense. Everyone thought that much less paper would be wasted. The opposite turned out to be the case. All the work in the design and editorial departments backed up because they used a cumbersome process of computer networking still in its enfant stage. All the links would jam. I'd have to wait around for hours and became addicted to click-based solitaire, which came bundled with all the big-screen Macs. My bosses didn't notice.

That same year I was asked to write for *Purple Prose* and *Flash Art* magazines. What the two had in common was that they insisted upon very little copyediting — in fact, none to speak of. They were garage magazines. They didn't have a "house style" and they didn't question my stuff (which still needs fixing). I felt freer writing for them than I did writing for *Art-in-America*, even if I did miss having an editor to correct my hopeless proofreading and my at-times horrific grammatical mistakes.

My first article for *Purple Prose*, "The Sunset Effect," was about how things seem brighter, cheerier even, before they fade out — as sunlight does, reflecting off the late-afternoon sky before it sets. By analogy, as you are about to leave school or a job the people you didn't like up until then suddenly become your friends, as say dictator Marshall Tito became a savior as Yugoslavia came apart, say — or in the way the Cold War seemed clearer once it was over, or in the way everything made before the Age of Television looks like a quaint old antique from a quieter world. In 1992 I wrote articles for *Flash Art* about Fluxus, Body Art, and a piece about the television program, "60 Minutes," which had shamelessly attacked contemporary art. Their slam fest concerned a Sotheby's auction in November of that year where a Jeff Koons vacuum cleaner hammered in at $100,000; a Robert Gober sink went for $121,000 and one of his hand-made urinals brought $140,000; and a Gerhard Richter abstract painting began its bidding at $50,000. These prices are cheap now, but the telejournalist Morley Safer — a Sunday painter of Edward Hopper-like hotel rooms — was mind-boggled by the amount of money spent on artworks he didn't understand. What right, I wrote, did he have to criticize — on national television — rich people for spending their money the way they wished? How much money did he make a year? What really bothered me was the art world's rebuttal on Public Television's Charlie Rose talk show. Three art world pundits — David Ross, then director of the Whitney Museum; Arthur Danto, a critic and writer of considerable repute; and artist Jenny Holzer — respectively came off like an ad man, a gasbag, and a sphinx. They were incapable of defending contemporary art, sounding as if its defense

was infra dig. Safer, the invited villain, came off as an innocent art lover just trying to make sense of art that, to him, looked like high-priced, repackaged dada and pop art. What was going on? Almost fifty years ago art critics complained that Jasper Johns did nothing more than redo dada. Now a TV reporter was attacking contemporary art en masse, for the prices of it, just as the art world was emerging from an economic slump that began with the October 1987 stock market crash. The prices he spoke of were nothing compared to those of today. The art world was in a period of transition, just like the magazines and the publishing industry.

Artists like Matthew Barney, Damien Hirst, Wolfgang Tillmans, and Maurizio Cattelan started showing their work around 1992. Clinton was in office, the economy revitalized, and art prices zoomed skyward. I wrote about many artists of the nineties from my perspective as a baby-boomer (and television junkie). I also wrote about how the sun had set on the age of literacy, and on Plato's Civilization, which might be called the Age of Primary Literacy — from the dawn of Western Civilization to the Age of Television.

By 1992 we boomers had one of our own running America Corporation. Hope filled our hearts. Down the hall from my boss's office at Random House, a wise elderly lexicographer named Sol was adding new words to the Random House Webster's Dictionary: *bad hair day, McJob, three-peat, hate speech, Generation X, snail mail, channel surfing, and European Union*. Eighties-style dressing up, in fashionable priestly black, was getting sportier. Everyone started wearing jeans and sneakers. Kids wore sportswear, ripped-up jeans, and oversized baby clothes, and soon began showing their underwear above their falling-down trousers, which sickened me and still does.

Looking back, it seems like air was leaking from the dream, and the Truman Show-like economic bubble that we boomers had grown up with during the 1950s and 1960s was deflating. The sunny glow of the Age of Television began to have a carcinogenic effect. It wasn't just the economics of stagflation and junk bonds, or the Greenhouse Effect, junk DNA, freeware, and Microsoft, or the Internet. It was everything. Microsoft became the "pencil" that everyone used. We had officially stepped out of the past and into … what?

Most of the time life slogs along. Notable events affect people, for better or worse. Periods define themselves and are later named, for closure's sake. The nineties offered advances in home technology that affected life everywhere. We didn't know then, and don't know now, what the *fin-de-siècle* will bring. Some dictionaries' *fin-de-siècle* definitions

refer to the world-weary 1890s, which set the stage for the modern era and defined the twentieth century. We don't know how or if the 1990s will define the future, but obviously the end of the Cold War was a monumental event. Europe is unifying and the borders of difference are evolving in ways one could not have predicted, especially along the borders of the former Soviet Union.

We're further away from postmodernism, which itself was always only an image of a dream. References like the IBM Selectra (an electric typewriter) or Al Capp (a cartoonist) have no metonymic portent today. Some say we're beyond history, meaning, in one way of looking at it, that we're beyond the possibility of certain kind of war between great nations. What we're not beyond is ourselves, and on our affect on Ol' Blue's fragile atmosphere: there's a hole in the ozone layer and a vast "brown cloud" of pollution hovering over China. But, thank God for computer mice, email, and remote control devices (which I wish were larger and easier to read). Mostly, though, I'm thankful that I was able (i.e., could still afford) to live in a city like New York during a time of such interesting change.

2003

I'm also not very analytical. You know I don't spend a lot of time thinking about myself, about why I do things.

— George W. Bush, June 4, 2003

This was the year George W. Bush, Oedipus Wreck, invented a war on terrorism, lashed out against his self-created cult of evil, and made the world a more dangerous place.

He kicked the year off telling then Secretary of State Colin Powell that he — King Wreck — had decided to declare war against Iraq. Christopher Hitchens, whom most of the world thought had leftist tendencies, said it was the right thing to do, shocking many, including me. In February Powell told the UN of "irrefutable and undeniable" evidence that Iraq was concealing weapons of mass destruction (WPMs). Equally shocking, few journalists would question Bush or Powell, though millions worldwide would condemn the decision. Thus began several years of journalistic kowtowing to war. On March 1, abetting Oedipus Wreck, Prime Minister Tony Blair compared, through innuendo, Saddam Hussein to Hitler. On March 16, after a meeting with Blair and Prime Minster Jose Maria Aznar of Spain, Oedipus Wreck announced, "tomorrow is a moment of truth for the world." Air strikes against Iraq began on March 19. US, British, Australian and Polish troops (now part of the

European Union) invaded on March 20. Two days later the US and Britain instigated Shock and Awe attacks in Baghdad, a mix of godlike power and mediated sublimity. By April 23 Paul Bremer was put in charge of Iraq, only to make a grand mess an epic mess. Untold, and unrevealed until 2007, was the $12 billion of Iraq's impounded money, 363 tons of hundred-dollar bills wrapped in plastic, flown during 2003 from New York to Baghdad, disbursed as handouts, ultimately disappearing into Iraq's economic void.

By April 15, 2003, tax day in the US, the war was considered a *fait accompli*. On May 1, off the coast of San Diego, Bush proclaimed from the aircraft carrier USS Abraham Lincoln: "In the battle of Iraq, the United States and our allies have prevailed. And now our coalition is engaged in securing and reconstructing that country." To most of the world Wreck's sole interest was conquest, for reasons no one could or has yet fully fathomed. Some claim that an obsession with his father's failure to oust Saddam in 1991 drove him on, possibly wanting prove himself. Some said it was oil, after all he and his cronies are all oilmen.

By June one US soldier was killed per day in Iraq. That number would increase as Iraqi insurgents reacted. Wreck's response was, "Bring 'em on." On July 22 Saddam's sons Uday and Qusay were killed. On December 13 Hussein was captured and of every 1000 people in Iraq 5.84 were dead. And the killing was just beginning.

Other events of the year included a "Road Map" for peace between Israel and Palestine, outlined and endorsed by the US, European Union, and Russia. It called for an end to terror and a normalization of Palestinian life and institutions. In February the space shuttle Columbia disintegrated as it re-entered the Earth's atmosphere, killing all seven astronauts. In the Horn of Africa, on April 25, the Darfur Liberation Front (now the Sudan Liberation Movement and Sudanese Liberation Army) began fighting against the government in Khartoum (about 2.5 million people would eventually be displaced). In June the dictatorial president of Zimbabwe, Robert Mugabe, cracked down on the Movement for Democratic Change, arresting its leader, Morgan Tsvangirai, tipping the country's slide into violent chaos. That same month, in Chechnya, a female suicide bomber blew herself up near a bus carrying Russian soldiers and civilians. A deadly virus in Southern China called Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) attracted world attention. An August heat wave in Paris killed 3000 people, and an electrical blackout affected major cities in the northern US and parts of Canada, some for days. In September Bush asked for an additional $87 billion for Iraq, which he called the "central front" in his global war against terror. In September singer Johnny Cash died. In October North Korea claimed it was extracting plutonium from spent nuclear fuel rods to make atomic weapons, the Chinese became the third country to send a man into outer space, and former muscleman and actor Arnold Schwarzenegger became governor of California — only a month before Michael Jackson was arrested on sex abuse charges [later acquitted]. That winter, the last, unified, issue of *Purple* magazine was published, before it molted into two magazines, *The Purple Journal* and *Purple Fashion*.

From the lead-up to war into the ensuing months, I was stunned by emails from a liberal Americans that I knew personally writing in support of a war I thought insane as well as illegal. One sixties social reformer claimed that US "influence" could redirect Iraq toward democracy. American naïveté has often been a factor in its folly. Most politicians, including Hillary Clinton, backed the war, and the name "Bush" became for many a litmus test in conversations. Those against him were silenced. France was contra, and treated as Evil's assumed accomplice. I spent October recording a CD with French singer Alexandra Roos in Tucson. French wine was rare and expensive. Arizonans didn't talk much about Iraq. Speech was guarded. During that trip, passing through New York City, friends talked about a lingering post-9/11anxiety. No attack of such a scale had ever happened since Pearl Harbor. Amateurs had attacked the US, and succeeded. Terror was criminal, not political. Reactionary Islamists were the culprits. Wreck instigated controls and tactics associated with the repressive Cold War economies of his father's generation. No one attacks the US and gets away with it, especially amateurs.

Comparisons between Iraq and Vietnam were years away [actually one year away*], as was the casualty rate, careless ineptitude, and inevitable corruption. Meanwhile, political feelings began drifting ever rightward. The Left died, "here, there, and everywhere," to quote an old Beatles song. It occurred as political consciousness gave way to paranoid insecurity. Terror became a political football linked to problems of immigration and globalization. Global warming and excessive US carbon emissions were put on the back burner to Oedipus Wreck's war on terror (the Son of the Oil fighting for black gold). His rhetoric of terror would enflame conservatives of every stripe — Christian, Islamic, and Jewish. The Left was directionless in a religious conflict, as it could not mount such an adamant platform because it fought through reaction rather than zealotry.

The future loomed darkly. Predictions were apocalyptic. Summers will get hotter. Europe will become as cold as Canada. Bangladesh

will be swamped. Hungry hordes will invade. China will take over and further saturate ol' blue's atmosphere with pollutants.

Years ago, the day (or was it night?) that astronauts photographed the planet, it became an artwork and we were one big murderous, genetically related family, fighting over rights and reasons, property, and power of possession. The American attitude of ownership became linked to its policing of the atmosphere — Earth was theirs. Judging by its 25% consumption of natural resources, that's at least partly true. Wreck sold his soul in his idiotically misplaced anger, dragging us down into his rhetoric of terror and into his endgame about life and maybe our universe's sole work of art.

*Military historian Martin van Creveld, whose works are required reading for US military officers, said in an interview in *The Guardian* (November 29, 2005) that concerning George Bush's decision to invade Iraq, "Bush deserves to be impeached and, once he has been removed from office, put on trial." Such reaction might lead one to wonder what US officers thought about the war.

**This essay appeared in a slightly different form in *Purple Anthology*, Rizzoli, 2007

CLICHES

Bags

Recently [in the fall of 2002] someone remarked to me that I always carry a bag. I felt like I'd been stabbed in the Id. I never — EVER — thought I'd be a bag toter. I vowed years ago that I wouldn't carry one. But here I am: a toter. Not just of lunches or important papers, but of stuff, the vade mecum, go-with-me stuff I need for daily life.

I shoulder a bag to carry my cell phone, pencils (for notes), pens (for anything requiring a signature, such as a check), the book or newspaper I'm currently reading, reading glasses, sunglasses, headache pills, checkbook, keys (European keys carryover from the Dark Ages — they're heavy, pointy, clunky, and dig holes into the pockets of the sturdiest jeans), a fold-up umbrella (frequently needed in Paris), carte de séjour (working papers), my discount train card (I travel quite a lot: at home I keep a suitcase half-packed), and my wallet (unless I'm wearing a jacket, in which case I keep my wallet in the inside breast pocket).

For years I carried everything in needed in the pockets of my jacket. I've worn a sport jacket since high school. I used to keep my wallet in the left back pocket of my jeans, change in the right back pocket, NYC subway tokens in the front right pocket, and keys in front left pocket. I carried a paperback book and my glasses in a jacket pocket. The wallet position changed to the jacket when pick-pocketing, begging, and accordion playing became subway trades. Males are warned

not to carry money or credit cards in any accessible place. I take heed of good advice, and now as a bag toter I'm cautious about its position when I'm in close public situations.

The word bag imparts so many varieties of experience and conveyance. So many sizes and shapes, so much emptiness to fill: bags under the eyes, over the saddle, in the trunk, at the store, old bags, bagmen, being bagged, one's bag, etc. Women wouldn't think of going out without one and men, myself included, carry one around like a toolkit. We call them bags, but they're more than that. They accouter us, secure us, help us get around, porter our needs. They cling to us like monkeys cling to trees. Maybe that's what we should call them: monkeys.

I have two monkeys. One is a filthy, Japanese school tote in gray canvas with a brown leather strap, now falling apart. The other is a simple, charcoal-gray nylon thing with a flap that has a stylish silver reflector strip — as if I were a bicycle messenger, which I've never been. (I rarely bike, and then only if the terrain is flat.) Neither bag is as big or durable as a messenger bag nor as small or smart as a purse. Both are unisex, but tilt toward the male side. They have separator pockets, which I am constantly riffling through — I'm often put in a bad mood because I've inadvertently switched something around or have forgotten or misplaced my phone, agenda, checkbook, or pencil.

It wasn't long after feminism took Americans by the ear that men started hop-toing to what were otherwise female habits: carrying bags, going to hair salons, and wearing sandals and pastel-colored uniform-like outfits called leisure suits. Then someone came up with the word *unisex*, and it changed the world. Those bag-toting men weren't fey artsy types either. I'm talking about *he*-men, businessmen, salesmen, and mechanics. They liked carrying monkeys. The briefcase, whose relationship to the bag is something like banker's shoes to a hairdresser's, was for papers, legal briefs, contracts — serious stuff, the stuff of industry and commerce. It was for stockbrokers, financial people, lawmakers, and dealmakers. Monkeys are softer, airier, and more malleable than hardcover briefcases with their hefty fake-gold locks. Bags aren't about power. They're about soft schleppage.

It's mostly city dwellers and tourists who tote monkeys. City folk carry their offices with them. They have busy lives and need to be reachable and to have their things at hand. Tourists need them for strange money, maps, pills, snacks, and passports. The most common travel tote is called a banana, because of its small, hip- or midriff-hugging shape. Some bananas can be worn under one's clothes. Bananas were

invented for travelers and developed about the same time that jogging, aerobics, outlet malls, and cheap air flights became popular. Now a lot of people simply carry a banana instead of traipsing around with a monkey.

I walk a lot, taxi occasionally, and prefer the subway to the bus. I'm frequently out of the house, often for the entire day. Not to mention for the traveling I do as a professor and art critic. During my peregrinations my bag often fills up with addenda. So, instead of breezily carrying a light banana, I end up looking like a light hauler, a self-styled delivery geek, a dupe of contemporary duty, a neurotic worried about forgetting something, a slogger of my own tow. My kind of gear has become the sine qua non of contemporary culture, an accessory essential for a life on the go, an artifact of our time.

Back when I was in college, students carried small knapsacks or rucksacks. The knap in knapsack means a bit of food, while ruck means back. People still carry these sensible tote bags, which are better for your posture than monkeys or bananas, but they look like hiking gear — they aren't really amenable to city style. I never had one. As I said, back then I carried only what I could fit into my pockets, and generally wore jackets or blazers to increase my cargo-carrying potential. I like to think I wore them more for the pockets than their style. I've always followed Andy Warhol's advice; I stick with the classics, because they never go out of style — at least for a few generations. Only now that damn monkey of mine is anything but a classic. Maybe if I lived in the country or in a city like Los Angeles, where a car is one's monkey, I could use my vehicle as an enormous tote pod. Then again I'm conflicted about cars in general, and about living in a place like LA in particular. So for the time being, it looks like I'm stuck with this monkey on my back.

Bureaucracy

Let's say that bureaucracy describes the difference between a country's government and its citizens. This difference, which is determined by government policy, creates a gulf between the policymakers and those affected by their policies. It is a gulf without bridges but with many tunnels. Bureaucracies are not created to protect governments, but they are a part of government's function, and are rarely transparent. Bureaucrats therefore build tunnels. Any increase in the number of tunnel operations decreases access to government. Too many fingers spoil the pot, entangling bureaucracy in the kind of mess that takes more hands and more tunnels to untangle. Controlling such a proliferation is impossible by the bureaucratic organism itself, and difficult for outsiders to even understand it.

We all know that bureaucracy sets its own pace, and the bigger the bureaucracy, the slower the pace. This is only logical. A trip to the post office, prefecture, or tax bureau confirms their different senses of time; compare these visits to your expectations, say, of being served in a restaurant or accessing your emails. Let's face it, though, bureaucracies also tend toward self-protection from outsiders bordering on paranoia. Bureaucratic gumminess can only be loosened up by imminent threats or calamity, either of which no one likes. But sometimes there's no choice: catastrophe increases the speed of bureau-

cratic function, and perhaps of some individuals as well. (People will stop going to inefficient restaurants and change Internet servers when they clog.)

An example: when Soviet Russia decided to rid itself of Americans, the American embassy had no choice but to reduce its employees from 80 to 15. The result? It never ran so well, nor had employee morale ever been better. Urgency instilled focus and determination. But were the 65 employees fired outright or simply moved to other embassies?

People tend to be more decisive and resourceful in times of catastrophe. Decisions must often be made at lightning speed. Otherwise there's the danger of becoming stuck in indecision. Choosing between two things of equal importance, no matter how different they may be, is difficult at the best of times. Decision is usually drawn out to accommodate the bureaucratic pace of resolution, unless real pressure — from a lover, cop, or a financial crisis — is brought to bear, stamping a foot, turning hard decision into immediate action.

Politicians continuously promise to reduce bureaucracy, but few do because few can. Bureaucracies become like the established habits of speed limits and holidays. Any mutation is hard going, and any change to the organization itself often leads to its expansion rather to than to its contraction. Generally politicians form committees to investigate the mess, which often results in a new government department performing the exact same function as the one it just replaced. But for the most part a bureaucracy is better able to mutate than to cease to exist altogether, if its existence is deemed necessary, which is very often the case.

However, the most difficult problem for a bureaucracy is not the control of its information, but the application of its function. A bureaucracy can be well run but still be impotent when it comes to doing what it's supposed to do. All the information in the world doesn't lead to a better application of process. A bureaucracy with surplus funds is often inefficient at spending them and in coping with the outsiders who try and get at these funds. This isn't necessarily because of the backlog of papers and the piling-up of reports in in-baskets — these are present in any paper-pushing organization. The problem is that bureaucracies become worlds unto themselves, increasing in size and inefficiency as they balance their function between the government and the individuals they were created to serve. Hence, they build tunnels of darkness instead of bridges of clarity.

Naturally, societies need to be organized. People also need jobs, including the 65 people who were made redundant at the US Embassy in Moscow, and bureaucracies are needed to sort out problems related to policies about work, pricing, and financial regulations. Increasing the police force to maintain law and order in a corrupt economy only increases disorder. Government regulations are needed in every sector, but not too much regulation, otherwise rigidity is increased. Governments need bureaucracies and people need work and regulation, which may be why too many cooks spoil the soup. Social needs create governmental bureaucracies, in a vicious, ever-evolving cycle, driven by hope and greased by corruption. What's crazy is that we know all this and yet can't do anything about making it, or us, more efficient and fair.

This may be a cope out, but perhaps we require genetic alteration, which, according to evolutionary theorists, usually takes about fifty generations, for change to become instilled, and about fifty thousand years to develop a new kind of species. The problem with this is that for the last five thousand years or so all bureaucratic messes have remained pretty much the same. Ergo, get in line.

Cute

Dictionaries define cute as a dainty, pleasingly pretty attractiveness. Dainty means delicate. Pretty means pleasing to the sight. Attractive means magnetic. Cuteness could describe something that's smooth without wrinkles or cellulite, small without a grudge, soft without blemishes, innocent without duplicity, but with big eyes thrown in. Our eyes remain the same size throughout our lives, so kids naturally have archetypically large, cute eyes.

A cute act, look, or behavior melts us into gooey, forgiving Awwsayers. A dimpled Mickey Mouse grin with baby fat around the eyes, a shy blushing hip-cock, a little kid's giggly face — whatever the image, cute is an attractive little smiley face that is mostly self-aware and alluringly pert, somewhere between unconscious flirting and serious seduction. Cute cannot be debauched, otherwise it wouldn't cute. Cute is allure on the innocent side of what Hendrix called experienced.

Most people know in their stomachs that cute means young and magnetic — the bigger the eyes, the bigger the appeal. Wrinkled crones or curmudgeons aren't cute, even if they happen to be our funny grandparents putting on their angel faces and offering us money and gifts. Elders are cute-in-inverted-commas. People are cute up until a certain age; then the balloon pops. You see it in the mirror — no delaying tactics can cloak the face of Time, which is anything but cute, though

it may befit the other meanings of cute: clever, shrewd, and mentally keen. And let's not forget cute's homophonic cousin, acute, which means sharp, perspicacious, pointed, and penetrating.

Albeit. Cute is a button passed down the generations, from old to young, with elders nodding in seeming unison at their cuties, the apples of their eyes. Babies are cute to their parents, especially to their mothers, almost at first sight, but become cute to others only when postnatal wrinkles give way to dimples and giggles.

Young kids are especially cute when they're precocious but don't go too far with it. This kind of cuteness can last years, depending on genetic luck. Adolescence throws in the ultimate wild card: sex. Once the sex urge kicks in, cuteness lasts only as long as one can convincingly sustain a veil of seeming innocence, which unlike real innocence is merely innocence's allure, the glow of a wrinkleless smoothness. It's an envelope many people perversely push, trying to mask their loss of this allure, often by resorting to surgery. Porn stars with their manga lips and melon breasts parody Hello Kitty and Barbie dolls, girls in school uniforms, cheerleaders, and nurses, and feeding you-name-it fetishes. People, girls mostly, hang on to their cuteness as long as they can milk the wholesomeness of youth. In the process they scuff it up and make it tawdry, tainting the milk. They may not mean to, but when they do the world changes and the lewd regard of sex is raised.

The teen industry, as expressed most vividly in advertising and pornography, is a shadow-world of half-cute flirts and half-wanked sneers, accompanied by ice-cream dribble, pristine cotton panties, and various degrees of undress. Popular cuteness combines blatancy and disguise, the frivolity of a Russ Meyers film and the oh-nasty-me! poses of a Calvin Klein ad.

Real cuteness exists in children before their Fall from innocence into self-consciousness; from the thumb-sucking toddlers showing their fannies to the Lolitas in their lipstick and miniskirts; from freckle-faced menacing Dennises to Thomas Mann's morbid Tonio in his swimsuit, torturing the nerveless Aschenbach. Cuteness is baby-faced perfection all the way up to, but not including, the Fall into desperate passion, which turns cute into complete folly.

Cuteness is a high face card in social exchange. It is played to the hilt and bet on recklessly. Recall those painted-up grannies and leering old uncles making fools of themselves for the cute faces that mock them. Yes, it's cynical. But how is one to cope, crying in the mirror, all the pertness gone and the wrinkles everywhere! How is one to

cope with the Aww-sayers when a puppy, a kitty, or a cutie-pie cozies up, or a baby giggles and flirts? It's bad enough remembering the messes we made in our geeky teens, when cuteness ran at its highest and coyest — when it was at its apex.

But after a while cuteness can cloy. Until, that is, you have a baby. Suddenly all reflection on innocence and all the Oohs and Aws rise up in your heart. And just about choke you to death.

As one of Natural Selection's inherited traits, cuteness is a powerful mechanism for survival. It triggers attraction responses and contains all the paradoxes of selfishness and selflessness. It camouflages human malevolence in pre-Fall baby innocence. Cuteness is unearned. Babies not only have it, they need it to survive, and use it to that purpose, innocently, unconsciously, with neither intention nor will. They're cute for their own benefit and for their parents' benefit. Cute insures their survival and assuages the irritability and impatience of their parents — who might otherwise really let them have it.

Some kids are very cute. Some adolescents are cute. Young people increase social position by exploiting cuteness. No adult is cute. They can only pretend. When one becomes conscious of one's own cuteness, it becomes merely a tool, an act, or a doll's face. Pretend cute is not pretty. So as the teeth grow long, the pressures and stress-wrinkles bring the blade man's surgical cure and engender the industries of creams, potions, and aesthetic intervention.

Cute is coy, precocious, dimpled innocence. It can exist in a flirt, in teasing foreplay. It causes some people to notice how quickly the bloom fades. It can help children avoid being knocked for a loop. It passes down through generations and is a useful genetic tool for those below the age of experience.

Maturity is about letting go of cuteness. Cute is a state of being, one not yet self-aware. It can't be conscious. Otherwise it wouldn't be cute.

Dining

According to statistics about ten years of an average lifetime is spent eating. These are international statistics and may not take into the account the starving masses, a Parisian's four o'clock *goûter,* or snack-eating *à la americaine* — the "little something" between meals. But eat we do, for ritual, for nurture, for energy, for distraction, for succor, and out of obsession and reasons so psychologically saturated that a massive therapy industry is dedicated to alleviating eating disorders. The ways and means of eating differ across cultures — and even across tables, for those of us fortunate enough to eat *à table.*

Anthropologists tell us that necessity is as symbolic as it is experiential, and that we might *not* eat, even in dire straits, if circumstances run hard against cultural habit. In *Freedom and Culture,* Dorothy Lee discussed the notion that "ingestion … is culturally structured" and that "needs [arise] out of the basic values of a culture," meaning that cultural value plays a strong, controlling role over personal needs. Margaret Mead wrote about the Arapesh of New Guinea, who only ate food grown or hunted down by others, because they found it inhuman to eat one's own kill. Indian Jainists and serious vegans won't eat any kind of kill. Some wear facemasks to avoid ingesting erratic and careless bugs.

Culture — the transmission of information by non-genetic means — takes us in many directions. One culture is cannibalistic, another is polit-

ically correct; one eats fish for breakfast, another has pancakes and bacon. Different tastes are instilled in us before birth, by mother's eating habits.

The dictates of family, society, and culture constantly remind us that eating is not just a physical requirement, but also a behavioral one. Diet and appetite are as culturally programmed as our reactions to what is or isn't edible, whether it's raw sea urchin, banana and peanut butter sandwiches, or fried crickets. Taboos run as deep as kinship connections. In many instances the psychological power of taboos can override the physical yearnings of hunger, which can subside when we don't eat. But as the saying goes: We are what we eat.

Table manners? Parents grind habits that have passed down from generation to generation into their children. And the table itself? In the past, tables around which diners ritualized manners didn't even exist. But at the dawn of civilization priests offered sacrifices on altars, claiming that their gods dictated such rituals. Blood ran. Gristle popped. Knives sizzled. Hearts pounded. Drugged victims moaned. Sacrificial altars were the forebears of dining tables. Priestly and kingly places and practices determined the rules of eating — the What, When, Where, and How — in this transmission of information by non-genetic means, an example of what is called *tradition.* A man's home was his castle.

In *Now I Lay Me Down to Eat,* Bernard Rudofsky wrote that at the Last Supper (a last meal before an execution), Christ's dozen (a symbolic number, befitting not only apostles, but months, musical notes, jurors, inches in a foot, and eggs in a box) reposed in a prone position, propped on their elbows, and ate with their fingers. Jesus' guests lay about like Americans snacking in front of the television. Think of Manet's *Dejeuner sur l'herbe,* without — or so we think — the naked girls.

One's table manners (despite the dominating "man" in the word), from soup to nuts, from sunup to sundown, and from bed to table to work to bed, are a function of society, breeding, education, family pressure, and peer pressure. This is the influence of our parents and our culture coming in to play, telling us to sit up straight, bring the fork to mouth, close the mouth when chewing, no burping or farting at the table, etcetera and so on, for years, until we are driven to pass it all on to our offspring. Rules differ from culture to culture, of course. Some Asians slurp as they take in cool air with their hot soup, in order to cool it off and aerate it for better flavor. They may forage up rice with sticks, the bowl held up to lips. Burping when sated is often considered a form of compliment to the chef. Such habits are obviously an absolute horror to the Emily Post/Miss Manners folks in the West.

So while sacrifice on the altar may be a part of everyone's cultural C.V., eating has been ritualized differently — taboos against eating swine remind us of this — and social etiquette is non-standardized across cultures. Likewise, rules about the use of split infinitives and about not ending a sentence with a preposition were written by cultures, societies, classes, parents, institutions, and snots, all trying to change things up with which they just could not put.

Parents impart to their offspring the same things they were taught. Children use this information according to the changing vicissitudes of their style.

Here's the sticky part:

Table manners, however we master or mangle them, are habitual, unconscious, rote behaviors (or misbehaviors, to the manners professionals judging us). Our bad manners are often pointed out to us by a lover — or sometimes even by a first date (friends and acquaintances generally only ridicule us behind our backs). The stooping over of our plates, the spittle on our lips, the slurping of our soup and the gnarling of our chicken bones, the scraping of our teeth with our fork, and all our other little lapses of which we were unaware.

Lapsing table manners may be part and parcel of fast food and snack eating, one evolutionary process influencing another. With so many foods packaged like snack items, dining might revert back to eating with one's fingers in a couch-potato position. Picnic manners may once again hold forth and current books on table manners will go the way of primary literacy (i.e., the West before the Age of Television). All the importunate, hoity-toity, stick-by-the-book rules manners police will have no choice but to loosen up. Then we can all flop on the couch and scarf pizza and Chinese take-out like Romans at an orgy, picking and snacking, day in and day out, 24/7, ripping chip bags open with our teeth,* suckling the nipples of Diet Cokes, and inventing a new world.

*The chip bag reference is from the poem, "Self-Portrait at 28" (*Actual Air,* Open City Books), by David Berman, singer/songwriter of The Silver Jews.

Domes

In the summer of 1976 the jazz-rock fusion band I was playing with lived and rehearsed in a Geodesic Dome that we rented from a friend of our drummer. It was located in an isolated spot in the Rocky Mountains, about an hour and a half's drive from the town of Boulder, Colorado.

The Geodesic Dome was invented by R. Buckminster "Bucky" Fuller, who was a self-described "design-science explorer," and by training an architect, mathematician, engineer, *and* designer. He held 25 US patents, including one he received for his dome in 1954. He wrote 28 books, as well as an amount of poetry. He based his thinking on systems analysis, or whole systems. It dealt with *synergetics* — the behavior of whole systems, not predictable by its parts — and *tensegrity* — meaning the combination of tensile and integrity. He applied these concepts to architectural structures that defy gravity, that float in space without falling apart. His domes do just that. In 1927 Fuller invented the three-wheeled Dymaxion Car (*dymaxion* meaning the drawing of maximum energy from available technologies), a car which looked like an eggplant-shaped airplane without wings and was able to turn around on its own radius; the Tensegrity Sphere, a structure, made of bars and wires, which holds together in free space; the Dymaxion Map, a depiction of the earth using triangles that doesn't distort its contours; and the Geodesic Dome. Fuller greatly inspired the creators of *The Whole Earth Catalog,* a best-selling guide to the tools of the New Age that was published twice a year from 1968 to 1972 and became a pivotal document of the era. Its publisher also put out *The Dome Book,* which, surprisingly, became a bestseller. The Geodesic Dome we lived and practiced in was built with the help of this book.

Fuller's thinking was unique. He described the evolution of modern engineering as the shift from tracks (trains) to trackless (airplanes), and from wires (telegraphs) to wireless (radio and television). His design ideas are like tools useful for navigating Mother Earth into the Space Age. His domes are structures that might one day be built on the Moon or Mars: they're light, strong, and cost effective. A twenty-story dome was built for the US pavilion at the Montreal World Exposition in 1967. He even conceived of one that would enclose and heat the island of Manhattan.

The word *geodesic* referred to the relationship between points of energy. Specifically, it referred to the shortest distance between two points on any sphere and that sphere's center point. A Geodesic Dome was the bigger slice of a sphere. Its support-structure employed maximum economy in its relationship to its center. Domes were solid-skinned. Variations have been made with interconnected pentagons, hexagons, or both — they're like the interconnected black and white shapes on some soccer balls. They can be made of light materials like aluminum and plastic. Once assembled, the structure is solid as a cup and can be picked up and moved about by a crane. Try doing that with a house made of brick or wood!

The one we rented in the Colorado Rockies was built from a number of wooden triangular frames, measuring about one meter long on each of their sides, which framed either plywood panels or double-pane windows. The triangles looked exactly alike but were actually very slightly varied, in order to give the dome its shape. Our dome sat on a concrete base. Inside were three levels of insulated wooden flooring, each divided into a few rooms, reached by two curled staircases. The space was as quiet as the mountain landscape around us, but the acoustics were … well, the acoustics of a round space: the sound rose up and wrapped around us — lousy for a noisy electric band rehearsing fast, semi-dissonant music. We had to turn down so much that our drummer — ever fast, often furious — was completely stymied. We resorted to playing very quietly, like introverted folksingers.

The bubble dome was eerily futuristic and seemed to reflect the changing world around us. It wasn't built for noise or silence, like a

recording studio is, but for communal ambience. To properly use it as a rehearsal space, we would have needed to build an insulated box inside of it.

Living in a geodesic dome was a cultural experience, one often associated with an emerging lifestyle that sought a return to a circular continuity of the commune — a retreat away from the four-squared hierarchies of a heavily patriarchal civilization. Fuller was a guru of this kind of experience. His hard engineering suited the social consciousness of the times, which included the eating of natural foods and the breaking-down of social barriers. The Geodesic Dome was like a space-age teepee. It looked like it could be taken apart and folded up to fit into the cone of a spaceship.

Architecture was invented when the circle was squared, when people went from living in huts and tepees to buildings with straight walls and boxy rectangular rooms. Renaissance architects solved the problems of constructing domes on top of square buildings. Gravity determined the construction of walls, Romanesque domes, and rounded roofs. Gothic era ribbed vaults and pointed arches allowed for much larger windows. Fuller went even further with his tensile-strength skeletons, which are perfect for outer space because they remain stable without the need of gravity.

I became a great fan of Fuller and a devoted participant in the scientific side of the New Age. I left the band at the end of that Summer of the Dome. I thought we were playing the wrong kind of music for the new age — which, in any case, later went disco, putting most of my musician friends out of work. Soon thereafter the world made a turn away from Whole Earth thinking and toward conservatism. Fuller, a great thinker and an even greater individual, is today all but forgotten, and Ecologists now struggle with fools.

Laundry

Some years ago [in 2000] I was in Dijon to see an art exhibition and ran into my friend Jay-Jay Johanson, the Swedish singer/composer. While we were talking he posed the question, "When do clothes become laundry?" Without thinking, I said, "It depends on your finances." I always associated laundry with dirt, dirt with lifestyle, and lifestyle with finances. Concepts of what we wear, the circumstances it's worn in, and our means of cleaning it swooped into my head all at once, and the reality of it all came down to money. Jay-Jay was wearing a pale yellow T-shirt and jeans: simple, stylish, and natty-clean. He tours a lot, so laundry is a nuisance. But he's from Sweden, and everything in Sweden is *clean*.

Anne-Claude, then *Purple* magazine's office manager, was riding with me on the train back to Paris the next day after meeting Jay-Jay and I asked her about the transition clothes make, from clean to laundry. "It depends," she said. "If you're in a city like Paris, you have to be clean or people won't give you the time of day. But if you're traveling on a bus in Mexico, you can go for days wearing the same jeans and T-shirt, and you're right at home." That convinced me: laundry is a class concept, related to income.

I had recently purchased my first washing machine, a powerful Bosch with a 1000-rpm spin cycle. I'm a two-wash-per-week user. I'd already learned about the special soaps for whites or colors, and about those

odd ones just for black. To me, owning a machine was like stepping up in social class. (Europeans tend not to dry their clothes in a machine; this is an American tradition due to its more humid climate.)

The word *laundry* comes from the Latin *lauare,* meaning to wash. Laundry is clothing in either a dirty or clean state, or somewhere in between, depending on where you are and whom you're with. But let's face it — laundry is the offspring of the realities of dirt, grime, spots, stains, and the concepts of purity and impurity. For laundry to become a public institution, civilization had to be sufficiently ordered so that people weren't walking around in G-strings or animal hides or nothing at all. Clothes had to have evolved enough to give rise to the problem of washing them, which, as I said, is class based, status oriented, style related, and morally ordained — judging by the reactions of others to odor and cleanliness, which are also cultural.

Addison said cleanliness was "recommended as a mark of politeness." John Wesley said it was "next to Godliness." But no adage ever mentions who will do the dirty work or how it gets done.

During the eons before the existence of home appliances women used poles to heave clothes out of boiling water, water which they first had to haul up from a well or stream and heat in kettles over a wood fire. They kneeled over scrub-boards using hand-wrecking lye-based soap. During the summer months it might be a 100 degrees Fahrenheit outside and a 120 degrees in the kitchen by the ironing board. They heated heavy flatirons on wood stoves, replacing one with another, ruining their backs while trying not to burn themselves. No matter. Cleanliness was a social issue. Which brings to mind the old Saturday Night Live skit in which Billy Crystal, imitating Fernando Lamas's Latino accent, says, "Joo know! It's better to look good then to feel good!"

Everyone wears clothes, even those few remaining "noble savages" living in the jungle. So we all contend with the laundry cycle. Some people wear things once before washing them. Some wear underwear and socks longer than others might like to think they do. Unfortunate people may never enjoy the airiness of clean clothes, of which the richer among us may have an endless supply. Some of the very rich don't seem to care either way. I once spent a month with an upper-middle-class family in a wealthy French suburb. The matron of the household wore the same fashionable outfit six days a week for the whole month! Though I changed often I felt like a disheveled slob in comparison. (But aren't the French the purveyors of the perfume industry — invented to mask body odor?)

I have a German friend who says that where she comes from the preparation — the soaking and whitening and softening — is as important as the washing. My Irish/English forebears were tailors and bank clerks. My widowed grandmother ran a boarding house, where it was a matter of pride to always wear clean clothes. Washing and ironing was a daily ritual, a way to be a good citizen. Starched whites raised one's social status. I have no idea what preparations she had for cleaning. For years I went to laundromats and dried my clothes by machine. (I couldn't touch them without getting an electro-static shock!) Maybe that's why I mostly wore T-shirts and jeans.

Citizenship and cleanliness have always been preeminent in the minds of people on the rise. Changed, though, are the clothes and the social mores. Maybe someday we'll have dirt-resistant clothes with temperature sensors. Maybe researchers for Comme des Garçons and The Gap will come up with recyclable, unisex Mao outfits, suitable for leisure, sports, work, and eveningwear, to be worn for short durations and then put in special pick-up bins for recycling. Accessories alone will reveal our financial status. Everyone, but everyone, will be in debt to the hilt for buying the most stylish tote, watch, phone, or plug-in. Wash and rinse cycles will go the way of the washboard, clothesline, iron, starched collar, and stuffed shirt. Cleanliness will be paid for by your taxes. But how you look — and feel — will still depend on your finances. *Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose.*

Resorts

In the summer of 2001 I spent a week at Esalen, the New Age California retreat center. Though it isn't exactly a resort for dedicated Esalen-goers. For me it's more of a New Age Resort.

I first heard about Esalen in 1987, when I listened to audiotapes of a workshop Gregory Bateson held there around ten years earlier. Being a big Bateson fan, I search out such things. Bateson was a biologist by training and one of the founders of cybernetics, a term coined by Norbert Weiner from a Greek word for helmsman. Bateson was a systems thinker who coined the term "double bind" to describe the situation of being caught in conflicting choices that offer no solution. He became a curiosity to New Age people because his books, like *Steps to an Ecology of Mind* and *Mind and Nature,* discussed ideas about logical types, pattern thinking, information and difference, and how learning requires error and correction, and therefore requires the learning of correction, as well as the idea that what prevents our learning is thinking we know what we like, when, in effect, we like what we know.

Listening to those tapes over the years I occasionally sensed him bristling, despite his very English politesse and his way of always trying to offer clear, logical answers to questions that sometimes came in from dreamland — the ones about time-channeling, reincarnation, pre-

destination, communing with animals, and getting in touch with atavistic archetypes. Bateson was a scientist, not a sentimentalist. Such queries made him flinch. They make me want to *flee*. So I was nervous about going to Esalen.

No, it wasn't exactly my kind of place. The people were too groovy and overly polite. Their voices sounded like coos and whispers, without the kind of urgency — and the amount of cursing — that I'm used to. They talked about inner life and tofu recipes. It was like a 12-step resort where people constructed private fortresses of politeness to replace their obsessions. But maybe I exaggerate.

I didn't participate in the enlightenment workshops or the yoga sessions. I ran from the folk singers and the group nudity in the hot spring tubs (I'd heard from a friend that in the sixties hippies on mushrooms snuck into them at night). But I wolfed down the organic Tex-Mex food. (California has gone Mexican, and for the better, in my opinion.) I eave-dropped on conversations, like the one between a Japanese girl and her newly found guru about Tai-Chi and the eudemonistic soul. I heard a lot of German spoken — Germans and Californians seem to be the flag bearers of the New Age. There were dozens of Heidis dressed like Pre-Raphaelites and lots of transported Midwesterners with sun-bleached (i.e., dyed) hair and Birkenstocks. OK, I wore a pair myself, and I drank gallons of herb tea, and after a few days of lazing around, staring beyond the cliffs at the endless Pacific, I began to relax. I even smiled. And soon I realized that not only was Esalen one of the most beautiful ocean overlooks on the California coast, but also that for a curmudgeon like me it was a place to rejuvenate, body and soul. I ended up enjoying it and left feeling a blissful otherworldly calm, reflecting as I did about the meaning of getting away, of re-sorting my life, and of the idea of resorts in general.

Resort stems from the Latin word, *sortiri,* meaning to draw lots, and an old French word, *resortir,* meaning to go out, to leave, or to escape. Resorts are last options, final retreats, or forms of recourse (which means to run back, as in a period of time, often badly needed, winded back in order to restart). In the deepest sense, resorts imply a hard-won succor, in response to a need perhaps bordering on desperation, something like a last chance. Because they are relaxing getaways, resorts often are designed for seduction, recreation and *re*-creation, and fun and sex — and not just as places one escapes to as a means to recourse. (I'll tell you right now: you may meet someone you fancy at Esalen, but men and women sleep apart. So if you're looking for a new sex partner you'll need the ingenuity of a boarding-

school student. Two people I knew who had just met there had to leave in order to get it on. However, pre-established couples can room together.)

Real resorts, the kind people go to in droves during August (which means sacred or grand, and relates to *augere,* meaning to increase), are located at beaches, in mountains, on islands, or in deserts — generally away from real-world activities. That is, they're located far from cities and "edge cities," a term Joe Garreau coined in the late seventies to describe those colorless, generic outcroppings of strip malls, industrial parks (an oxymoron), car dealerships, and furniture barns, where many people now live and work. No, resorts are havens. They're sequestered in scenic environs. They are preserves where humans can gather and relax, wear different clothes, and sometimes even streak around in the buff. We go to such places to play and act foolishly, to flirt and ogle, to read, to fantasize, and to forget — until we go back home and the bills for it all start rolling in.

A stay at most resorts requires fairly serious money. Well-paid vacation time is often necessary to enjoy them properly. Working at a resort can be fun, but only if you're young or exceptionally outgoing. If you're not, a resort can be a last resort — a place to go because no other opportunities are available, or perhaps because a significant other didn't offer a choice in the matter. Which is why I went to Esalen. Which raises a question: What do resorts have in common with *last resorts*? Why are there so many paradoxes in our languages? What do these paradoxes say about us? Do doubt and an obsession with escape undermine positive thinking?

As we departed Esalen I avoided these questions — the very ones I'd obsessed over before arriving there. We two, and our three-year-old boy (Esalen has Edenic baby-sitting), left in such a relaxed state that the drive south was like a very pleasant travelogue. We stopped more frequently than normal, taking the time to actually see, in the depths of our minds and memories, the landscape, the limpid blue sky, and the dark-emerald Pacific. In fact, we traveled much farther than we had planned, all the way to White Sands, New Mexico, which, frankly, put the fear of nature back into my city-boy's soul. The White Sands are gypsum, white as snow, which has accumulated over millions of years and, apparently, conducts electricity. New Mexico is primordial: there are lightning storms — without rain. I watched nervously from the driver's seat, tapping my fingers as my girlfriend photographed jagged bolts in a weirdly white, rainless, cottony sky. The flashes came only seconds apart. We were in an exotically pristine,

end-of-the-world location — a photo op if ever there was one. It's a first-and-last place born in the dust of eons, a place where earth and sky communicate in scary shimmering electrical currents. It made me want to head straight for the first motel and resort to some familiar, forgetful, homestyle, horizontal TV watching.

EXPERIENCES

Criminals I've Known

When I was living in Colorado in my early twenties I knew a singer whose father had been a gentleman bank robber. He only robbed banks in states he didn't live in. He roamed, as would his daughter. She was a minor recording artist working on the threshold of the downward trend that would hit almost all working musicians hard: disco. When I met her she didn't have a recording contact and was putting together a band for smaller venues. I played with her but didn't stick around long. A few years later I heard she had overdosed. It happened just a few months after her whining bass-player husband had done the same thing, in their bathtub. They were products of the era. Her father was in prison at the time she died, as I recall.

I met another bank robber in Europe many years later, not long after he'd been released from prison. He said he'd retired from the profession and didn't want anyone to know about his former life. Prison had saved him — better-organized professionals, seeking to prevent a new gang from encroaching on their territory, had murdered his former partners, six of them in all, while he was safe behind bars. He recounted how he'd spend days watching a bank from a safe remove, noting every detail, prepping himself. His dispassionate fearlessness enabled him to leap over a bank counter and surprise a teller without panicking. His watchfulness and fearlessness, it seemed to me, gave him uncannily

prescient insights into people. He was a good judge of character, and conformed to the thief's code of honesty. But you wouldn't want to cross him or to tell him about cash squirreled away inside a sofa cushion. He may have quit the life of crime, but sometimes, on a whim, he'll test his break-in skills, these days stealing only a look — unless there's cash, a diminishing item in this world of credit and credit cards, lying around, just ready for the taking.

His keen skills of observation, it seemed to me, are among traits common to artists. There isn't an exact equation between theft and art, though both involve alternative lifestyles. According to T.S. Eliot, the best artists don't borrow, they steal — to make things more vitally and integrally their own. Obviously it's better to be an unknown thief than an unknown artist.

Years ago a friend told me about an artist known locally (in New York City!) who became a thief because he had no other source of income — nor, it seemed, the fortitude to find a straight job. The circumstantial thief drove around in a van stealing books from shopping malls and, according to my friend, once spent two years in jail. No one knew about this side work of his or his incarceration, and apparently no one had missed him. My friend wouldn't tell me the artist's name, but said I probably knew him. Hmm….

In my youth I knew a few break-in thieves and several very successful drug dealers who managed to "go legit." I know hundreds of artists. What they all have in common is a desire to escape normal life. Artists lead a reflective life of creativity. Thieves are more blatantly parasitical than, say, salespeople or politicians. Neither wants a job that straitjackets their time or lifestyle, both want to retire comfortably at an early age.

In the 1970s selling illegal herbs and pharmaceuticals became a common source of income for many people. I've known people from very wealthy families who had thriving drug-dealing businesses. None of them were artists, although some did trade drugs for art. Some were jailed but still managed to launder their money. During these years I noticed the relationship between drug dealers and nightclubs, as well as the growing number of working musicians being replaced by disc spinners. I spent two years house-sitting a fabulous home while its owner was doing time in a minimum-security prison, where he arranged for musicians to come and play.

Selling drugs is a lifestyle choice. The risks are not on a par with bank robbery, which requires nerves of steel. The European ex-bank robber I know shares the sentiments of artists. In fact all the crooks I've known have expressed some kind of creative urge. Few people choose thievery as a life-long profession. They see it as a short-run risk leading to a long creative life. Spike Lee's flawed but poignantly accurate film, *The 25th Hour*, recounts how a middle-class drug dealer, age 37, spends his last 24 hours before going to jail for seven years, a long time for any age. Lee's procrastinating character laments not laundering his money earlier. Around the same time the movie came out I read about two bank robbers who were nabbed after almost 30 successful heists in which they netted millions in cash. One of them had paid for a house in cash, alerting a jealous neighbor who contacted the income tax people who tracked the money.

Money is a circulating medium of exchange for power. Its quest awakens innate competitiveness and a primeval sexual instinct to procure it. Laws pertaining to its acquisition and dispensation are constantly being devised, bent, and distorted, not just by thieves, but by businesspeople, politicians, the construction industry, artists, and meek professors starting home pension funds (I know of one who bilked his friends for 20 years, spending their retirement funds, ruining their futures).

Bank robbers break the law unabashedly. Amateur and professional businesspeople exaggerate the limits of money's declared value. Drug dealers disagree about the illegality of their product. (I myself think drugs should be decriminalized.) The luckier of dealers (who are often white) are social chameleons who can pass themselves off as legitimate businesspeople.

The comparison of criminals and artists is a false one. Not just because criminal activity is socially informal, not being amenable to ritual or rule, but also because people don't want anyone else to profit freely from anything. Yet, by hook and or by crook, we bend like sunflowers toward the perfidiously circulating gold that makes us swing and connive, bending the rituals and rules of power and possession. Crime is just the riskiest of shortcuts.

Living in Paris

Many Paris buildings, including art galleries, are accessed by pushing a polished-steel nipple located above a keypad on a plate found at their entrances. This unlocks the three-inch-thick, 400-year-old inside door, which is set inside the frame of a larger door. These doors can be so heavy they test your strength — and patience. Years ago visiting Paris I aborted several attempted entries because the nipple's purpose was not apparent and all my pushing wouldn't budge the door. Once beyond that obstacle, I often encountered either a winding staircase or a two-person Otis elevator from the *fin-de-siècle* — their *fin-de-siécle.* The doors of these elevators open inward, making people where I come from heft their paunch to squeeze in. I sometimes find a courtyard with a funky old greenhouse workshop that's been transformed into a matte-white gallery waxing a clinical SoHo-esque interior — though anything like a square-off room is a rarity in Paris. The very walls eschew practical, American-style grids and rectangles, echoing France's refusal to adapt another Americanism, her style of commerce. Here, every edifice exudes time's musk.

This is perhaps the way things ought to be: business supports life rather than rules it. What's interesting here in France is that life itself is an art form. The idea of art is revered, and it's a cathedral of an idea. Only art here also includes the art of life, not just the life of art. In that

vein, art collectors of the American variety — materialists to the core — are fewer, and, as a result, most contemporary French galleries rely on art fairs and foreign sales for their sustenance.

France is special in a sensory and intellectual way. If you take a practical perspective of life here, you'll find an inbred Cartesian dualism that is generally not resolved practically, but theoretically. Which is to say that here you can have your abstractions and eat well too. Ergo, the menu contains a level of abstraction that can be mulled over endlessly, while the meal itself is expected to be, at minimum, *correct,* which in itself is a very great expectation.

The French lifestyle is as fastidious as that of Japan, another highly controlled kingdom of aesthetic willpower. It's been said that a French baby's head is chopped off at birth: the brain is sent off to learn Frenchness by rote and rule, while the body is dotted upon, with four o'clock *pain aux raisins* and *chocolat chaud.* French kids are imbued with sensitivity and a feeling for style, the apex of which is a luxuriant, pampered, fondled, complicated, and artfully contrived fetishdom of *bon goût.* Thus, they revere heady intellectual abstractions, some of which — especially in the art world — are as dandily calculated as a Gault et Millau rating or a Jean-Paul Gaultier *soutien-gorge.* Their minds are programmed to instantly assess the density and "doneness" of all the 460-and-something French cheeses, a wine's bouquet, the tinges and textures of baguettes and meringues, the latest fashions, and everyone's "look." Because the average French person has a far better sense of style than most university-educated Americans, not to mention a better haircut.

Aristotle was the first to claim that sight is the highest of the senses, that the eye is the window to the soul and the organ of the will. The body communicates to the mind without words. Both are programmed by habit. Separating them allows one to sustain the most radical or polemical of arguments without compromising social contracts, or without bungling the segue from to meat to fish, in a five course meal.

In France, everyday life is the highest form of art. The strictures of etiquette spawn French style and social grace, while the rules of *écriture* frame a written language that is noticeably different from the one they speak. Strangely enough, the French language treats the senses as though they were a subset of conceptual thought, deferring first to the body's most hawk-like sensory apparatus, the eye. The verb *sentir* means to taste, to smell, *and* to feel. So it's possible to say something like, "Let's taste a different track on this CD," as a friend said to me in English, not long after we "smelled" different *parfums* (flavors) of deliri-

ously tasty Bertillon ice cream. (Translation is always a form of adaptation, but especially between French and English.) The senses themselves don't need augmented verbal description of their subjects, of course; they're programmed to do what they do by habit, in each of us. On the other hand, philosophers need little in the way of sensory input when they strive to encompass the galaxy of the mind, wherein the twain of thought and sensation is examined in language, which is the altar upon which young heads are severed from artfully programmed bodies.

The French also speak in a narrowly nasal decibel band; they're soft spoken and aspirate when they're miffed. They rarely banter before a formal introduction has been made, which is one of their faults. The French also tend *not* to speak at all to people they haven't been formally introduced to by someone they know — and know well. You can live in France for thirty years but if you don't meet French people through other French people, chances are most of your friends will be foreigners. The French simply don't talk to people they don't know. Once you've been properly introduced — meaning on their terms — friendships in France proceed as they do elsewhere. But crossing that bridge requires a kind of social visa that a lot of other cultures don't ask you for (except, perhaps, in Japan).

France is just not a practical, hands-on, go-meet-the-neighbors mentality, as America's is. (Often to a fault: consider America's comparative indifference to appearance and naïve social contracts, especially those in politics. French, not English, used to be the model for diplomatic language.) In France, lessons learned from heady social abstractions create the distance necessary for such an aesthetic sensibility. France encourages a brittle but eminently sensitive sensibility in which a separation of mind from body leads to the kind of sensory refinement of which the eye is indeed the highest sense; the body is expected to revel in Sybaritic pleasures so that the brain can savor and contemplate certain matters. As noted, the French have mastered this sensibility to the point where it constitutes a living art form. But, as in Japan, this kind of sensitivity engenders social reticence.

For outsiders, of course, this all remains a bit of an enigma. Because there's something hissy-lipped and tight-assed, girly even, about France — and it's not just the attitudes or the skirts. The French buy more fountain pens per capita than any country in the world, as if one's handwriting is still developed for *billet doux* and fancy signatures (their typically fancy signatures seem to reflect an eighteenth- rather than twentieth-century attitude). The landscape called France, especially when it is seen from the windows of the elegant TGV trains, is a perfect carpet of

controlled agriculture. Trees line up at attention like soldiers. The train trip from Paris to Avignon is like a three-hour ride through a Grant Wood landscape, all perfect tufts and soft survaces. (There are no untouched places in France, or indeed in all of Europe.) In a city like Paris, its palatial buildings lining the Seine are frosted in polished gold (the inverse of Japan's patinas), as though they were cakes made for a city whose shape was based — as in fact it is — on the circular labyrinth used for the city of Troy. Some of those gaudy buildings house a left-of-center government (even when they come from the Right they are by US standard centrists), which guarantees its five million functionaries 39 days of vacation per year! State functionaries are the true beneficiaries of the French Revolution, which overturned the nobility to create a country of civil servants who expect a modicum version of the grand lifestyle. Thus a French lunch is a two-hour mini-holiday and vacations are a formal expression of an expected way of life. In fact, one *must* go on vacation.

The delicacy in the French palate relates to their sense of time, the expectations they await from government, and the aesthetic attention they devote to what they call *le regard,* the gaze as it is badly translated in English — badly because they don't glance, they glare. The French are fastidious to a fault about what they eat and where they eat it. Spice means salt and herbs, not hot sauce. The bread and cheeses, the refined earthy wines, and the meat gussied up with the sauces Marie de Médicis brought to France five centuries ago (disgusted by the festering meat she saw) are a testament to French cuisine. Juxtapose these to a language that descended from an analphabetic Latin argot (the word *tête* is Latin for pot, argot for head), which flowered into aristocratic prominence during the age of Diderot and the *Académie Française* — the society which still convenes to preserve France's linguistic inheritance, creating words like *ordinateur,* meaning computer (neither word is particularly appropriate). That's Lamarkian inheritance, not Darwin's survival of the fittest. It's the scrutinizing force of the will, which is applied to the vague senses of taste and touch, and then further applied to the culture's overall aesthetic of good taste.

But in order to maintain a lofty air all the way through the meat and fish courses — and still be able to sniff and stomach that sneaker-smelling cheese before the *île flottante* is served — requires the kind of concentration a competition power-crammer needs to hoist forty pickled eggs. And, of course, it's all washed down with leggy Bordeaux wine. All that moldy cheese might even make the French chemically immune to diseases that fast-food-eating Americans develop. Ergo, if your head is chopped off at birth, your eyes may perform one task while the rest of

your body indulges in other activities. And the seven courses are an aesthetic requirement; the fat content is whisked away by cultural will and excellent wine.

Naturally, French art also tells us something about the French. They loved Jerry Lewis and Mickey Rourke, not Buddy Hackett or Jerry Seinfeld. France produced the sophisticated Jacques Tati and Alain Robbe-Grillet, and made Swiss-born Jean-Luc Godard famous. France created dada, existentialism, Serge Gainsbourg, and the cryptic language of "theory," as revealed by Gilles Deleuze and Jean Baudrillard; many art world academics still swoon over it for its headiness.

As the advance forces of sensory experience, artists in France play a game of style in order to pique thoughts. In fact, oxymora like "deeply superficial" or "intensely banal" make critical sense, particularly when translated across sensory modalities from touch to sight, such as one might think in abstractions while pampering the palate. Thus the master Epicurean Frenchman, Marcel Duchamp, continues to guide French artists, who still traffic in dadaist conceptual art and Duchamp's Readymades with a consistency that outsiders find superficial, while they look to dot that last 'i.' Duchamp was an idea man from the center of Parisian café society, one who knew how to test the mind's limits without getting his hands dirty. Matisse was a southerner; Picasso was an import, "assumed" into France the way Mary had to be assumed into Heaven: unable to get in uninvited.

Artists are "in-formers." Most artists make things with their hands to feed people's thoughts. Some traffic in what seems like classified information. Inherent in artworks are pre- or nonverbal perceptions that need to be decoded by viewers using their own senses and thoughts. Babies taste life by putting things into their mouths; artists probe their environments and engender messages in bottles, for people to taste, smell, and feel, if not touch. (DO NOT TOUCH! Art ob*jects!*) Art's natural purpose is to stimulate thought. We understand artworks by recreating them in our minds, trying to figure out their origins, tactually as well as intellectually. Artists stylize the world for contemplation. The French *re*-present the world in their own way, sometimes re-presenting objects in order to take them out of reality for the mind to contemplate. Duchamp's famous urinal and the bicycle wheel he inverted on a stool were enigmatic, alluring, ironic objects made to be pondered over for pondering's sake. In France, turning life into a form of contemplation is high art, not just *très à la mode.*

A Visit to the US Consulate in Paris

I had to go the US consulate in Paris to make sure my girlfriend Elke's German passport was valid for our upcoming visit to the States. The last time we were in the States a light-green entry-exit paper was left stapled inside her passport. It should have been removed when she exited the country. I asked the girl at Window 1 of the consulate about it. She told me that this time Elke should not go through customs in the non-US-citizens line, like she always does, but in the US-citizens-only line with me, even though we're not married, so that we could explain that the paper had mistakenly not been removed. Just the thought of this made me nervous. I was also worried that our three-year-old daughter would be turned away because her picture, taken when she was one month old, only faintly resembled what she looked like three years later. The girl at Window 1 said the picture would do just fine because the passport was valid. Then I asked her by what authority could we all enter the US-citizens-only customs line. She said she knew it wasn't normal, but it would be easier for us. [We always do that now, because we're a family, even though our surnames names are different.] Then she told me not to mention that a US government official had given me this advice, which only increased my nervousness.

That day I also had to get a tax form at the consulate's Internal Revenue Service office. American income taxes must be filed by April

15th, which was only days away, as was our trip. As I entered the office I saw a middle-aged man wearing an IRS badge talking animatedly to an Asian-American woman at a corner table. I couldn't help but listen in. He told her that even if she *was* late filing her tax return, she'd only have to pay "peanuts" because her taxable income was so low. He was polite to her, but manic. I thought he would never stop talking. I too had questions; I wasn't sure which form I needed and I thought I might have to get an extension. The Asian-American woman was suspicious about what "peanuts" meant, as I would have been.

My turn came about ten minutes later. I had three different forms in my hand, because I wasn't sure which was the right one. The manic official said I needed the simple 1040 form, and then, in mid-sentence, he asked me what I did. Wanting to be as vague as possible with such a blabbermouth, I told him that I'd been teaching a class that morning. He asked me where. I answered at the Sorbonne. He said, "Oh, you must be a big reader!" He told me he belonged to a readers' group. I said something like, "Oh, really," with only the bare minimum of exclamatory tone. He proceeded to tell me about "the single, definitive text that brings together psychology and God." By now I was really nervous, because I still hadn't asked my other questions.

"This isn't meant to be pejorative," he said. "Everyone has some experience with psychology or psychotherapy. Many psychologists consider *A Course in Miracles* to be the only *true* document that talks about psychology *and* about God." His slight, shy, unimposing, friendly, maniacally earnest manner — the beige clothes and peachy blandness — led me to think he was a believer looking to share the key to happiness. I suddenly wondered if this wasn't an IRS ploy to get rid of people. But, why me? I was sure he hadn't accosted the Asian-American woman with the same frenzy. It sounded more like he'd been trying to pick her up. By this time my nerves out-stressed my needs, so I abandoned my other questions and finagled a way out of there.

When I got back home I googled *A Course in Miracles* and found out that it was the result of seven years of trance-spirit channeling via Dr. Helen Schucman, a Jewish research psychologist who lived in New York City. "The Course," as it is called, is founded on a transcription of the words of Jesus' spirit channeled through the ages to Schucman, His devoted medium and scribe. The Course argues that Scripture was mistaken in claiming that Christ died for our sins, and that sin doesn't separate Man from God. Reality is a manifestation of God's love, not his vengeance. The Course also teaches that this corrected perception can mitigate an initiate's separation from Jesus' love. The Course combines

Christian belief, Freud's theory of psychological defense mechanisms, and Jung's concept of archetypes. Jung was a believing Christian who described "collective unconsciousness" as a shared psychological disposition composed of archetypes, which, to my thinking, might just as well include fairy godmothers and Santa Claus. I can't imagine what degree of separation from the love of Jesus the tax office official suspected I suffered from. I never got around to telling him of my atheism.

I had to wonder what his superiors would think about his missionizing during office hours. But hey, for all I knew he was working for free, exchanging tax return tips for some time to troll for converts. Or maybe the tax people were using him, hoping that if he rattled people like me we'd make mistakes in *their* favor. All told, the girl at Window 1, with her suspicious insider's advice, taken together with the proselytizing taxman became for me a metaphor for contemporary America. I think of metaphor as being more than just a comparison or transference, as in one thing taking the form of another, or as in parts standing for wholes. A metaphor is a way of reaching out for meaning. That day in the consulate microcosm became macrocosm and the message reached out. Telling me to cancel our trip.

Two Train Rides

I've always liked traveling by train. When I lived in New York City I often traveled to Washington, D.C. by train. I moved to Paris in March, 1995, and for about seven years I traveled a minimum of twice a month for my various teaching jobs — to Nîmes, in the South of France; to Reims, in the east; and to Lausanne, Switzerland — and to many other places for vacations, to see exhibitions, or to participate in conferences on art.

Most commonly what one notices on trains are fellow travelers. In the US, the expensive Metroliner between Boston and Washington, D.C., carries many business people. The standard coaches I mostly took travel much further and convey more families. In France everyone takes the fast TGV (*Train à Grande Vitesse*). Only those people trapped by schedule problems or living outside the TGV's lines take old coach trains. I had that problem traveling from Lausanne, Switzerland, on a Monday night to teach in Nîmes in the South of France the following Tuesday morning. I traveled through the Rhônes-Alpes into Languedoc-Roissillon, in Provence. Unless I returned to Paris, the only option was a slow nighttrain that bypassed Paris (all the TGV trains are routed through Paris). There was no other way. Coach travel in Europe follows a closer schedule than in the US; it's slower and there are more frequent stops.

Here are two memorable trips.

NEW YORK–WASHINGTON, DC

The commuter line between Washington and New York is the only line in America on which passenger trains are given priority over commercial freight trains, making it the only train trip in the US that's faster than going by car. It's more convenient than the plane trip and it offers some assurance of arriving on time. This is because the Eastern corridor from Washington to up to Boston is an almost unbroken conurbation. At night it's just a stream of lights 500 miles (800 km) long.

Traveling by train from NYC to Boston or Washington, D.C. takes a bit more than three hours; air travel is hardly quicker. And the new commuter trains even provide electrical outlets for laptops, phone chargers, and what have you.

One time on the train in the late 1990s I sat next to a man from New Delhi, an economist traveling on business. He was peacefulness incarnate yet quite a talker. I had the closest ear. By the time we emerged from the tunnel into New Jersey I knew all about his professional interest in shifting populations, how the service economy was being outsourced, and how his countrymen were taking over America's accounting profession, en masse.

He reminded me of a downstairs neighbor I once had when I was in college, a physics student from India working on his PhD. This man was brilliant in the same deep, accepting way; his overview encompassed the vastness of the world, which, it seemed to me, he saw like a plate of spaghetti that his imagination could unravel and reconnect strand by strand. He talked about cultural genetics, the over-valuing of growth capitalism, and about how in the future fewer of us will work and those who do will be responsible for those who don't. (Personally, I couldn't take a life without work.) He favored curiosity over ambition and was carried aloft by his hopeful belief in human capability.

We conversed for less than three hours and didn't exchange names or email addresses. I was old enough to have packed away my youthful idealism, but I hadn't quite yet — maybe it was the musician in me. But my idealism was shaken from our discussion. He left me seriously wondering about how the world's spaghetti connections might be sorted out in a different, perhaps better, way than the current appositions of socialism, capitalism, and economic growth.

NIGHT TRAINS: GENEVA – NÎMES

Few travelers take the night train that runs from Geneva to the Portuguese coast. It's slow, creaky, and uncomfortable, but at least there are always plenty of seats. Mostly though, it's just plain eerie, because not long after the train leaves Geneva at a few minutes before ten in the evening all the lights in the wagons, except a few nightlights, are turned off.

The old passenger trains are nothing like the new TGV trains. The former smell of dust and are minimally maintained. Some of the yellow ochre bench seats in them face each other, giving more legroom; these are coveted by night travelers like me, as the trains don't have sleeping cars. The nonsmoking sections are separated from the smoking sections by barriers built up to the ceiling. Smoke wafts into the nonsmoking sections but the paucity of passengers limits the fumes for those trying to sleep. I listened to music and slept intermittently between stops — Belleport, Lyon, Valence, Avignon — as the train trundled through the east of France, the rich regions of Rhône-Alps and Languedoc, and then on to Province.

I traveled on the train from Geneva to Nîmes many times because I taught in Lausanne (which is thirty minutes by train from Geneva) every other Monday and then in Nîmes the next morning. With my shoes off, I'd prop my feet up on the seat opposite me in the nonsmoking section, but one time a controller was so adamant about my not resting my feet on the seat — like everyone did — that I changed my habit. He was right, of course. But everyone he reprimanded about it grumbled — what was he doing here, anyway?

But it was on another night that a development I hadn't noticed yet was brought to my attention.

On a number of those train trips, young men, many of them macho braggarts with dogs, acted threateningly, mostly, I think, as an act. They recalled to me Beckett's character, Molloy, who carried a stick for protection against "dogs and marauders." The phrase always conjured up bands of highwaymen from another era. What happened on this particular night involved two young men and an angry young woman, a rarity among the nighthawks I'd seen riding the trains. The men rushed around from seat to seat avoiding each other's importunities — lying down, getting up, mouthing off. They did seem like marauders of another age as they flirted with their rage, quarreling and bickering, and rushing back and forth to the smoking section for reasons that made no sense — and they irritated me. Their pit bull terrier slept under a bench close by, perhaps just nanoseconds away from lurching into violence.

They got on in Lyon, the main stop before Avignon. I wondered where they were going to, but they didn't seem to care. I considered moving to another car, but I was comfortably situated, buried under my jacket with my headphones on, shut off from the world. I kept one eye peeled. The train chugged through the night. Nothing happened, but I never slept. I got off at Nîmes at around six in the morning. The hotel where I always stayed is two blocks from the station. I had to wake up the night concierge, a happy fat man who likes to chat, to let me in. I dozed for about two hours before I started the day.

I asked around and was told by a guy I worked with, and later by a barman I knew, that drug dealers frequent the night trains because they're usually next to empty and therefore rarely controlled. You never know: they could just as easily been young soldiers one often sees traveling cheaply on trains in the south of France. But, no, it was something other than mere youthful energy that kept those passengers moving around so nervously that night, leaving me with one eye cocked. I imagined them making their drug deliveries further down in the south, the angry girl just tagging along. They'd be indifferent to the dog, and, quite possibly, to their future.

I often think about European train travel versus US cars and airplane travel. Europe is smaller and more crowded and it's full of trains, though in France you still have to pass through Paris to get anywhere. The US was quicker to have train tracks crossing the nation, but it bet its future on automobiles and airplanes, which might turn out to be the wrong horses, to use an older metaphor.

The Indian economist seemed to see the world in his head, both the past and the future, which may be his culture's way of thinking. He thought work and money would need greater governmental control, which is anathema to US style capitalists. The young men traveling on the night trains in France represent, for me anyway, a common type of young jobless men, a far less dangerous version of the bandits who ran riot in the middle ages across Europe, a violent place if there ever was one. They warn us about the future, now.

Vincent's Bedroom, 1888

Feeling remiss for my under-appreciation of many modern and late-modern painters, from Seurat and Cézanne to Dubuffet, Barnett Newman, Jackson Pollock, and Jasper Johns — all of whom are, of course, very important artists in the Western canon — I finally had a Stendhal-like experience: a feeling of physical ecstasy as I stood before a work of art. It happened with a painting of an artist I'd always liked, but who had never actually bowled me over for real.

I was visiting the Musée d'Orsay, and I stopped to look at Gustave Caillebotte's *Les raboteurs de parquet* (*Floor Scrapers*), which was painted in 1875, a very interesting, social realism, workers struggling in the heat, at the dawn of the ages of capitalism and Marxism. Next to it hung *Vincent's Bedroom*, which Vincent van Gogh painted in his yellow house in Arles in October of 1888. He went so far as to copy it twice while he was in the hospital. Supposedly, he repainted it to re-access the feeling of unity and openness he'd had when he first painted it — a feeling he never recovered. He died in despair two years later, with one ear less than he was issued with. I felt neither fullness nor well-being as I looked at the painting, but I was transfixed, transported even. All at once I felt like a mad mind-channeler communicating with Vinnie the Genius/Nut-job. I felt the sensation of being him in front of his easel, brush in one hand, palette in the other, the world narrowing in the mania of his concentration. The subject was mundane: two ladder-back cane chairs; a 120-centimeter bed with a mattress and two pillows, both as soft as mashed potatoes; paintings on the wall — a well-known self-portrait and a painting of a woman — both about the size of the mirror above the corner table; and the southern Provençal light that streamed in through the window of the small room he'd rented in the modest house (he had planned to turn the house into a retreat for artists — a hopeless dream, not to mention his ear). Nevertheless, his artistic calculation of narrow brush and thick paint transformed his vision into one of mine, now that I've joined the world's ardent van Gogh fans.

Most of the subjects of impressionism, symbolism, and pointillism — as well as those of movements all the way through fauvism and cubism — were mundane compared to those of the calculated historical and philosophical paintings of preceding movements, the paintings of Ingres or Courbet, say, or Caillebotte. Painters turned away from accurate representation and the retelling of history and toward an investigation of pictorial process and personal expression of style — their style, a way of working they could repeat. *Vincent's Bedroom* (what a touristy title applied by history!) depicted a bedroom drenched in daylight. It heralded a new age of self-expression. Caillebotte's Floor Scrapers was less mundane, and more of an historical period piece, because of the specificity of its subject: the sweaty, dusty, dirty, shirtless workmen, scraping a wood floor by hand instead of with the machines we now use, machines that can eat right through to floors below. Caillebotte's painting was a study of reflected, photographic light. *Vincent's Bedroom* was light incarnate: pale, brilliant fire, the colors of which were painted in a style most people thought nonprofessional or amateurish. I fell into his painting, as if H.G. Well's time machine had hurtled me back to the French fin-de-siècle and into the heady vibrations of the artist's vision of the world, here made real with his style.

Van Gogh's lack of academic style was what made him famous (I think here of Thelonius Monk's piano style, which also seemed amateurish to many). Not that Vincent lacked technical ability (or Monk either). Even as a teenager, Vincent could draw about as good as Rembrandt. His strongly cast, high-contrast drawings have the perfect perspective of a camera's viewfinder, but use a rougher, brushier style. The more Vincent drew and painted, creating about 10,000 works in a dozen years or so the more his true style developed (one as unique as Monk's became). Vincent didn't invent his style: he embodied it; he channeled it out of himself like it was a projection of his soul. See-

ing the painting as I did that day — for reasons I can only ascribe to the transfixed association of my own habit of first looking at how art is rendered, and only then what it's about — I sensed what the Russian painter, Wassily Kandinsky, who I don't much care for, called "inner necessity." Emanating from the style of van Gogh's art was a kind of inner spiritual wound. In *The Wound and the Bow*, I941, the critic Edmund Wilson claimed that this kind of testimony, one based on an evocation of a personal vision fixed by the painter's style, defined modernism. Vincent embodied that sentiment.

Modernism was born out of the creativity urge to reprocess art, to start from scratch, using a rawness of attack, without employing fussy technique or seeking exact duplication. Artists turned their backs on realism, largely because it was something photography could achieve so much easier. These were difficult times for many artists. All the same, a signature touch like Van Gogh's was preferred to a correct representation by, say, Caillebotte. Modernism evolved new species of art and new species of artists (as has Contemporary art). In the decades that followed the results of this evolution entered the hearts and guts of art-lovers worldwide and influenced aesthetic trends (although many people still do have a problem with contemporary art, especially when it's more conceptually than visually appealing). My being transported by van Gogh's painting was like a vision appearing unannounced, what the Beats called a satori, a Japanese-Buddhist term for enlightenment, which they used as a kind of visionary awakening. I prefer abstract painting, from Mondrian to the present, so *Vincent's Bedroom* took me a bit out of myself, which is another reason why the experience was so memorable.

During my visit to the Musée d'Orsay that day I was irritated by the blocky, blatantly postmodern mauves and grays of the main arcade downstairs, with its concession to current fashion, and the bad lighting in the galleries alongside. I was miffed looking at Courbet's cinemascope-scale painting, *L'atelier du peintre*, 1855, the fantastic self-portrait of the artist in his studio. Actually, it's a theater of strangeness, the artist being surrounded by denizens of history and former subjects. Baudelaire claimed that Courbet sacrificed realism for his art, and to make such a painting, a theory I don't buy. But the painting is now blurred by the glare of the gallery's bad lighting, and the unfortunate problem of it its being hung too high. This ruined the wacky, even comical, genius of it for me. I grumbled all the way up to the fifth floor where suddenly I was hit with an ecstasy like Saint Francis experienced while receiving the stigmata two years before he died — in what

year? 1224 or '25? I was mesmerized by how van Gogh's painting was illuminated by the brilliant sunlight that streamed into the room (brilliant sunlight is rare in Paris, unlike in the south of France).

About five years after this happened I went back to the Musée d'Orsay to try and repeat the experience. The museum's collection was hung historically this time, and the building was packed. I looked hard at *Vincent's Bedroom*. Nothing happened. I waited, trying to recall the mood of my first viewing. Again nothing. Then, pushing through the crowd as I headed toward the next room, I spied, out of the corner of my left eye, a Monet painting, one of many, of his water lily pond in Giverny. It was about the size of a square bay window, and had raw linen visible at its edges. The center of the canvas was swathed in moody greens and purples — colors that I loathe! But I was stopped in my tracks by another satori, nearly tripping the crew of Asian tourists dawdling along next to me. The painting was undeniably modern, favoring process over content, a formal transformation of vision itself. It made me wonder what else I've missed — in all of art! Maybe if I could come back every day and wander around without prepossession of ideas I could increase my appreciation of artists I'd neglected. Yes, I was remiss. After all, artists want people to enter into their process, to take the time to look and to see. No one can look properly at art the right way, every time. There isn't enough time. But maybe if I can be open to sneak attacks, a whole new world of visions might be awaiting.

HISTORY

America, America

The conquering and settling of America by Europeans was a mad scramble for real estate: free land was up for grabs. Which meant a new life and a brighter future for its potential owners. God had bestowed it upon them.

About 12,000 years before this happened tribes migrated from Asia to North America, eating their way all across the land. Mastodons and mammoths became extinct. The first inhabitants eventually domesticated dogs and cats, and, over the ages, turned corn, tomatoes, potatoes, tobacco, and quinoa into harvestable crops. When the European settlers started arriving, there were around 25 million inhabitants in North America; that's almost the current population of Canada. What is now Mexico City was larger than any in Europe, certainly the largest city Cortez had ever seen. European explorers took the crops that Native Americans had domesticated, along with all the gold they could find, and brought them all back home. They even brought along a few natives to show off. They imported African slaves to the new world, mostly to pick cotton, a staple commodity of the Industrial Revolution and the English economy.

These transitions may have been violent for Europeans, but they were ruinous in absolute terms for the native peoples of the Americas, the Noble Savages as Dryden called them in his tragic play, "The

Conquest of Granada," written in 1672. Half of the first European settlers perished from fear, loneliness, tooth decay, bad food, or no food at all. But in a just a few centuries about 25 million Native Americans would be killed or die from contracting European diseases like chicken pox, small pox, and the flu, which Europeans had contracted from the cows, chickens, goats, pigs, and horses they had domesticated thousands of years earlier, diseases they were now mostly immune from. You might say that life *and* death were different back then. Diseases spread through the new land like ghosts, what Europeans called miasmas, and killed many people — even before the filthy, lice-infested invaders, in their odd clothes and beards, and bearing swords and guns, rode in on their terrifying horses — these white men, obsessed with gold and ruefully disrespectful of the land.

Shakespeare called it "the brave new world." John Locke called it life before civilization. For its settlers it was an epic landscape with room to stretch. No thought police told them how to tend to their beliefs; these they policed themselves, and forced on others. In the mid-nineteenth century the New York newspaper editor, Horace Greeley, advised Americans to "Go West!" Heading West was Europe's Manifest Destiny, fulfilled in the marriage of biblical preaching and free-market capitalism. Free land and private property fostered the belief that any self-made, God-fearing Man of Destiny could become rich. Many did. The further west they pushed, the more they wanted, often working themselves to the bone, and dying young. Some were scalped. Native Americans riding bareback on horses which they initially stole from Spaniards and later bred, could still shoot arrows twenty times faster than a soldier could fire and reload a single-shot rifle. Not until the invention of repeating rifles like the Gatling gun, in 1861, and the Winchester rifle, in 1873, did the advantage swing hard to the conquerors. Revenge was swift and merciless when it came. Natives were corralled in reservations. In the post-Civil War years, oil was discovered in California and entrepreneurs — the robber barons like Jay Gould, Cornelius Vanderbilt, Andrew Carnegie, and Henry Frick — built the railroads and began the US banking industry. By that time half of the cowboys "Out West" were former slaves. Most of the buffalo were slaughtered. Cattle ranching thrived and Chicago became a major meatpacking center. The robber barons built museums, providing the working class, Marx's proletariat, with culture, which they could absorb on Sunday, their one day off from work. This philanthropy elegantly masked their corruption.

The United States, which is two and a half times the size of Western Europe, flourished on a belief in its own destiny. In the following century America witnessed the advent of automobiles, electricity, airplanes, and commerce. Its resources were vast and its beautiful territories — including the Southwestern deserts, Rocky and Sierra Nevada Mountains, and Grand Canyon — encompassed more wild space percentage-wise than all of Africa today. These places have been seen the world over in films and advertisements. In truth, it wasn't until the last half of the twentieth century that many rural people stopped urinating and defecating behind bushes. Electricity and plumbing may have been common Back East but they sure weren't in West Texas, the Appalachian hills, or the sparsely populated outback — not until Roosevelt's New Deal were public utilities a possibility nationwide. Before then the government wasn't willing to get involved. And businessmen certainly weren't going to pay for them. The great city of New York grew into a world capital with barely a thought given to trash collection. In a century and a half of tarring over refuse and animal carcasses, the surface of New York's roads rose eight feet higher. New Yorkers of today pile their plastic garbage bags on sidewalks and curbs for trash pick-up, a staple industry of the East Coast Mafia. How the world has changed.

But from this great land, frugal pioneers forged a New World, one whose culture is now exported across the world in dream images of its seeming freedom to work and to get rich, not just based on real estate but on innovation, Manifest Destiny and the spirit of capitalism. A person might even think of America as a European project, one that began in 1492 and will last … Well, time will tell.

Thanksgiving Day

In the United States Thanksgiving Day falls on the fourth Thursday of November (in Canada it's the second Monday in October). The holiday's origins lay in the autumn harvest festival that was celebrated in England centuries ago. The first American Thanksgiving was feted on September 6, 1621, by 50 or so fortune hunters and religious separatists who called themselves Saints. They be wouldn't be called Pilgrims for another two centuries.

A year earlier, in 1620, 102 Saints led by Miles Standish, known as Captain Shrimp because he was so small, set sail for America in the *Mayflower,* a vessel about the size of a large double-decker bus. They were driven by fantasy, and were either totally ignorant or blindly indifferent to the practical needs of pioneers. Among them were a printer and a number of merchants. They carried musical instruments, hat-making supplies, and a copy of *The Complete History of Turkey* (the country, that is), but nothing to hunt animals or till the soil with. It took 66 days for the puke-stockings, as the ship's crew called the Saints, to make it to the New World of the Heathens. They arrived at the coast of what is now the state of Massachusetts in December of 1620, filthy, wobbly legged, exhausted, and entirely unprepared. One Saint died and two were born, en route. The following April the *Mayflower* returned to England, leaving behind 54 Saints, most of them only children. They survived, thanks to the help of the Wampanoags Indians, one of whom, as if by a cosmic coincidence, could speak English.

The first Native American the Saints encountered was a man named Samoset, an Abenaki Indian from Maine who was visiting Massachusetts by chance. He knew a few words of English, and only approached the newcomers to ask if they had any beer. Samoset had learned a bit of their language from Englishmen he'd encountered fishing off of Maine's Monhegan Island. Even stranger, Samoset said he knew of another Indian who spoke English even better than he did. Two days later he introduced the Saints to Tisquantum, a name that means "Rage of the Manitou." The Saints called him Squanto.

Decades earlier Squanto was kidnapped by explorers, who took him to England and later sold him into slavery in Spain. He escaped and was eventually discovered with an Englishman named John Slany in Pakistan, and finally returned to the New World on John Smith's 1613 voyage. Squanto stayed with the Saints for about 18 months, showing them where to fish (though they were primarily meat eaters), helping them to build warmer houses, and acting as an interpreter. For the Saints, his very presence in this lethal land was truly miraculous; he literally saved their lives. About 90 Wampanoags were invited to the meal of the harvest festival of 1621, including Squanto. Though his tribesmen by now mistrusted him, considering him tainted by the European savages.

The first Thanksgiving meal was nothing like our present-day feasts — tens-of-thousands of industrially fattened oven-roaster turkeys cooking across the land, stuffed with chestnuts and breading, festooned with roasted sweet potatoes, cranberry relish, string beans, mashed potatoes, apple pie, and drink. The Saints ate more meat than vegetables or fish — mainly wild game, dried ham, and exotic birds whose fat content would induce heart attacks today. They also ate the corn and the pumpkins harvested by Native Americans' (as they are now called), but not pies. And they ate everything at once, in no particular order, with spoons, sitting wherever they could, and wiped their hands and faces on the oversized napkins they used to grab the hot food.

Once they found the means to procure sustenance, the Saint's principal meal became lunch, which the women prepared in the morning; leftovers were eaten for breakfast the following day. The natives didn't eat meals as such; they snacked whenever they were hungry. For them, food was plentiful, and it was constantly in preparation.

Though Thanksgiving has been celebrated off and on since the first feast of the "Pilgrims," the national holiday of Thanksgiving wasn't

signed into law until President Franklin Roosevelt did so in 1941. The first official celebration came just days before the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor, the event that forced the US into the Second War.

One of the factors in Thanksgiving becoming such a popular holiday is the parade held every year on the same day, initiated in the mid-1920s by Macy's department store of New York City, once heralded as the biggest store in the world. The parade, which starts promptly at nine in the morning, sets off at 145th Street and Broadway and ends at Macy's 34th Street and Fifth Avenue location. Thanksgiving Day generally begins with family and friends gathering around the television to watch the parade — a veritable orgy of school marching bands (participating in the parade is the pinnacle of glory for a high school or university band). Horn sections strut noisily to tribal drums as dancing majorettes twirl their batons and kick up their heels. Overhead fly gigantic helium-filled balloons, some of Disney animals. Between marching bands are "floats," flat-bed trailers festively decorated in assuming themes like those of Broadway plays or cartoon characters. Smiling pretty girls, and any celebrities who just happen to be in town, wave to the street-side throng from the floats. The last float in the retinue is always reserved for Santa Claus, The King of Shopping: fat, rosy cheeked, and dressed in Coca-Cola red, calling upon the citizenry to fulfill their destiny. The parade is followed by nationally televised football games — and then American families gather together for a sumptuous late-afternoon meal and the roast turkey is presented. All of which is just preamble to the most important thing about the holiday: Thanksgiving also kicks off the Christmas season, starting at nine o'clock the next morning, when The Shopping Day of the Year begins!

The colonists thanked God and the natives for sustenance, including the crops like tobacco, corn, tomatoes, and potatoes that were sellable in the European markets. Native Americans lacked the concept of material value. They died by the millions from European diseases like flu, diphtheria, and smallpox, and from the forced westward displacement ordered by President Andrew Jackson in the 1820s. Samoset and Squanto may be characters from American mythology, but they were also real people. Thanksgiving, a veritable holocaust for turkeys, is a non-religious celebration of consumption for the sake of society, celebrating something that North American consumers primarily do most: thank themselves.

Viva Las Vegas

"Freedom's just another word for nothing left to lose..."
from the song "Me and Bobbie Magee," by Kris Kristofferson

Most people think of Las Vegas as a degeneracy of kitsch and lost wages, an impossible place to live and only bearable to visit if you gamble. I've visited the city twice, and spent in total about a month there. I went the first time because I was invited to lecture on art at the University of Nevada at Las Vegas. The school specializes in restaurant and hotel management, mathematics, and sports, but has a graduate program in Fine Arts that attracts many students because a MacArthur Genius Award winner and his art-historian companion teach art there. I was invited to speak by a friend who was then a guest professor.

Some UNLV graduate students I met had studios in a shopping mall adjacent to the Liberace Museum, which houses many of the accumulated possessions of the kitschy proto-Elton John pianist, including his Rolls Royce, his Baldwin grand piano covered in Austrian rhinestones, his other pianos, his extravagant costumes, etc. The students made works out of Tupperware, fast-food packaging, and every other imaginable kind of cheap artifact. The painters among them made works that closely resembled graphic design. They wore T-shirts

and walked around carrying soft drinks in personalized plastic cups, proselytizing like the acolytes of an imaginary optimists' club — in the same way gamblers talk about hope winning over despair. They talked about the affordable housing, how they could work without distraction, and buy a drill or a pair of socks at three in the morning. They loved the vast desert sky dome and the fact that Vegas is only six hours by car from LA — not really *that* far. And there's even a Guggenheim museum on the Strip.

One student, a Tupperware artist named Curtis, said, "Vegas makes the rest of the world look gray." In the studio next door, Sean S. spoke of the lack of time, about how the city never slept and the casinos had no clocks or windows. He predicted that in the future all cities would be more like Vegas: "Nothing will be sacred. Everything will be torn down and rebuilt." The MacArthur Award winner said, "Vegas is the seventies with valet parking. It's a society, not a community. Nearly everyone who moves here *wants* to be here. It's like living at the beach. Even if you're a waitress, you're still at the beach. It's temperamentally gregarious. … Gamblers are smart, but they aren't wise. So the level of raw intelligence is relatively high, but the level of impulse control is relatively low. This is good for discipline."

Las Vegas was once a desert oasis populated by the Paiute, Shoshone, and Washoe Indian tribes. It sat between the Colorado River, which runs through the Grand Canyon, and Death Valley. The Spanish name, chosen in 1829, means "the meadows." (*Nevada* means snow-covered.) Mormons built a fort here in 1855. The Paiutes ran them out after two years. Late in the century silver and minerals like borax (which is used for making soap) were discovered. The government sectioned land and sold it, mostly to farmers, for $1.25 per acre. The town was founded in 1905, when a railroad link to Los Angeles was commissioned. By 1911 there were 800 inhabitants. In the early 1930s gambling (later renamed the less pejorative *gaming*) was legalized and six gaming licenses were issued. Divorce laws were liberalized; a "quickie" divorce required only a six-week residency at one of the dude ranches. The Hoover Dam (initially called the Boulder Dam) was constructed. The dam allowed the city to increase its water supply, but the rights were sold to the City of Los Angeles; Las Vegas still pays LA for its water! By 1940 the population was 8500 residents. In 2000 there were almost 500,000 residents. In 2006 the per capita income for the city was $22,000, with 9% of the population living below the poverty line.

After the Second World War the gangster Benjamin "Bugsy" Siegel, under the support of East Coast mob bosses, Meyer Lansky and Lucky Luciano, built The Flamingo Hotel. It wasn't the first casino, but it was the first mob-run establishment. Siegel invited famous Hollywood performers like George Jessel, Rose Marie, and Jimmy Durante to its opening. It flopped. Bugsy was later killed by the mob for skimming money. But the idea caught fire. By the 1960s, stars like the Hollywood "Ratpack" of Frank Sinatra, Dean Martin, Sammy Davis, Jr., and Joey Bishop were working in Vegas. Singers and stand-up comic made their livings working on the Strip. The mob flourished. Gambling, cheap hotel rooms, and high-end entertainers attracted hordes of visitors. In the 1970s billionaire Howard Hughes tried and failed to buy a number of casinos. By then hotels were competing over which one had the greatest amount of neon signage in the city that never closed.

Like most American cities, Vegas is laid out in a Roman grid, with a few angular and winding streets creating alternative axes. Just about every major block has a shopping center. A minor drawback is that the town has no sewer system, and when it rains, as it occasionally does, the downtown can be flooded out. But nothing has stopped the growth of Las Vegas. By the mid-1990s Vegas was the fastest-growing city in America. City revenues come in from the gaming industry, which, of course, is based on seduction and addiction. And there is no state income tax.

Strangely enough, *freedom* is a word many locals use to describe life in Las Vegas. A retired musician, now living in a seedy motel, calls it "the last bastion of freedom." Many also feel free of class-consciousness and social restrictions: free to come and go as they please; free to shop and indulge their fantasies at any time of day. Costs are low. Drinks are cheap. Jobs will be readily available as long as the city keeps growing, which, at the moment, it isn't.

What was it in Las Vegas that made people feel so free?

The frequent use of the word *free* is odd, considering that the ubiquitous slot machines (more on them below) that lure in the dreamers of hope and freedom are actually programmed to favor the casino. In fact, the only game that doesn't favor the "house" is poker, which is also the only game played by professional gamblers (the casino takes a small percentage of the pot). Casinos don't like professional poker; they like steady, family-style holiday splurging — as much as they can get. For that reason the casinos have sunk a lot of money into entertainment, much of it family entertainment. The burning pirate ship at Treasure Island casino has gusts of smoke and bursts of fire, just like in a Hollywood movie. You can reach up and touch

Bellagio's exact replica of Michelangelo's David (the same size and, it turns out, the same cheap marble). The carpets are plush and the costumes are exotic. Spindly entertainment towers have roller coasters on their rooftops. The half-scale Eiffel Tower and the World's Fair-like versions of Venice, Paris, and Manhattan aren't just props, they're sturdy, fully insured entertainment architecture offering shopping opportunities to all. The Strip is like Disneyland for adults. The food is pretty bad, but that's America for you, not just Vegas. An ex-New Yorker working at a music store told me, "The bagels suck! The Chinese food sucks!"

A very postmodern 34-year-old public defender named David F., who specializes in representing murderers, was born and raised in Las Vegas. He free-lances as a culture commentator for public radio and thinks the reason Vegas is "so interesting" is because "dreams are unlimited." American middle-class optimism is based on a belief that anyone can suddenly become rich. People come here to realize their dreams. But doesn't Despair, more often than Hope, linger on most Las Vegas street-corners?

The people I talked to spoke predominantly about the working-class population of Las Vegas. The mobsters are pretty much gone now, and the unions have come in, the most powerful being the Culinary Union. As Mary, a waitress in a sports café, said, "Vegas is the only state with a Right-to-Work law." Meaning that you aren't required to join a union to get a job. The MacArther Award winner went further: "There's no White Protestant Upper Middle Class. Vegas is Detroit liberal rather than Hillary Clinton liberal." In this regard, Vegas's version of hope might be one of the last bastions of what a transplanted Englishman I met called "class-free escapism." But as Will P., a non-Fine Arts university student, said, "The illusion is to be told what happiness is, which is also an illusion of happiness."

Literally everything that is consumed must be trucked in. But, as Sean S. suggested, nothing much is preserved. The old casinos have been torn down. There's talk of building a neon museum. I attended a barbecue put on by a company that makes neon signs and has preserved a veritable junkyard of them. A few were lit up, and from a small promontory the lights of downtown shone magically. Maybe some things will be preserved after all.

When you drive out of the city up into the foothills at night, the hedonistic outpost glitters like a jewel, mirroring the stars above. Las Vegas is a Babylon built on dreams, luck, and entertainment. It reminds me of gaudy Italian Renaissance art and architecture (whose iconography was based on morality and the sins of human indulgence), transformed at the far reaches of Western Civilization by the visions of Mafiosi and the indulgences of disposable income in the 1950s. Curiously, Las Vegas is once again full of Mormons, who are all but invisible and, thankfully, don't go around breathing down necks. With the mob no longer around, or at least so prevalent, there's not a Machiavellian consortium holding court, only the illusion that opportunity and happiness are attainable. Optimism, it seems, has about a 52% edge, the same advantage a veteran poker player has over a rube. According to a transported young Englishman I met, Las Vegas is a place "where anyone can become President." Many people think it's also a place that lacks culture. Maybe the fact that night never seems to arrive creates the slim margin of illusion — at least for gamblers. Where the sun never rises, darkness never falls.

Slots Machines: Engines of Fate

There are about 600,000 slot machines in North America. In Las Vegas, according to the Nevada Gaming Almanac, the big casinos give over about 70% of their floor space to slot machines. Outside the Strip, in less entertainment-oriented casinos, the percentage increases dramatically.

Playing slot machines is the most popular form of gambling worldwide. It's odd that a programmed machine attracts the greatest number of people to gaming. Every slot machine has been designed by technicians who program-in profit to the very limit of legality. Luck is guaranteed, but sparsely distributed. For example, there are machines that advertise a 95% payback ratio. That means the house is guaranteed its 5% percent, so, at worst, the house will always win by that margin. Slots are designed to be neither volatile or consistent, which means a lucky player can win a big pot, while the consistent dribbling regulars throw good money after bad, as the saying goes. Hope, it seems, resides in our DNA for our own distraction, longing for Chance's rare gift of coherence. Its presence seems to validate escapism over logic and the hard face of reality.

What we might glean from all this is that gambling, or *gaming* in legalese, is a euphemism for playing to lose. People look for machines that are slightly out of control or a wee bit loose (like a con man looking for a sucker), thinking that a margin of error increases their options against the mechanical logic of fate.

How is it then that betting machines influence people into pursuing folly over reason? Is it the blinking lights and dials and tooting whistles? Is it their inorganic innocence?

Sitting alone at a machine, a heap of quarters in a half-liter cup, hours pass. As buttons are pushed and levers are pulled, hope rises and falls like the waves of the ocean, waiting for a tsunami of tumbling coins.

COMMENTARY

Collecting

Collecting fits like an alter ego into the very nature of human experience. Commerce was born in the gathering and collecting of things. The first hunter-gatherers were the proto-collectors of today. Their methodology involved the scanning of a territory and the effort to possess it. Possession requires a defined target, without which gathering is meaningless. It's unlikely that *Homo sapiens,* man the knower, would even have survived without collecting. Collecting may have been one of his survival instincts. The timeworn customs of naming and categorizing are the very ingredients of targeting — the searching, the reaching out, and the gathering in.

Moses exhorted his people to follow Yahweh's command to "Collect your ration for the day. On the sixth day, however, this must be twice as much as you collect on ordinary days." Gather up each weekday, the story goes, but double your take on Saturdays and rest on Sundays. Cultural traditions are based on this kind of advice. But collecting arose to public prominence when the marketplace began to replace the demands of the gods with differing material possessions, often accrued by force. With the elimination of laws prohibiting Sunday shopping, people are today enjoined to work day-in and day-out, and to gather and horde 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year.

Historians categorize prehistory, according to the metals, tools, and weapons that were used — hence, the Stone, Bronze, and Iron Ages. The employment of these materials abetted the conquest of Nature and the usurpation of enemies — the killing of men and the enslavement of women and children. By the middle of the eighteenth century, science and industry were advancing (as was the development of the novel — stories about lives), and the knowledge of Mother Earth's chemical elements — 117 in the current Periodic Table — helped scientists to begin to understand the very making of our universe. Carl Jung called these inorganic substances *pleroma.* He called organic matter *creatura.* Today, a few hundred tons of carefully selected Terra Firma can be transformed into a vehicle that can fly to the moon. Thus, patterns accrue and object matter proliferates in the form of items of acquisition and trade. And now hunter-gatherers are called shoppers.

Our predilection for material acquisition, however, has also been thought of as a Fall from Grace. In prehistoric cultures the physical world was often claimed to be the expression of an eternal, perfect metaphysician residing in Paradise — a place people were estranged from because of mistakes they made, mistakes for which they were held in His admonishing critical gaze.

Aristotle conceived of a Great Chain of Being that delineated all of life in a neat, evolutionary order: the smallest creatures at the bottom, Man in the middle, and the gods at the top. In his time the beautiful but over-curious Pandora released all human maladies from a box she'd been given — and was told to keep shut. All of life's constructions were conceived as heavenly appointments bestowed on man like *manna* (that indefinable miracle food). Kings wore the mantels of immortality, crowning themselves with headgear shaped like miniature sunrays. Priests controlled secret knowledge made privy to them by the gods, especially in the early days of writing, when the Word was directly linked with Divine power. With the event of writing, the oral tradition of clichés was slowly and painfully replaced by a literary tradition; manuscripts and books became our form of clichés. Monotheism evolved from pantheism, in which different gods maintained control over different territories. (Up until the Christian era it was common for conquerors to feign worship for the local gods in order to more easily control the population.) Eventually a single demanding God replaced the many gods, and a pretty girl named Eve came to be blamed for our fall from grace into materiality and human consciousness, which is, in any case, a struggle with materialism.

In the late Renaissance much of the land in Europe was plotted for

mass-crop agriculture. The magical potato, recently imported from the New World, was heavily cultivated. This was also the golden age of geography and cartography. The dividing of land into property evolved into the real estate business. New industries evolved that required market managers and indentured employees. Mass-market art forms like printed reproductions of expensive paintings were available to people who were in the middle of the great chain of humans, somewhere between nobles and peasants.

In the eighteenth-century the third Earl of Shaftsbury based his aesthetic theory on "disinterestedness," the psychological and intellectual distance needed to evaluate and isolate high art from mass-market art forms. In the nineteenth century Charles Darwin's theory of evolution turned Aristotle's theory of a Great Chain of Being on its head: man had evolved from microorganisms, in a seven-million-year biological struggle to survive. Along with Darwinism, free-market capitalism, and Marxism, a phenomenal spurt of what A. N. Whitehead called the industrial "invention of invention" changed the world. In this new world workers became the cogs of industry. Nature was categorized and defined in the nineteenth century. Flowers pots were brought into homes. Museums were built to inspire the masses with man's success in reaching up from the earth to the pinnacle of human ideals. Primitive societies were studied in the new fields of anthropology, archaeology, and sociology, and this in turn provided masses of objects for museums and collectors of every stripe. In the art world, from French impressionism to abstract expressionism, the realm of personal vision was imagined to emanate from anyone. Pop art was just around the corner, jumping out of comic books, televisions, magazines, and advertisements.

In a purely material world everything can be turned into a collectible — including spirituality. Of course, fulfillments are also symbolic for us all, whether in diplomas, driver's licenses, the accoutrements of wealth, or the finality of belief, or simply to define who we are or what we have proven we can do, like drive or vote. A taste for things and the inventories we create with them comprise the formulae we use to establish identities. Collecting is therefore nearly as multifaceted as we are. You can collect things of the color blue or things defined by their elemental differences, such as their being vertebrate or invertebrate. Collecting can begin with a speculation on value and a lust for prestige and self-aggrandizement; this might conclude with a person taking over a country, hording shares of stock, or wanting a museum wing named after his-or-herself. Collecting can be pursued for the pleasure that

objects like stamps yield as mementos, or for the different pleasure objects like guitars yield for the merits of artistry. Collecting can be anthropological and taxonomic; sundry objects such as cocktail swizzle sticks or turkey wishbones may be perceived as species of things. The gathering and cataloging of such objects then becomes evidence for that order. Collecting can be atmospheric when acquired objects, such as a wall of moose heads or self-portraits by Rembrandt, define one's character or reputation. Collecting can be personal or public, obsessive or compulsive, purposive or accidental, ephemeral or historic. In many cases the whim that begins a collection can engender a synergistic value beyond the sum of its parts, examples of this being all living speakers of the Navaho language or The Frick Collection in New York City. Collectors can be completists, speculators, or pack rats. To the minds of artists, art collecting is a serious endeavor — even though, just to survive, most art dealers define the value of art by sales made through their social contacts with collectors, many of whom buy art only for the social status it confers on them.

In his 1931 essay "Unpacking My Library," Walter Benjamin described book collecting as a "passion [that] borders on the chaos of memories." For Benjamin, collecting was possession, and possession was "the most intimate relationship one could have to objects." Every book engendered the memory of its acquisition, of a time and place. I like the energy that resides in books, the author's insistence on communicating something. I especially like reading non-fiction and history, so hardly any of the books I have can be considered collectible. Yet all writing can be considered as a way to collect facts and pass them on.

Civilization preserves its artifacts in books, museums, films, and photographs — the civilized world's mnemonic devices. The preservation of heirlooms is a preoccupation of many families. Preserving ourselves is, so to speak, a way of collecting ourselves together.

Most of us don't share Benjamin's evocative, almost Proustian sentiments. Many of our most treasured possessions are acquired by chance or whim. But when our possessions are labeled, in the way that clothes are emblazoned with their maker's names, the symbolism of the label can subsume the quality of the item. Such self-accessorizing reflects the descent into materialism that Trungpa distrusted. Medieval Nominalists and Realists debated questions concerning the alien abstractness of names versus the physical reality of things. We might say that the value of goods is debased when the name retains a higher order of symbolism; consider the case of a jacket being stolen because of its brand name, or of an art collector using the name of an artist instead of his-

or-her work to connote that work's value as a status item. Nevertheless, falling into materialism doesn't debase the spirit. The preservation of things also supports the conservation of life and, sometimes, of sanity. In the current environment things are preserved electronically; electronic hardware and software make up a new order of museum, as ephemeral as we are (a subject in itself).

This is an interesting time for existentialists — those for whom the world is the source of meaning that is not dependent on the symbolism of religion or a concept of universals. We can now collect knowledge about every kind of thing, access every kind of imagery and musical representation, and copy them without having to pay anyone. We can communicate across the world and access unprecedented amounts of information. We don't collect so much as process things, as we adapt to a changing world where names and knowledge take precedence over the physical reality of things, and where so many of the things we hold dear, such as computers and Internet connections, aren't things at all, but containers. So maybe instead of defining a target in order to possess it, we become both the target and the projectile. Wait. That sounds a bit too Zen-like, and perhaps too outlandish for what might be an evolution in consciousness. But perhaps what computers suggest to us about possession is that we are our world's ultimate works of art — even if we're not our universe's ultimate experience.

Small Change

I live in a nice neighborhood in Paris, and just about every day I walk down the hill to the metro I meet a toothless little guy with a big smile, a graying beard, and a pageboy haircut straight out of a Lancelot comic book. He's at least 50, but has an impish grin and a kid's glint in his eyes. His three-quarter-length coat hangs way below his knees. Except for the sneakers, he seems to be from another era, a cook named Grits in a John Wayne cowboy movie, say. I don't know what his living situation is, but he doesn't seem to drink, and he does change his clothes with some frequency. For the past few years I've watched him working the same section of the block nearly every day.

When he sees me he yells out, *"Ca va?"* His little hand reaches out expectantly. I give him most or all of the change I have in my pocket. OK, I give him between one and two Euros. Occasionally two. When I have nothing to give him, poof, he's gone, seeking another handout. If I have a lot of change I sometimes separate the larger and smaller of it into two of my pockets, and then just give him the small stuff. I sometimes feel a twinge of guilt, thinking I should give him a real handout, a big holiday handout. I never do on holidays because I generally go out of town. But then, so does he. I can't imagine where.

Before I moved to Paris I lived in Brooklyn for many years. I had the same pattern of giving there, donating money to the same person on

my usual route to Manhattan. I once gave a ten-dollar bill to a windshield washer on Delancey Street.It was dark out. I was driving into town from my apartment in the Greenpoint section of Brooklyn. I thought it was a one-dollar bill that I pulled out of my jacket pocket, but there it was: a ten. The man smiled so happily; I not only made his day, his appreciation made mine. I still remember how surprise bloomed on his face. Now I'm embarrassed to recall my pathetic little generosity.

I answer my Parisian guy's *Ça va?* with a *Wie gehts, Fred?* I know now that his name is Frederik, and that he's from Dortmund. He thanks me with a sincere *merci,* his right hand patting his chest, as people do these days, meanwhile calibrating his gratitude to the amount I've given him. I justify the small size of my gift by its regularity — four or five times a week for several years. I can imagine him growing tired of the same small quantity of change. Everyone wants a raise. Choosing him as the recipient of my pathetic munificence allows me to deny the other beggars I run into. That's my calculation. He's interested in money. I make it social by looking him in the eye and asking how he's doing. This is a charade. I'm never going to invite him home to take a shower. I should, but I don't want to get *that* close to him. What do I know about the guy? I give him change because by doing so the weight of the countless others I don't give to is reduced. That's the excuse I offer myself. It's a busy street, and there are other donors.

Perhaps I should mention now that the only change I possess at any time is what's in my pocket. I don't accumulate it. I used to have jars full of pennies. I cured myself years ago by following the advice of a coworker at a publishing house in Manhattan: carry eleven pennies every day and make sure you spend them. In a few weeks I had no change in my house — and I still don't. Honestly, I'm happier, and certainly lighter, without those jars. But it means that I don't have that much change to give out. What change I do accumulate today Fred will get tomorrow. That's how it goes. Right now I have one euro and sixty-two centimes in the right front pocket of my jeans. I'll give him most or all of it.

I imagine beggars have always existed, but what did they beg for before there was money? Food? Love? Better rags to wear?

I have a musician friend who spent twelve years busking on Market Street in San Francisco. He says he got by on his talent. People gave him money because he played his instrument very well (eventually he was spotted by a local nightclub manager and has been off the streets ever since). He also said that those without a talent of some kind often starved. The thought of that increases my discomfort.

Money gives us a practical means to evaluate our power and status — to separate the rich from the poor, the Haves from the Have-Nots, like Brahmins separate themselves from outcasts. If money didn't exist, surely our discomfort and our obligations would be different, if only because our symbolic value wouldn't be so starkly numerical. Outcasts like Fred test us by making us uncomfortable — it's their plight versus ours. His wretchedness pains me, even though he doesn't show his suffering to the world — which I can't figure out at all. Maybe if he had only recently been forced onto the street he'd be angrier. I know I would be.

Before people used money, other means of exchange included things like weighed silver, grains, and cocoa beans. The Lydians invented coins in the seventh century, B.C. The Romans minted coins, which they mostly used for government purchases, in the fourth century, B.C.

The Lydian coins were invented about the time the Greek alphabet — the first true alphabet, which directly linked speech to writing by including vowels. Money and literacy took over the world; they're the foundations of civilization, sources of power and control, and our means of concentrating wealth and power. Wealth and poverty define our limits. Poverty has always been bad. But being poor *and* illiterate is far worse.

We like to say that money is the root of evil; therefore we're suspicious of its means of acquisition, and associate ill-gotten gain with scoundrels. Realistically speaking, money has been instrumental in freeing people from oppression. It provides a practical means of gaining status. All you have to do is get some. Most of us middle-class workers grumble because we have to work to earn it, and to get a job we have to train ourselves or study something. Supposedly, work makes you free. But it depends on the return, and on the context.

According to my tax bracket, I'm middle-class. But living in my neighborhood makes me realize that middle-class living costs far exceed middle-class wages. These discrepancies in purchasing power have existed for decades. Inherited capitalist guilt tells me that my earning capabilities are limited by my lack of ambition. I should be more industrious. I could say I don't have the advantage of class or inheritance. My degree of literacy has gotten me enough work to live comfortably, but not extravagantly. I'm not particularly materialistic. I've relocated far too many times. Because of my lifestyle — I'm a professor at an art school, and a freelance writer and musician, and until recently I was nomadic— and because I take public transportation all the time, I encounter beggars with greater frequency than the rich art dealers and successful professionals I come into contact with do. I'm further down the food chain. I give more often because of *my* social status: I run into beggars and not-so-well-off people with

greater frequency. It's not just a question of my guilt or my empathy for them.

According to some evolutionary biologists, the human trait known as "reciprocal altruism" has been genetically bred into us. Darwin is credited with the idea that our helping others actually helps ourselves, if only by bolstering our self-image. Neo-Darwinians often talk about "selfish" genes, and about how our behavior is genetically inherited. In *The Moral Animal* (1994), Robert Wright cited a 1971 essay by Robert Trivers, "The Evolution of Reciprocal Altruism," which states that "friendship, dislike, moralistic aggression, gratitude, trust, suspicion, aspects of guilt, and some forms of dishonesty and hypocrisy can be understood as being important adaptations to regulate the altruistic system." The altruistic system is the necessary niceness we often use in our social lives and encounters — niceness that is often *not* genuine. I have to admit that I've felt every emotion that Trivers mentions when I've encountered Fred, sometimes within moments of each other. These feelings can hit us all on any given day. They arise in many social situations, and are the basis for both our interactions and our psychological dilemmas. Our feelings of dislike, moralistic aggression, suspicion, guilt, dishonesty, and hypocrisy are strongly affected by our financial status — where we live, how we live, and what we expect out of life. I suspect that Fred, in his mask of niceness, sometimes plays along with me. His mask allows me to get away with my meager generosity. It's an arrangement that is only partly conscious, for both of us. In all likelihood this kind of semi-conscious social exchange is an acquired habit through evolution, too.

For that matter, morality is a device all social animals need, especially animals like us, who are always watching each other, and who often report what they see out-loud — or in print. As evolutionary biologists have confirmed, survival skills were learned by humans living in small groups, groups in which everyone watched out for the other guy and in which reputations were always at stake. Feelings of sympathy, gratitude, guilt, obligation, moral indignation, and self-righteousness arise in social circumstances. We try to control them in our quest for social status — and devise laws and punishments to reign in our emotions, as well as the other guy's. Yet we exploit these emotions, as much as they exploit us. And we always calibrate their exchange value.

In the case of Fred, once we started looking each other in the eye, I could no longer avoid him. Now we talk, mostly in German, sometimes in French. Every time I see him he asks me about my daughter Emma, because he remembers her name but not mine or that of my son or girlfriend. Seeing him makes me uncomfortable. Seeing him seeing me makes me even more uncomfortable. We've entered each other's universe, which is what he needs. The value for me is social: I perform a minor public service. I might even be noticed giving him some change (I know people on the street he begs on). It's not that I want witnesses. I want to quell the discomfort that I feel. But this discomfort arises from my own ingrained social awareness.

Life's unfairness hits me when I see beggars — but not all beggars, because I protect myself by not making eye contract with most of them. Fred probably doesn't have an address; therefore he can't apply for social assistance, won't find employment, doesn't wash regularly, etc. He begs. He might hide his anger to increase his take. Weak social positions force people into behavioral compromises. Maybe Fred drinks alone or with friends. Maybe he flies into terrible rants and rages and has mentally murdered me countless times. I don't kill him in my mind; I keep him at bay with small change. His behavior is as much an act as mine is. Maybe I fool myself into thinking he is more deserving than others, or that his act is somehow more real to me because we see each other so often we've increased our social exchange rates.

I don't know if he can read either. I suspect he can. He could be an accountant, judging by how fast he can count coins. I feel that a certain degree of literacy is a form of protection against falling through the social cracks. This is a threadbare idea, which I cling to out of habit. Most of us think a bit of education protects us from the skids. With an inbred expectation — call it blind hope — we think an education will get us through disasters, such as losing a job. So we align ourselves with a group of people like ourselves. The group determines the kinds of social exchanges we have, and provides the semblance of a net. Fred clearly fell outside of any net that might have saved him in Dortmund, where, I hear, living on the street is basically illegal.

Giving handouts to the needy is an easy way to meet one's status obligations. These obligations are acquired characteristics. The gift of my small change is tantamount to a few Hail Marys after a basically dishonest confession. Choosing the easier route of admitting to breaking a few commandments (as I did as a kid, basically lying to the priest) earns a minor penance. Confessions are a way to subdue guilt. I give what I can afford. I *feel* that I should give more. This feeling that we should be responsibly generous is written into our genetic program. Fred offers me some release from this abstract social tension. I only go so far. I give him change, thinking he might be able to pay for a shower in a shelter. He isn't always covered in filth. Sometimes I see him in completely different clothes. They look clean enough to me.

Maybe a neo-conservative fundamentalist will have a different opinion, and think that praying for poor sots will ensure their self-delivery from squalor — that they'll raise themselves up out of penury's deadness. I don't subscribe to such beliefs. But I can imagine how prayer offers believers a conceptual doorway out of social responsibility — though I'm of the opinion that thoughts don't offer much in the way of comfort, even if they are generously conceived. Such thoughts lie at the heart of our social consciousness. Only actions make them visible. And only greater degrees of action qualify them as socially visible.

Then I wonder if money doesn't provide the means to lower the exchange value. If money frees people from oppression, it also offers them a means to win status, and it allows those who give it away a symbolic release, paid in literal tokens of self-esteem, which they are repaid in the abstract notions of social recognition. People are expected to give what they can afford to give. The most important thing is the impression we make, not the amount actually given. (This is beginning to sound a bit like politics.)

My middle-class brain thinks that generosity is inversely proportional to wealth; that people with less money are more generous — which may not be true at all. Maybe the richer you are, the further you're removed from squalor, and at that remove a reputation for generosity is judged differently. The rich benefit differently from their generosity, through tax abatements and big donations to the public trust. I can't deduct Fred from my taxes unless I employ him.

If what counts most are the impressions we make, we need only to fulfill a social obligation by *seeming* to be generous. Seeming to be cheap is another thing; cheapness, like cheating, hurts one's reputation. Everyone has an eye peeled for cheapskates. How we are perceived in society counts more than how we feel about ourselves. We hope our appearance stand ups to scrutiny. But other people's radar for cheapness can often be stronger than the false appearance we project. This too is a reality of natural selection: we are suspicious to a fault of just about everyone.

There are days when I want to avoid Fred. Sometimes I don't have a cent on me, or so little that I don't want to suffer the discomfort of seeing his disappointment. Sometimes I'm just tired of the whole thing. But every day I let him have the small change I have in my pocket, and so far, so good.

*This article appeared in a somewhat different form in *Graphic* magazine, issue 5, London, 2004.

What I Want

Personally speaking, I don't really want much of anything. I know that sounds pretentious, but I never really wanted much. When I was a kid my father would bring home presents from his business trips, and I usually gave mine to friends who seemed to want them more than I did. For years I collected books. I sold many of them, mostly to pay off hopeless romantic over-indulgences, but I still have a lot of books, because I read a lot and consider books to be the closest thing to any kind of representation of myself. Before I moved to Paris I gave away my old Chrysler, my television, my stereo, many books and records, all my furniture, including bookshelves and Japanese Rattan chairs and tables from the 1940s, all my kitchen paraphernalia, and other things too numerous to remember. I don't miss any of it. The problem with not wanting anything is that people don't really let you get away with it. Wanting things is the ultimate human ambition, and it really starts to get serious with sex.

To have sex, even a quickie with someone from a new encounter, brings you into an exchange with that person's stuff, their psychological baggage as well as their possessions. When sex evolves into a relationship you are drawn into joint projects and acquisitions. Projects can be anything, in any order, on any basis, from sharing a taste in music, to renting apartments, to accommodating habits, to making babies.

Acquisitions involve every domestic appurtenance, without exception. Relationships also bring up the issue of ambition and, therefore, the philosophical problem of Being versus Becoming — of who you are in the Know Thyself sense versus the what you or your relationship partner might want you to Become sense, be that mechanic, doctor, house husband, or success story. Partners usually want their mates to increase something, generally materially related, but not something necessarily related to every aspect of their relationship, such as agreeing on the number of sex partners permissible outside the relationship.

I've been accused, mostly behind my back, of lacking ambition. But that's not exactly the case. The problem is, you can't always do things that work out in exact, or even increasing, exchange ratios with who you are, your personal circumstances, or what you want to become. Sometimes the things you do, like teaching or being a musician, say, aren't so rewarding financially. Which reminds me of the joke: What do you call a musician who just lost his girlfriend? Homeless. (The problem with that joke is that it becomes a philosophical problem for musicians.) But to not want things, you have to accept poverty as an ever-present possibility, especially if you don't have family money. OK, so just about everyone has to work. And work can be pleasurable, especially when it comes from your true self — but such work isn't always about making the bucks, not to mention the Big Bucks.

I used to think that monks had sidestepped the acquisition game. The problem, of course, was their denial of sex. Years ago, while reading Chöguyam Trungpa's *Cutting Through Spiritual Materialism,* I realized how easy it is to deceive yourself into thinking that avoiding material possessions is the essence of not wanting anything. That's not the case, though it brings up the somewhat Zen-like pretension mentioned above, and makes the problem of not wanting anything as great as the problem of wanting as much as you can get.

The physical universe is an inconceivably vast expanse of matter that is measured by energy loss, which is called entropy. Momentum and heat-exchange involve matter. Human exchange involves acquisitions, including those of spiritual things — things we hope for, things we turn toward and turn away from. I mean, sure, I'd like to live in reasonable security. I'd also like to see the end of totally unregulated free-market capitalism. I think a bit of control, but not too much, is a good thing. I'd also like to see an end to nuclear armaments, genocide, pollution, and the kind of madness that allows people like G. Dubya Bush to become president and to abuse power. But that's not what I *really* want. That's only today's list.

Living requires material possessions. But that doesn't mean that your possessions have to possess you. We share our physical space with garbage, computers, and refrigerators as well as with and friends. Having the latest gizmos or the most well made things doesn't make you a better person. Ideally, we should be able to live within the realms of exchange without having to be fortressed inside the walls of our possessions. But it sure doesn't seem to work out that way, and it can wear you out.

*A slightly different version of this piece was published in *Je Veux,* OneStarPress, 2003.

Work

Work defines us: what we can and can't do, how we spend our time, what our habits are, and what our social status is. The older we are, the more clearly work inscribes its effects on our lives. Lucky are the ones whose work suits their skills and sense of self. Lucky are the ones whose lives are free of strife. Lucky are the ones who don't define work as drudgery.

The English word *work* derives from the Indo-European root *werg-* and the Greek word *ergon,* meaning the energy required to make iron. Producing iron required slaves to mine the ore and to stoke the fire that heated it, and then blacksmiths were needed to hammer it: difficult tasks, physical drudgery, and a lot of unhappy people under someone else's control. A related Greek word, *organon,* means a device, or a mechanism like a tool; one of its cognates, *orgy,* means secret rites, another is the word *organization.* The French word *travail,* stemming from *travaillier,* meaning to torment, is derived from the Latin *trepalium,* meaning an instrument of torture made with three stakes (or pales, used by sadists like Vlad III, Prince of Wallachia, a.k.a., The Impaler). How the words for the energy to make iron and an instrument of torture came to mean work says more about the drudgery of work than about the contentment and personal fulfillment people today expect from it. Yet *work* and *travail,* which is

associated with pain, hardship and exertion, have essentially the same meaning.

In the language of physics, work is the energy transferred in applying force over a certain distance. Work, as such, is effort that is applied and transferred. The energy expended working can leave one exhausted, bored, excited, or fulfilled. Work is the energy spent for a return. It creates expectations in those who provide it, and in those who perform it.

People didn't always work, as such. Hunter-gatherers shared their struggle to survive with other members of their clans. They didn't *have* to work for someone higher up. Work wasn't a concept. All that changed with agriculture and the separation of work from other kinds of activities. All this occurred gradually, anywhere from 12,000 to 2000 BC — the greatest proliferation being in the Fertile Crescent, now the Middle East. With cities like Jericho or Sumer, founded in the late sixth millennium BC, civilization began. In what is now the Middle East, people began to separate into classes: slaves, citizens, soldiers, healers, priests, nobles, bandits, and of course mothers and children. Roles evolved to become traditions, defining people and what they did. Male citizens performed soldiering tasks. According to Plato's student, Aristotle, virtuous citizens fulfilled obligations to communities; otherwise they were either beasts or gods. Slaves were non-citizens, beasts of burden, cogs in wheels, mere human resources, to use a common term today, as were women. Being a soldier became a profession in the seventeenth century. Women always moved somewhat flexibly within tight societies, but their power was limited to households, where they were basically under house arrest. The clergy was often a way that intelligent young men could rise up in social influence, entering in veritable partnership with local leaders, in what were managerial positions. This was true in places like Sicily even after the Second World War.

Until the Industrial Revolution, place, social identity, and work were linked. Peasants lived in small, unchanging societies, except during siege and war, and a sense of place was paramount in one's sense of identity. Place meant a locality or polis, not a country, or a nation. The Industrial Revolution and the free-market economy severed them from their traditional way of life, which in many cases meant both servitude to their feudal masters and their connections to a place, setting them on a course of life in which they had to define themselves and how they would survive. The modern world, as we know it, emerged to become a world driven by what we call self-interest. Industries proliferated beyond villages and cities and fewer and fewer men and women

would follow the professions of their parents. They began to migrate to places where work was available.

Karl Marx essentially defined the modern world's image of the working class. He did that in the dawn of the industrial age, particularly in Britain and the United States, then at the helm of free-market capitalism, which defines our world still. Marx's *proletariat* — from the Latin *proles,* for offspring, for whom a family's wealth were essentially the male children — described the working class: people who sold their labor to survive and who worked with their hands. In Czarist Russia, and in many parts of Europe and the world over, they were illiterate peasants. But Marx was thinking about artisans, clerks, and all wage earner. By the end of the nineteenth century Western theories about work and production, like Taylorism (the scientific management of work) and assembly line manufacturing, linked work and production to greater consumerism, and described workers in machine metaphors, such as cogs in wheels. In 1899 Thorsten Veblen was already unsettled by what he called the leisure class's conspicuous consumption, conspicuous leisure, and conspicuous waste. This was Marx's bourgeoisie, the owners of production and the distributors of work. Perhaps without a tradition or a sense of community to give meaning to one's life, success had to be measured in one's conspicuous waste of material, and of time — the taking of lavish holidays in exotic places, for example. Those were the bourgeois of the industrial age, many of whom had a great deal more free time than ever before — more anyway than steady laborers, but not so much more than the unemployed or the barely employed, who existed in hoards, and still do, the world over.

But a growing middle class was beginning to earn wages that were sufficient enough to provide them with modern consumer comforts, which included adequate food, plumbing, and electricity, health services, education for children, and leisure time — things that formerly only the rich could afford. Marx could not have predicted the growth of the middle class, or that governments would begin to offer them social security and retirement packages.

In a capitalist world innovation is its tradition. Men and women look for work that fits their needs, their capabilities, and their social status. These are ingredients that don't always work together — if, for example, a job one likes, say, being an artist, musician, or teacher, doesn't pay so well. But this is the world today. Jobs are found. Careers are forged. Success and advancement are branded into our psyches. And living a good life no longer requires great luxury (from the Latin *luxus,* which originally described an overgrown plant, bent under its own

weight), because creature comforts are available to those with a middle-class income. (In America in 2007, the poverty threshold for a single person under 65 was just under $11,000, and about $21,000 for a family of four.) Money can also be earned (and lost) in ever more creative ways. Opportunities for private investment offer new possibilities to increase one's income for those who work extra hard or are clever or thrifty. Earning a great deal of money can raise ones social status.

Still, the psychology of "becoming" someone or something can tear up our souls, especially those among us whose abilities aren't so developed or marketable. Books on self-help, personal investing, salesmanship, and how to make money have flourished. Spin-offs included the therapy and exercise industries.

What would Aristotle or even Marx think of such things? It's likely that neither one could even conceive of them. Today's middle class is far removed from the feudalism as it was even in Marx's time. Problems of self-meaning and self-respect have also been addressed through education and specialized labor. Free public education became a middle-class clichés; its purpose was to link education to work.

Without work, young men are easily driven to informal adaptations, like joining gangs or taking out their aggressions against a greater foe. Many of them, including young women, are radicalized by the social inequities they are forced to live with, many of which are directly tied into problems about their own self-respect. Radical political or religious zeal often arises as a strong cause against a powerful foe because zealotry offers a way to self-respect, if only in an afterlife — which is patently insane to people with jobs, reasonably good health, and security. People fight for causes. Women also may participate in fights against larger, more imposing aggressors who threaten their identities and the survival of their families. Therefore, we need more education for men and women, and perhaps a redefinition of work as it is related to status, and which supports some degree of self-respect, even when, or especially for, those people who do *not* have work.

Work, more than say a sense of place or tradition, is now associated with self-definition, and, in the best of circumstances, can be personally meaningful in an almost artistic sense, in which case the word *work* defines both the effort and the result, each giving meaning and satisfaction to the other.

Work, the energy required to make iron, evolved when some select people had time enough *not* to work, when they could stay put and develop means of exchange and forms of art. One place had salt or precious stones another had fish or grain. They traded. Money was invent-

ed. Markets evolved. Work became marketable, but a noble class required slaves and a servant class. We have outlawed slavery in description, if not entirely in meaning, and we have created a different idea of work from that of a stake that chains us to drudgery. In the modern age, in the aftermath of the unprecedented horrors of the great wars, the peasantry and the nobility were outmoded, and a domestic economy created a large middle class comprised of former members of both Marx's proletariat and his loathed bourgeoisie. Now many of those former classes live and shop together.

We are still hunter-gatherers, but our means have improved exponentially through advancements in technology, education, and an awareness of democratic principles. Unfortunately, we might need thousands of years to evolve beyond the mindset of killing and hoarding and to develop different ideas about self-respect, social status, and the meaning of work.

Say We Are a Revolution

1. Scientists say the human body hasn't changed for about fifty thousand years, and that genetic change to a species takes as long. What about human culture, though? Look how much it has evolved. Maybe it's time for us to evolve further. But how?

2. Civilization began with the domestication of plants and animals, about 12,000 years ago in the Fertile Crescent, the place with the most abundant supply of both, the birthing ground of Western Civilization. WC's next leap occurred in communications with the introduction of writing, which came about for the first time in that same region about 4500 years ago (writing began about 2000 BC in China and 500 AD in the Americas). Then, in Ancient Greece, around 750 BC, the first alphabet was concocted. Greek writers, mostly in Athens, gave us literature, philosophy, and history, our notions of good and evil, of categories and hierarchies, and of citizenship and democracy. In that world, however, lives were short and the world was violent. Apocalypse and Armageddon were ever-present. Death could be a relief from life's veil of tears. Hope resided in Paradise. Progress was slow. Then came the catastrophic Black Plague pandemic in the mid-fourteenth century, which halved the population of Europe and inadvertently offered fewer people greater opportunities. Shortly thereafter WC's next great leap occurred in Italy,

in the 1430s, with the invention of the printing press and graphical perspective. The exact duplication of texts (in Latin) and images (using woodcut printing) spurred a revolution in science and exploration, influencing Europe's discovery of the Americas — and not China's, which had the capability but not the exploratory urge. This last step defined WC's geographical limit, which began in Ancient Greece and culminated along California's Pacific Rim. Henceforth, WC would create another grand narrative, this time based on capitalism, on profit and production.

3. England and the United States became Western capitalism's role models of progress, growth, increase, profit, and the model for the transformation of workers into consumers of their own products. Capitalism's most outspoken critic, Karl Marx, cautioned that capitalism was prone to financial crisis because it created a calculating madness for profit, such as the recent subprime mortgage scheme — named for those with a questionable credit rating — and subsequently renamed a credit crisis after banks could no longer resell their bad subprime loans to investment banks, thus creating the bubble that burst. Marx's organization of workers into a huge international political body didn't succeed either, if only because of human nature: people want to be different, special, and to control as much of their own ends and means as they can, top to bottom, or bottom to top.

4. Charles Darwin described human evolution as one of "natural selection." Herbert Spencer, following Darwin's lead, offered the metaphor of "survival of the fittest," and compared biology with economics. Survival requires reproduction. For an organism to survive it must adapt, meaning it has to acclimate itself to its environment, which is part of the natural selection process. Maybe following Spencer, the assembly line was a social adaptation on a socio-cultural scale, from the top down.

5. During the last 150-plus years of free-market capitalism a renaissance in materialism evolved and WC's peasantry and nobility all but disappeared, largely owing to the two cataclysmic world wars, which were fought over territory and race. A middle class of producer-consumers evolved. Hope lay in materialism, in work and wages, in production, consumption, and technology. Apocalypse was nuclear destruction and natural catastrophe. Apocalypse and Armageddon now had a human face.

6. New electronic technology, fast and prolific, rocked the world with as great an impact as plant and animal domestication, writing and print, the Black Plague, and the fear of God combined. A postwar domestic economy projected its lifestyle in magazines, on radios and televisions, at the movies, and in commercial products. People didn't just want potable water, education, transportation, commerce, and leisure; they expected it from their governments. Artists, art directors, performers, writers, celebrities, athletes, and religious leaders promulgated this lifestyle, which redefined western materialism — even for those against it, as was the case with the followers of Karl Marx's Utopian communism. This kind of commerce virtually outmoded wars between nations. The West was swallowed up by capitalism, mass media, the Cold War, nuclear energy, and information, which filled minds and instilled a nervous expectancy, a combination of paranoia and excitement — and wreaked havoc on traditions.

7. The capitalist revolution that first began to evolve in the Renaissance is now overheating. For years scientists had warned of climate change, the *greenhouse effect,* and *global warming,* engendering images of anarchy across the globe: Northern Europe as cold as Canada, the South of France a desert, Bangladesh lost to floods, Africa ruined by drought and famine, earthquakes in China, fires in California, hurricanes in Asia and the Caribbean. They announced that 16% of Greenland's ice surface had melted. What if all the problems continue? Apocalypse could seep in slowly, stealthily, and not come crashing in like the Black Plague. And maybe global anarchy will arise from hoards of jobless men. There's still time. But sometimes revelation comes too late.

8. Changing a society's dependency on, say, fossil fuels, might require something as catastrophic as the Black Plague. Dictators like Hitler, Stalin, and Mao implemented decisive social change in their lifetimes. Those dictators' messes were relatively short-lived, nothing as permanent as the changes wrought by the inventions of writing, print, and electronic media — though we should stay clear of such mad decision-making. But how can large-scale change be implemented when situations are *not* so obviously extreme as in times of plague or devastation? What if middle classes can no longer afford houses, fuel, education, insurance, or food — which they produce and consume — or if people becomes catastrophically indebted to creditors? Without middle-class materialism to give reason to life, society can quickly revert to aggression. We are in such a phase.

9. Terms like selection, survival, and adaptation are evolutionary metaphors. Progress is a capitalist metaphor, which emphasizes in its motives what Marx called "naked self-interest," which he suggested leads to excess. A more suitable metaphor than, say, survival and self-interest, might be adaptation, because it implies a subtler and less "naked" kind of aggression, which can in any event turn violent.

10. Changing orientation is not just a matter of changing perceptions. And changing ourselves isn't really possible because, as Darwinism reveals, competitive self-interest is bundled into our DNA. Evolution is a bottom-up process, which may be part of the reason why a middle class evolved out of industrialized production, from the bottom up — and not from the top down as in Stalin's Marxist-Leninist communism. A better model than any top-down policy is one based on evolution's bottom-up process, an example of which was the fight for worker's rights that occurred during the past 150 years of free-market capitalism. Bottom-up capitalism is also closer to human character than Marxist communism — or even to the unregulated, trickle-down, supply-side version of free-market capitalism of recent years. The problem is that the dream of getting rich remains the ultimate expression of materialism, our Paradise on Earth. Furthermore, top-down control systems continue to rule life. Such a system furthers the class-based social model and seems to carry over religious concepts like the divine right of kings, in which rulers are above the law — all of which a bottom-up system resists. Nevertheless, it's unlikely that we'll disentangle status from materialism any time soon, even if we do make something like saving Earth a universally shared idea.

11. The one medium that is as close to an external brain as we've ever devised is the computer. It can take people out of naked materialism, if only briefly, and bring them into the abstract space of a cross-cultural, cross-class communication system. A large percentage of Westerners own a computer. These are the middle-class descendants of Marx's proletariat. They are contemporary working class people. Though the business community uses computers to systematize profit and to expand the free market, computers are also used on a daily basis by people, not just for work, but also for enriching their lives — via computer links, which cross borders and create a different sense of place, space, and time. Computer screens are abstract spaces — electronic architectures without walls. Computers contain museums and libraries; they bring us in and out of different worlds. It would be nice to think that through this very prolific medium we might evolve a different style of materialism and adapt a different economic theory from the current one based on profit and surplus, a theory that might include a bottom-up approach to economics instead of, say, trickle down from the rich to the poor. Computers may never change our genetic makeup, but a change has been made in cross-class communications and is likely to take us further along, at least technologically.

12. What if Earth could be thought of as an artwork, with us in the role of its artists and curators? We are capable of adaptive self-definition because of culture, not just learning to say please and thank you, but also to recycle plastic bottles and to create new energy sources. Equality and fairness may never be achieved, or wanted, as achievement and success are elements of our evolution, and people naturally want independence. So what could we do to redirect naked self-interest toward creative adaptation and better communication between groups? What would allow us to keep capitalism while preserving this universe's only memorial monument, Earth, and its only audience, us? What would help us evolve such a change from the bottom up?

13. Computer images turned Earth into an artwork, visible from space, making our treatment of her painfully apparent. Such awareness won't make anyone any less selfish or less status-oriented. But we are clearly the artists and curators of Earth's destiny. We know that; and we can extend that knowledge by passing it on to our offspring so that maybe they can take Earth and our memory further. In that regard we could be Earth's revolutionaries, assuming our revelations don't come too late.

A Unified Theory of Acceptance and Letting Go: Part 1

Zen Buddhism, some psychological therapies, and most 12-step recovery programs suggest using a Yin-Yang balance of acceptance and letting go as antidotes to our fighting one another, our trying to outdo one another, our wanting more than others, and our thinking that we're better than others. Maturity is the goal. Staying grounded is the key. Accept who you are and let go of the things you can't change. Identify your feelings. Live in the present. Take the bad with the good, and don't cling to either. Sleep when you're tired. Eat when you're hungry. Let go of disruptive feelings. Don't get carried away with unrealistic expectations. Don't let circumstance decide your fate. Pay attention to your reactions — especially if you feel two or more of the things AA habitués call HALT — Hungry, Angry, Lonely, and Tired.

Suggesting that people accept their weakness is sound advice if they're trying to stay off the sauce, keep away from the needle, or give up using credit cards — dealing with addictions and overindulgences. Accepting faults helps one to let go of obsessions, bad habits, and excessive anxiety. Letting go of the idea that another's behavior is evil is the first step toward communication and can lead to the development of mutual trust. Communication is important. The more we know about things and people, whatever or whomever they are, the more we're open to finding similarities, instead of fighting over differences, and the easier it is to accept the things we think we won't like. This is important in all relationships, in those between spouses and in those between countries dealing with nuclear arms or terrorist aggression.

The difficulty we have staying grounded and balanced involves our natural tendency to go to extremes. We like to test the limits of who we are and what we can do in just about everything, including sports, love, and ownership. We're obsessed by increase. We're also a cantankerous and violent species. Life is the story of war and forced relations, in which the things in our minds are let out to kill. How many people have you killed in your mind? (Read any novel by Cormac McCarthy for high art revelations about human violence.) Evolution is the story of survival and adaptation, and surviving involves more violence than adapting does.

Conflicts evolve from comparisons and questions of difference — how we look, what we do, what belongs to whom, etc. Conflict lies at the core of all social relations, including sexual relations, and it stymies the desire for peace between partners and populations. Beliefs can cause conflict, too, carrying us forth, defining our arguments, and framing our differences. When belief becomes too strident, conflict over differences can escalate to horrendous extremes, as in the wars over material, religion, territory, and ways of life that defined history. We never seem to be satisfied, never say *enough*. Someone always wants more and others are forced into going along with it. Fights ensue. Often, for the fighting to end, someone has to let go of the argument, to give in, to quit, or worse — much worse. Sometimes one party submits to the other's dominance. Sometimes one party has to be cared for, to be assuaged. Sometimes the result is greater division — a divorce or a separating wall. Adaptation can help, if we're open to it, simply because it can be less violent.

Say the parties A and B are in conflict. One-upmanship on either side can lead both into escalating the conflict. During the Cold War the United States and Soviet Russia were in conflict over the buildup of nuclear arms, which reached extreme heights during the Cuban Missile Crisis. Fortunately, both sides were afraid to unleash these terrible weapons, and eventually one side collapsed, not only because it could not afford to increase its military spending but also because its way of life had become untenable. In a personal squabble someone's head might be axed in the mind's eye of the other, but one party actually reaching for an axe can mean the death sentence for both. The use of nuclear arms has the same consequences for nations. Hence, we've seen an

adaptive restraint in using them. This all began, of course, with the bomb the US was so compelled to try out, just to see what it could do. So the US dropped *two* of them on Japan in 1945. (In 1941 the Japanese may have attacked Pearl Harbor just for the aesthetic beauty of rearranging all those ships sitting idle on a Sunday morning. They too tested an extreme in their attack. They also may have had a suicidal acceptance of the ultimate demise they would suffer by wagering war against a greater foe.)

One way to get out of heavy conflict is to introduce complementary behavior, such as generosity, into the pattern of the symmetrical behavior of, for example, both sides screaming ever louder at one another. The effect can be to neutralize the argument before the parties kill each other, break up, or build a wall between each other. In any relationship, personal or national, when one of the parties introduces generosity into the conflict, the other party's argument often begins to deflate. Instead of responding to aggression with more aggression, the aggression is tamed by generosity, a seeming submission in most any argument. One of the contestants is forced to listen to the other's issue, even if they disagree. Sometimes one party has to submit to the other's domination. That's where many of us get stuck: not many people, and certainly not many countries with populations to protect, want to look weak. Not wanting to look weak, especially when their foe is in fact weaker, can lead countries to bizarre forms of aggression, such as the overreactions of France in Algiers, and those of the United States in Vietnam and Iraq.

Another problem we have, aside from our leaning toward excess, is an obsession with unified theories. Explaining everything or everyone with one theory is just about impossible because once things are pinned down here, complications crop up there. This applies to all of reality, except possibly that of mathematics, because math relies on proofs and committee verifications. Math is also an abstraction that can be applied to real contexts, but is not dependent on them. Einstein's General Theory of Relativity was based on the forces of electromagnetism, which he described in a mathematical formula. The Unified Field Theory tries to explain natural constants in terms of elementary particles. But physicists have learned that energy is transferred in both waves and particles. They've seen both — but not both at once, which must be very frustrating.

Historians are also driven to organizing life into epic periods and grand narratives like Capitalism versus Marxism. They try to be thorough, carefully examining a subject, footnoting sources, and reading

everything they can find. But no single historian can ever have the last word on any subject. Time passes and perspectives accrue. We change because of the drive to gather and accumulate — to survive and to adapt. Historians try to be factual and concise, but most stories are skewed to fit their public. In any event, total coverage is difficult even when larger patterns are sensed. [See Part 2 for an example of Tolstoy's bigger picture.] Add belief into the mix and the problems of difference take off into theoretical extremes and often into violent disagreement. Which is why we need laws, journalists, activists, and organizations to mediate against extremes and extremists.

Nevertheless, understanding (to *stand under,* or observe from below), whether its understanding ourselves and others, or the past and the present, often requires a bit of accepting *and* letting go, which generally requires what the philosopher and the theologian call wisdom — something which neither can fully define. But most of us have an idea about what wisdom means and usually it has something to do with maturity, which means having lived and experienced life, can accept how things are, and let go of wishful thinking, and maybe have come up with an adequate personal formula for tallying one against the other.

There is a message in all this.

Our planet has been conquered and divided into plots of land called countries. No country has ever been able to define itself by the ethnicity, color, race, language, or economic policy of its population. All have adapted, mostly through violence. Our resources are limited, while our numbers increase. (Exacerbating the dilemma, scientists agree, is the growing depletion of fossil fuel, as well and the havoc that their present burning wreaks on the environment.) Accepting this, as well as accepting the reality of others trying to survive and adapt, is the first step toward letting go of ideas that are no longer tenable. Planetary conditions are indifferent to these divisions. The past has to be accepted, and divisions have to be let go of. Everyone wants to feel safe. We are freest when we accept our differences and let go of our fears.

A Unified Theory of Acceptance and Letting Go: Part 2

Isaiah Berlin's essay on Tolstoy's theory of history, *The Hedgehog and the Fox,* borrows an idea from the Ancient Greek poet, Archilochus: "The fox knows many things, but the hedgehog knows one big thing." In America, a hedgehog is a porcupine, whose only defense is a hide full of needles. Foxes are more clever and adaptive. Berlin wrote that the hedgehog searches for one unifying principle while the fox looks for many ends and means. The latter, he suggests, often leads to contradictory conclusions. Tolstoy took both stances, using countless descriptive details to compose a story about how and why things happen on a larger scale. However Tolstoy didn't see the Whole Truth; he saw what Berlin called "the many," using fiction to create a larger picture of reality.

Tolstoy, according to Berlin, thought knowledge was empirical: the more Tolstoy knew about something — the more evidence he had about it — the more inevitable things would be. If you think about it, this idea is more optimistic than even Tolstoy himself might have admitted, because, using a perspective like this, what one finds is often only what one is looking for: ideas and situations end up being tailored to fit each other. Tolstoy's big idea needed a myriad of little details to elucidate it. He wrote a great big book, *War and Peace,* which he finished in 1863, to make clear to all the human capacity for war, which is waged in order

to satisfy a concomitant desire for peace. Tolstoy wrote about the Napoleonic Wars, which came to an end when French soldiers, freezing in Russia, lost the will to continue fighting. Tolstoy's subject, war and peace, is also a contradiction in terms. His big picture can't combine enough possibilities to frame a unified theory of history — of war or peace.

One reason for this is that you can't always know exactly why things happen, even with a wide-angle perspective and volumes of details. Another reason is that no one can control how the stories of mythical people like Adam and Eve, or of real ones like Alexander the Great, Shakespeare, Hitler, and Gandhi, can infect and dominate peoples' visions to the point where their actions may take them to an extreme. The terrible truth is that too many of us go along with violence as a means of expression and as a means to an end.

For example, historians still debate the causes of The Great War of 1914 to 1918, a very big event that seemed to just "break out," after a number of complicated diplomatic processes were set in motion by the assassination in Sarajevo of Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria. Germany went after Russia; France wanted to take the Alsace back from Germany; England supported the French. The war began in August, and many thought it would be over by Christmas. Instead it became a means to its own end, as is generally the case once a war is in progress, even when the ultimate cost is slaughter, en masse. In the Great War, the warring states were made up of "governments, armies, and people," to borrow a term from Martin van Creveld's illuminating *The Transformation of War*. The states — the governments, armies, and people — seemed, according to historians, ready for conflict, but were wholly unprepared for its consequences. A quest for peaceful order, via redrawn boundaries, drew them into a conflict that would continue for thirty-years, through the Second World War, at the end of which all the warring parties concluded that wars could never resolve the issues that spawned them in the first place. The Cold War resulted from the excesses of the military machines these countries built. From the waging of this "cold" war one thing became clear to the great powers: using nuclear weapons would be suicidal.

Thus understanding the problems of people going to extremes, and the differences between foxes and hedgehogs, requires a Unified Theory of Accepting and Letting Go: accept the things that can't be changed; base decisions on real possibility, not wishful thinking; and don't let one set of circumstances decide your fate.

Mohandas Karamchand "Mahatma" Gandhi implemented a similar

kind of thinking, using non-violent civil disobedience (a term based on the Sanskrit word, *ahimsa,* meaning the avoidance of violence, or *himsa*) to further the cause of Indian independence. In the 1960s Martin Luther King employed Gandhi's method and became a martyr for the cause of Civil Rights. In both cases, complementary behavior humiliated the aggressors for the power they wielded over their weaker foes, who were seen as victims of the aggressors' power *and* unsupportable beliefs. Indian independence was relatively peaceful as a result of the non-violent "aggression." The enforcement of the Civil Rights Act was also swifter thanks to the action of M.L. King.

In the case of the Cold War, with the two sides pretty much sharing equal power, neither side was generous; each copied the other until the Soviet side was economically exhausted. (As van Creveld observed, most military power struggles, and all wars, between nations are driven by symmetrical behavior — one side copies the other's methods of fighting.) Neither side accepted the other's differences or let go of their own prejudices. These nuclear powers, with enough weapons to destroy the world, remain great military powers. What they now face, however, is "low intensity conflict" from inside and outside their own borders. Their extravagant military power, always an obscenity, has been made obsolete by the different means others can now use to attack them. This is where we are now.

The Sea and Memory

When I was a kid I liked to swim underwater in the ocean with my eyes open. The water was the color of green tea, fish scales, eucalyptus leaves, and hazel eyes (like mine) — colors of a green-gray scale more commonly seen in winter than summer. Water jostles you, and denies you much of a chance of holding on to your position. Feet work like rudders struggling for ballast. For most of my childhood the sea felt like a kind of pleasurable liquid entity that pushed and shoved me around like a friendly octopus might. I wasn't afraid of it, and I could swim for what seemed like forever. I remember, when I was nine or ten, swimming in the lower Chesapeake Bay, out beyond the first buoy. I got tangled up in a jellyfish, the devil of the sea. It felt like being bound up in a giant web of burning goop. I swam back to shore with the monster wrapped around my legs, dragged it up onto the beach, and then crushed its gooey body into the sand with a piece of driftwood. I was too angry to feel the burning welts. Thinking about it now, I can smell the salt and feel the viscous texture of the water and the waves.

Water covers about seventy percent of the earth's surface. Our bodies contain about the same percentage of water; so do a head of lettuce and a watermelon. Some say that in the future water will become as precious as crude oil is today. But what will replace crude oil in the future? Scientists say that water will be the waste product of nuclear

fission, which uses helium atoms, and is a fairly abundant atom. The problem is that fission requires the same intensity of heat the sun produces to occur. A pollutant we could drink and swim in: that would be a nice change from the 240,000-year long killing potential in the half-life of nuclear waste. Nuclear power today seems like nothing if not a death machine. We might not even miss crude oil one day. But maybe I'm dreaming.

Like in entropy — the loss of energy in a system — we often understand something by way of, or after its disappearance. Shakespeare's Hamlet addressed the hardest fact of life when he said, "To be or not to be, that is the question." All of life is born to die. This paradox — the double nature of being and non-being — is a way to explain life.

When Descartes separated mind from body, or, in fact, the mind from the brain, he was really talking about the separation of consciousness from the world of things and sounds that surround us, the world we pass through physically, as the world, in turn, passes through our thoughts and memories. Memory is stored in the part of our minds that perceives, feels, wills, thinks, and judges. But our minds are nothing without the patterns necessary to connect thoughts, images, and memories. The most important part of the cup is the part that isn't there. The most important part of a room is its contents. That which is not contained contains the meaning of that which is.

Time and the tides are patterns that link us to life, to being and non-being. One of the jobs of culture is to map reality. Its maps are constantly renewed to increase understanding and direction, but they are never complete. Consciousness has been compared to a fish's relationship to water — something the fish becomes more aware of by being removed from it.

A full moon is like the eye of a fish: glaring, turning, and reflecting light without thought. Light's reflections on waves culminate in odd numbers, according to a Frenchman's mathematical proof. Reflections are visible to us only intermittently because of the intersection of light waves and ocean waves. In this case, reflections are signals from light sources bouncing off of bobbing reflectors.

Water pretty much defines our planet. From outer space the earth looks blue because the oxygen in our atmosphere reflects the color of the planet's bodies of water and because of the oxygen in water and in the atmosphere (compared to, say, Mars, which looks red because its atmosphere reflects the iron on that planet's surface). We are attracted to water because it links us to life and to an expanse of time that exceeds our limited hours. The tides seem eternal, even though they are caused by the gravity of the moon, which was torn from the earth a finite number of years ago. The ebb and flow of the tides is like the ticking of a clock that will end millions of years from now on an odd rather than an even number, when there will be no one left to reflect upon such things.

JEFF RIAN

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