



Threshold of Transcendence

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deep diving

in the daimonic dumpsters of 2015

with Don Shewey

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ACTING

I'll tell you, all the film and television things—you do them, and everyone gets so excited about them, and then they disappear so fast. Whereas I'm always amazed about the shelf life of a theatre piece. [Edward Albee's] *The Goat* was on Broadway, the longest run I had ever done, I think it was seven months, and 600,000 people saw that. That's a bad night for a movie or a TV show, where if you get 10 million, that's a disappointment. But people always come up to talk to me about *The Goat*, and that TV show I did shortly before? Twelve years later, no one has mentioned it. The theatre has more staying power than you think. Maybe it's a smaller pool of people, but the integrity of the experience stays with them.

-- Bill Pullman

Your life will change, and you will get used to it. And you will be by turns happy, and delighted, and employed, and then you'll wonder "what the hell happened?" every once in a while. Because the natural state of an actor is to observe life around them, and now you have to figure out how to do that when all anybody's looking at is you.

--Harrison Ford, speaking to the young cast of *Stars War: The Force Awakens*



The song: We don't want a ring-tailed lemur. We want a ring-tailed lemur (gg)

ACTIVISM

The danger is that people will go from denial to despair without stopping in between to ask themselves what action they can take.

--Al Gore, *An Inconvenient Truth*

When you get bleak about things and think, Gosh, is there an end to this? Yeah, there is, it just takes lots of work, lots of time. I was never a hippie — I'm punk rock, really. I was never into: "Let's hold hands, and peace will come just because we'll dream it into the world." No. Peace is the opposite of dreaming. It's built slowly and surely through brutal compromises and tiny victories that you don't even see. It's a messy business, bringing peace into the world. But it can be done, I'm sure of that.

--Bono

ART

The purpose of art is to lay bare the questions hidden by the answers.

--James Baldwin

For me the Museum of Modern Art was a temple where I might refresh my own sense of artistic purpose, though my medium had become words. What made this impudent array of color and form Art was the mystery; what made it Modern was obvious, and was the same force that made me modern: time. . . . But it was among the older and least "modern" works in the museum that I found most comfort, and the message I needed: that even though God and human majesty, as represented in the icons and triptychs and tedious panoramic canvases of older museums, had evaporated, beauty was still left, beauty amid our ruins, a beauty curiously pure, a blank uncaused beauty that signified only itself. Cezanne's "Pines and Rocks," for instance, fascinated me, because its subject . . . was so obscurely deserving. . . . The ardor of Cezanne's painting shone most clearly through this curiously quiet piece of landscape, which he might have chosen by setting his easel down almost anywhere. . . . The Matisse's, too, attracted me with their enigmatic solemnity. . . . How impudently, in "Piano Lesson," does the painter take a wedge from the boy's round face, flip it over, and make of it a great green obelisk, barely explicable as a slice of lawn seen through a French door! I knew of nothing so arbitrary in writing - a regal whimsy enforced by the largeness of the painting, whose green was already cracking and aging in another kind of serene disregard. The little boy, but for the cruel wedge laid across his eye, looked normal to me, but the other figures - the little brown nude, the tall unfinished figure merging with her chair - were, I realize now, emissaries from another world: they were art twice over, representations of Matisse works already distributed in this domestic space.

--John Updike, *Just Looking*



"We do a lot of amazing work bringing the arts to people who don't want the arts."

ATTENTION DEFICIT DISORDER

Dyslexia, chronic lateness, distractability, hyperactivity make up “attention deficit disorder” – and what patience it demands. Yet how else contain and tease out what this “deficit” also shows? Children so categorized, and adults too, are often those with above-average intelligence, given to daydreams, and with such widely open sensitive souls that their “ego” behavior is noncompliant and disorganized. Ritalin, Prozac, Xanax—of course, they work. But because they work against the deficit does not confirm the cause of it or disclose its meaning. Crutches work, but they can’t account for your broken leg. Why is this disorder so prevalent today? What does the soul *not* want to attend to, and what might the daimon be doing when it is *not* reading, *not* speaking, and *not* fulfilling performance expectations? To discover this takes patience, and that imaginative perception that Henry James described as “a prolonged hovering over the case exposed.”

--James Hillman, *The Soul's Code*



AUDITIONS

[Casting director Allison] Jones had already seen half a dozen actresses when Milana Vayntrub sat down in the waiting room, wearing glasses and a prim plaid dress with a white collar. To break the tension in crowded audition rooms, Vayntrub told me, she likes to slurp water loudly from a cup, see who laughs, and befriend them. She was waiting alone for Jones, so she repeated a mantra from her acting coach: “I release and destroy my need to get this part. I am just here to tickle myself and play in these circumstances. This is not a scene; I am just going to behave as though it’s really happening.”

--Stephen Rodrick, “The Nerd Hunter,” *The New Yorker*



BASQUIAT

He liked to see words at play, populating the surface of a painting like signs on a busy street, their visual rhythm syncopated with their verbal percussiveness. The words form a diary and a map and a vast inventory of names and dates and lists and historical connections. Sometimes he sketched complex matters with remarkable economy — as in the 1983 painting that sets out the passage from Africa to slave ship to “Undiscovered Genius of the Mississippi Delta” as a kind of textbook page run riot — and sometimes he addressed more elusive matters in huge open-ended rebus-like structures. The notebooks were his laboratory and outflow, predictive less of the specific contents of paintings than of their overall gestalt. It is all flour from the same mill. Reading them puts you in the world of the paintings through sound alone:

THIS BUM NAMED BALTIMORE
 THIS A VAGRANT NAMED CHICAGO
 A LOT OF BOWERY BUMS USED TO BE EXECUTIVES —

--Luc Sante

BIRTH CONTROL

Since strong anti-birth control laws in Massachusetts and in many other states made it impossible for [G. D. Searle and Company, who first produced a contraceptive pill] to conduct the large study of humans required by the FDA, it turned to Puerto Rico, which already had a long history of governmental birth control programs. The pseudocolonial island of Puerto Rico became the most important clinical site for testing the Pill outside the national disciplinary institutions of the asylum and the prison and functioned as a parallel, life-sized biopolitical pharmacological laboratory and factory during the late 1950s and early 1960s. During the cold War period, Puerto Rico would become the United States’ biggest pharmacological backyard. The island was the invisible factory behind the Playboy mansion and the white liberated middle-class American housewife.



--Beatriz Preciado, *Testo Junkie*

BOOKS

Books can be mentors, even providing a moment of initiation. R.D. Laing, writer, philosopher, and revolutionary psychiatrist, tells of this discovery in a small public library, while he was still an adolescent in the 1940s. He came upon Kierkegaard while

eating my way through the library. I mean I was looking at all the books...working my way from A to Z...The first major thing of Kierkegaard that I read...was one of the peak experiences of my life. I read that through, without sleeping, over a period of about 34 hours just continually....I'd never seen any reference to him...that directed me to it. It was just this complete vista...It just absolutely fitted my mind like a glove...here was a guy who had done it. I felt somehow or another within me, the flowering of one's life.

This moment of initiation is also like a ritual of adoption. Kierkegaard – along with Marx, Freud, and Nietzsche – became one of Laing's spiritual parents, a member of the family tree that nourished his acorn and fed his intellectual fantasy. You expect less from your natural parents, and they become easier to bear once you have discovered the other family tree on which the life of your soul depends.

--James Hillman, *The Soul's Code*

BULLYING

[LinkedIn founder Reid] Hoffman persuaded his father to send him first to a private school in Berkeley, and then to the Putney School, a progressive boarding school in Vermont, which another classmate was planning to attend... Once he got there, his relationship with his friend from Berkeley turned sour and another student started a bullying campaign against him. He compared it to the organized cruelty in *Lord of the Flies*, saying, "Little harassments, the techniques of trying to demonstrate power and dominance—that was my first experience of betrayal." Hoffman used game logic to solve the problem: "The way you deal with bullies is you change their economic equation. Make it more expensive for them to hassle you." He went to the chief bully, and said that if he continued to hassle him, " 'I will break everything you own.' He stopped."

--Nicholas Lemann, "The Network Man" in *The New Yorker*



"No right at all"

CHANGE

[Kenji] Yoshino, a leading progressive thinker about civil rights, is the Chief Justice Earl Warren professor of constitutional law at New York University Law School. The story of his title helps explain why he wrote this book [*Speak Now: Marriage Equality on Trial*]. When the law school's dean offered him the chair, Yoshino explains, "Chief Justice" wasn't part of its name. He declined it as a Japanese-American: Warren, as California's attorney general during World War II, had approved the internment of Japanese-Americans. A few days later, the dean called again to point out that, as chief justice, Warren apologized for the internment, then to offer Yoshino the chair with the full title. "Wouldn't it be great," the dean asked, "if your chair embodied how much an individual can grow over a single lifetime?" Yoshino accepted the position.

--Lincoln Caplan, *New York Times Book Review*

CITY

The secret of life in the big city is wear a suit, because you can take a shit anywhere. Folks are, like, "Hello, sir, welcome back!"

--Paul Feig

CONVERSATION

Conversation is [Sherry] Turkle's organizing principle because so much of what constitutes humanity is threatened when we replace it with electronic communication. Conversation presupposes solitude, for example, because it's in solitude that we learn to think for ourselves and develop a stable sense of self, which is essential for taking other people as they are. (If we're unable to be separated from our smartphones, Turkle says, we consume other people "in bits and pieces; it is as though we use them as spare parts to support our fragile selves.") Through the conversational attention of parents, children acquire a sense of enduring connectedness and a habit of talking about their feelings, rather than simply acting on them. (Turkle believes that regular family conversations help "inoculate" children against bullying.) When you speak to people in person, you're forced to recognize their full human reality, which is where empathy begins. (A recent study shows a steep decline in empathy, as measured by standard psychological tests, among college students of the smartphone generation.) And conversation carries the risk of boredom, the condition that smartphones have taught us most to fear, which is also the condition in which patience and imagination are developed.... Our digital technologies aren't politically neutral. The young person who cannot or will not be alone, converse with family, go out with friends, attend a lecture or perform a job without monitoring her smartphone is an emblem of our economy's leechlike attachment to our very bodies. Digital technology is capitalism in hyperdrive, injecting its logic of consumption and promotion, of monetization and efficiency, into every waking minute.

--Jonathan Franzen, reviewing Sherry Turkle's *Reclaiming Conversation* in the *New York Times*

DANCING

Dancing is not just
getting up painlessly,
like a leaf
blows on the wind;
dancing is when you tear
your heart out
and rise out of your body
to hang suspended
between the worlds.

-- Rumi



"When I make eye contact for the first time, I want it to be with the right person."

DEVICES

I was in the recording studio the other day. I'd hired five musicians. We were in the studio for seven or eight hours. One of the musicians was 100 percent committed, no interruptions. He will be hired again. By contrast the bassist stayed on his phone throughout the session, doing social media. He will only be hired again if I can't find someone else.

--producer Delfeayo Marsalis



"You can't list your iPhone as your primary-care physician."

ESCAPISM

Escapism is a very pejorative word, but I believe it is wrongly understood. When we escape life into literature, we are actually substituting something real for something unreal. It is what we think of as literature that is clean, definite, solid and meaningful. Through the years there has been a confusion, nurtured by literature, that life is what is outside and that what is inside is fantasy, so that the two terms have actually gotten substituted for each other. I insist that we need all the escapism we can get and even that isn't going to be enough.

--John Ashbery

FANATICISM

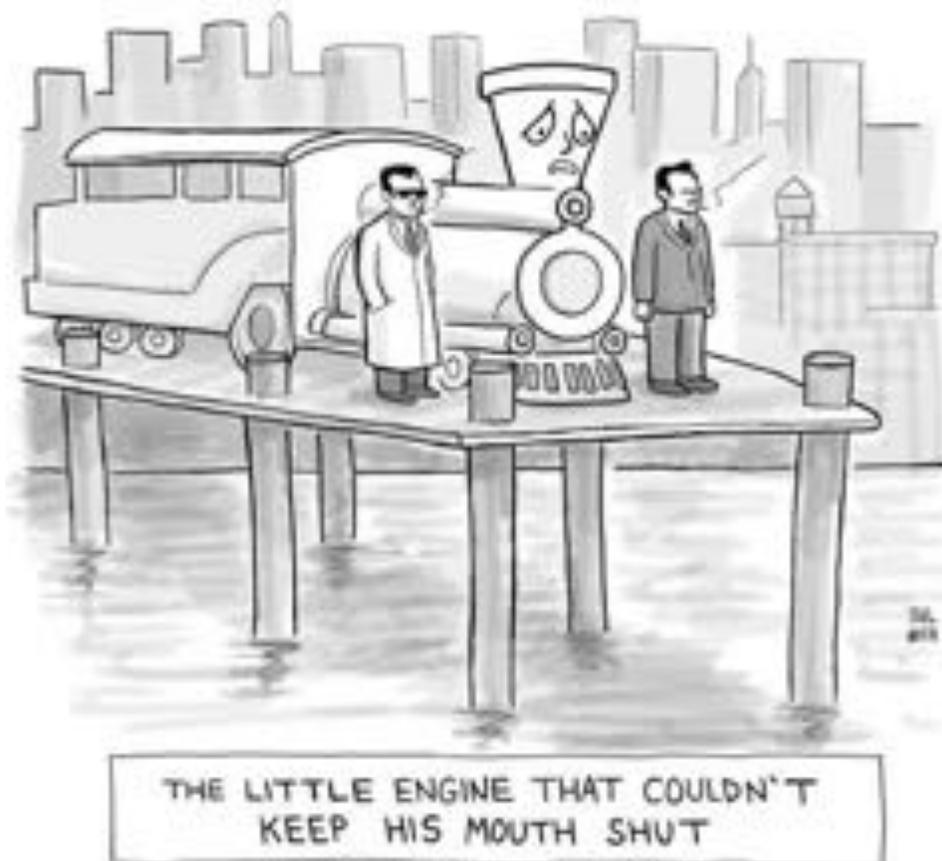
Fanaticism loses the purpose and redoubles the effort.

--George Santayana

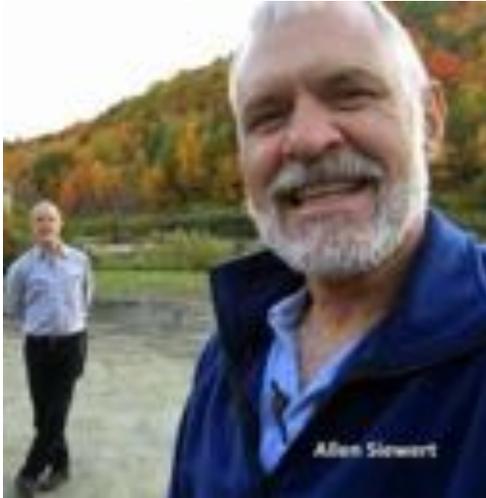
FEAR

Men fear ridicule the way women fear violence.

--Gloria Steinem



FRIENDS



Allen Stewart



Roi Chast



Tom Barber



William Irving



Mr. David Zinn



Lizette Anderson



Carlyn Whitner



Andy and his mother
Brooke Hench Gleda



Micha Berson



Laurene and George Willett; Tom Varney and Ben Seaman; Bruce Cryer and Michael Cohen; Bu Uci, Bu Yenni, and Bu Etti; AA Bronson, Ben Haggard, and Joe Miron; Robert Farrar, Achim Kraemer, Peter Pleyer, Andy Saich, Kai Ehrhardt, Peter Kogelbauer, and Eric LeRouge

GOD

When I see a garden in flower, then I believe in God for a second. But not the rest of the time.

--Nobel Prize-winning writer Svetlana Alexievich

GOOD AND EVIL

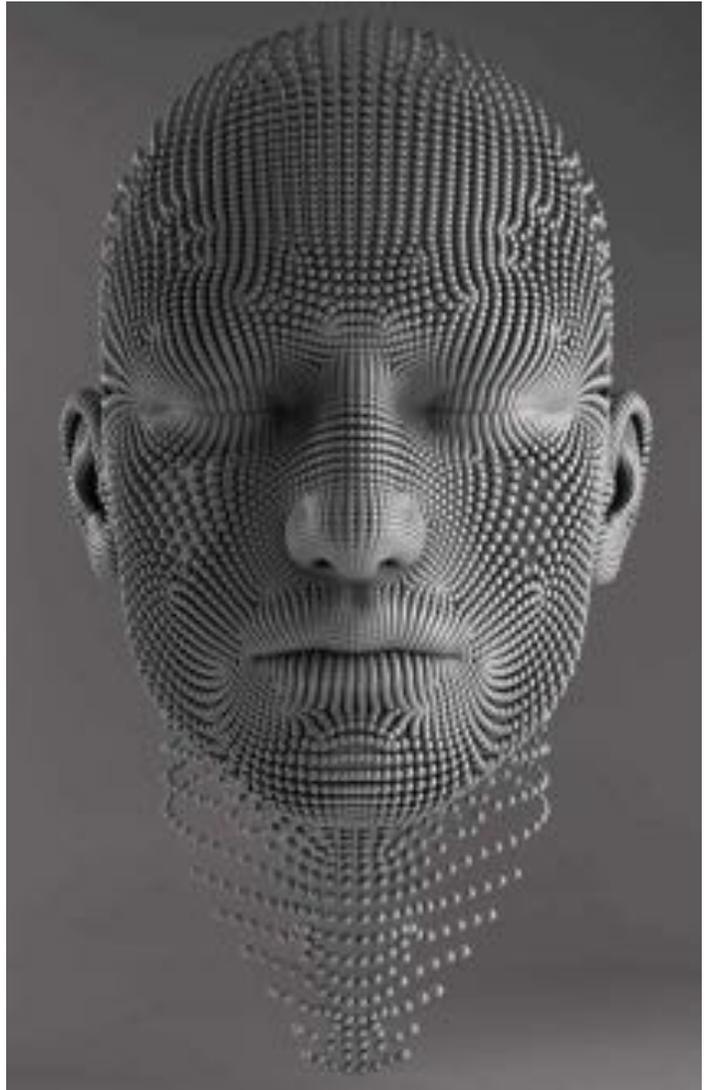
Imaginary evil is romantic and varied; real evil is gloomy, monotonous, barren, boring. Imaginary good is boring; real good is always new, marvelous, intoxicating.

-- Simone Weil, *Gravity and Grace*

GRIEF

Grief is not sadness. There's sadness in grief, but grief is not exhausted when the sadness goes away. And it does go away, because you can only drag yourself around and rend your clothes for so long. Sadness has a shelf life, but grief endures. It's not something that happens to you; it's something you do. You can grieve, but you can't "sad." Of course, most of us choose not to grieve. We decide to stay busy, to join a protest, or whatever. It's understandable, but none of these is grieving...Everyone has the same dilemma. It can't be otherwise. But once you realize this, you can become better. Your better self is born of grief. Grief is the amniotic fluid for your humanity. That's how it works. The guilt will pass, but the grief will not, because it is composed into something more life-loving – but not human-hating. There's no hating, no resigning, no withdrawing or running or transcending. Stay here. Stay long enough that the grief can have its way with you, and you begin to realize that this grief is a wisdom, a recognition that human beings are maintained by the death of other living things.

--Stephen Jenkinson, author of *Die Wise: A Manifesto for Sanity and Soul*



HANGOVER

If you were suffering from a hangover on New Year's Day, you weren't alone. The chief culprit is dehydration caused by the diuretic effect of ethanol, which can lead to shrinkage of brain tissue, and that causes headache. Alcohol irritates the lining of the stomach, causing queasiness. Other symptoms are caused by the toxic by-products of the liver's detoxification process. For something so common, hangover is poorly understood by the medical community, and quack remedies abound.

Hangover remedies probably evolved hand in hand with alcohol consumption. Pliny the Elder counseled Romans to eat fried canaries or raw owl's eggs. Ancient Assyrians tried to assuage their anguish by consuming a concoction of ground bird beaks and myrrh. Medieval Europeans consumed raw eels with bitter almonds. The Chinese drank green tea, which seems benign enough, but their neighbors the Mongolians ate pickled sheep's eyes. The Japanese ate pickled plums. Then there's the Prairie Oyster, introduced at the 1878 Paris World Expo: it's a raw egg (with the yolk intact), mixed with Tabasco sauce, Worcestershire sauce, salt, and pepper. Puerto Ricans took a preventative tack: they rubbed sliced lemons in their armpits before drinking; In India, they drank coconut water, and there's some merit to that, because coconut water is rich in electrolytes and it helps with the dehydration.

Then there's the "hair of the dog" approach. In the 19th century, an Italian named Bernardino Branca developed a potion called Fernet: rhubarb, aloe, peppermint oil, and opiates. As a bonus, Fernet also cured cholera, or so Branca claimed. It's still available today, minus the opiates. Some people swear by the Bloody Mary: tomato juice mixed with vodka and a variety of spices; Hemingway's variant was tomato juice and beer.

A literature review in the *British Medical Journal* concludes that there is no reliable way to treat or prevent hangover after over-imbibing. The Algonquin Round Table writer Robert Benchley came to a similar conclusion: "A real hangover is nothing to try out family remedies on. The only cure for a real hangover is death."

--The Writer's Almanac



HEARING

Hearing is how we touch at a distance.

--Susan Stewart



HEY, SAILOR!

Late last year, Sweden was alarmed to discover that a Russian submarine had entered its territorial waters and remained there for some time. What to do in response? Sweden doesn't belong to NATO, and its military outlay can't exactly match Russia's bloated budget. So Sweden devised a response in the form of a transmitter and video display whose message was tailor-made for this enemy, distinguished by extreme fear and loathing toward anything "gay." The device was lowered into the ocean where the submarine had lurked, whereupon it proceeded to broadcast in Morse Code: "This way if you are gay." Pictured on the monitor was a neon "Dancing Sailor" whose hips gyrated provocatively, along with the words, "Welcome to Sweden. Gay Since 1944" (the year in which Sweden legalized homosexuality). No word on whether the Russian sub has re-entered these newly treacherous waters.

--*Gay and Lesbian Review*, July-August 2015





HOLDING

There is an ancient longing wired in us as infants to be seen, to be felt, and to have our surging, somatic-emotional world validated by another. When our subjective experience is empathically held, contained, and allowed, we come to a natural place of rest. What is love, really, other than fully allowing the other to be who they are, for their experience to be what it is, and to offer the gift of presence to their unique subjectivity? In this sense, I love you = I allow you.

The late Donald Winnicott, a brilliant psychoanalyst from Britain, used the term “holding environment” to describe the ideal mandala in which growth and development could occur, weaved of the qualities of contact and space. Through making attuned, present-time, somatically-engaged contact with another as they are – and by providing an open, warm sanctuary in which their experience can unfold and illuminate – we become vehicles of love in action.

Simultaneously, by offering the gift of space, we do not interfere with the unfolding of their heart and majestic inner process. We do not pathologize their experience or demand that they be different, change, transform, shift, or “heal” in order for us to love them. If sadness is there, or fear, or despair, or shame, or depression, or profound grief, we will infuse their inner mandala with validation and presence. We will be there for them, but only if they need us. We will not engulf them with the projections of our own un-lived life, nor will we unload upon them our own requirements and agendas, arising out of our own undigested psyches and bodies. Instead, we will seed the intersubjective container with tender space.

While not talked about as much, we can provide this same contact and space to ourselves and come to discover that our nature as awareness itself is in fact the ultimate holding environment. You are always, already resting in the majesty of presence and are always, already held – by the beloved –

who is none other than your own miracle nervous system, heart, and somatic brilliance. While we may not always understand our experience – and while it may never fit into our ideas, hopes, dreams, and fantasies about the life we were “meant to live” – we can come to trust that it is unfolding according to a unique blueprint which is emerging out of the unseen hand of love. We are invited to practice a radical intimacy with our experience, staying close to our ripe bodies and tender hearts, but not so close that we fuse or overly identify with it. Rest in the very middle and stay astonished at what is being birthed out of the unknown in every moment.

For many I speak with, there is an undercurrent of aggression towards themselves, a subtle movement of self-loathing, unexamined shame and embarrassment, and a very alive (if not conscious) belief that they are flawed and have failed. Each time we exit our present, embodied experience into thinking, interpretation, blame, resentment, and complaint, we turn from the preciousness and the majesty of what we are. In this movement of rejection, we keep alive the archaic belief that our immediate experience is not valid, not workable, that it is not forming the the path of healing, exactly as it is. From one perspective, this may be seen as the ultimate act of self abandonment.

Let us all take a pause on this new day, and from a place of love visualize a holding environment for ourselves, where we grant unconditional permission to make intimate and direct contact with all of our vulnerabilities, with our tender bodies and with our raw hearts, with our unprocessed challenges from the past, and with our less-than-awakened thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. Let us make the most radical commitment to no longer abandon ourselves, exiting into our conditioned stories and unkind judgments, and inquire with love into the habitual belief that there is something fundamentally wrong with us. As we open our eyes and our hearts to the always, already present holding environment which is our true nature, we behold the drop of grace which pours through the eyes of everyone we meet, including that unknown precious one that we see when we look in the mirror. And then all that could possibly remain is an unshakeable faith in love’s perfection.

--Matt Licata



INITIATION

The biggest single reason our culture views death as unimportant is that we don't practice any childhood-ending rituals. When there's no initiation into adulthood, death cannot assume its rightful place in a culture...An initiation is a person-making event, which means the cultures that practice initiation don't see children as people. Children are hugely important. They are a privilege and a joy and bestow richness by their presence. But in these cultures they aren't understood to be full-fledged human beings, because a human being is a participant in the back and forth of life. Children are not capable of that. A child's job is to be self-absorbed. And for them to become adults, that self-absorption has to be killed off, because nobody gives up childhood willingly, certainly not here. Hence you encounter fifty-five-year-old adolescents everywhere you go.

Childhood gets killed off in initiation ceremonies. Overtly that is achieved through isolation and fasting and darkness, but covertly it is by the purposeful and skillful introduction of the child to her or his personal, meaning-burdened death in a ritual guided by older people whose lives have prepared them for such moments. Through the ceremony, the awareness of death, its meaning and justice, is granted to kids. It's not what they were seeking, but it's granted to them. It's like a nuclear bomb goes off, and childhood does not survive the radiation. It cannot, because childhood is predicated on everything lasting as long as we want it to, and nobody who loves us ever leaving, and so forth.

If the initiation is successful, you come out of it able to see the centrality of death in life, which is the beginning of your capacity to participate deeply in the indebtedness that is the basis of all real culture. This is not macabre. It's not fatalistic. It doesn't legitimize people committing suicide. I sometimes get those responses from people who've had no initiation. Their objections arise from the idea that life is not supposed to be burdened by the awareness of death, but everybody who's been through an initiation knows that death doesn't burden your life. It animates your life. The centrality of death gives you the chance to live, because it says, "Here's the bad news: it's not going to last. And here's the good news: it's not going to last." You can choose how to take that. You have the opportunity to sink both heels into the soil and say, "Here I stand, and while I do, there are things I can do." The news of your imminent demise is enabling, when all is said and done.

-- Stephen Jenkinson, interviewed in *The Sun*

Initiation is a lot about knocking on pain's door and introducing yourself so that when it shows up later, unannounced, you're not shocked, insulted and unable to cope. If you don't consciously engage in rituals of initiation, don't worry — life will bring you pain, and when it does it's good to recognize your experience as initiatory. Courage is not letting fear of pain overwhelm you. Wisdom (adulthood) is knowing that pain is coming.

--Jules Beckman



JONI

Miles Davis taught me how to sing. More and more I'm beginning to show what he taught me – pure straight tones holding straight lines. The feeling when you sing and you open up your heart. If you just try to remember to keep your heart open, it produces a warmer tone than if you really think you're hot shit, because the tone is going to get cold then. That's the thing. You can be so flashy and incredible, there's a certain beauty that comes out of that too, but not out of arrogance...warmth is not gonna come out of it, you know. I always kept Miles and his music, especially at a certain period, a lyrical period, in the area of music that I would play for myself but never thought of it as attainable. And now I'm playing with most of the players who made up that music.



The way Wayne Shorter works is the difference between a genius and a talent. The talent will come in, a great player. He'll listen to my music, he'll write out the chord changes, he'll notice how weird they are and he'll go, "Oh, this is deceptively simple." Then he'll figure out a part. He'll play it. The first time, it'll be a little rough. The second time, it'll be better. The third time, he's not gonna deviate. You'll get up to take four, and I'll ask him for take five, thinking maybe he'll put a variation on it, but he won't. He's got his part, he's done it, and he's giving you a dirty look like, "Don't you have it already?"

A talent is pretty good to work with.

A genius like Wayne is always exploring, so he's gonna be more inconsistent. He's gonna be all over the place. Because he's going into new territory. The great things nearly always come on the edge of an error. What comes after the error is spectacular. So if you are hung up on the error, you missed the magic.

--Joni Mitchell *In Her Own Words* (interviewed by Malka Marom)

JOURNALS

1939: The Woolfs have a large pond in their garden with water lilies and goldfish. I arrived in time for tea. After tea, we went out on to the lawn and played a game of bowls. I had beginner's luck, and I think I won the first game...Virginia and I walked about the garden talking about writing, which she said she wanted to discuss with other writers. She was pleased that I kept a journal because she said she found it was the only thing she could do, too. She thought that every day an occasion arises in which one sees things in an entirely new and different way, that these moments of transformation are one's grasp of reality. This is the experience which she tries to catch hold of in her journal.

--Stephen Spender

KIDS

I was thirty-six and finishing my degree in education when I was diagnosed with auditory-processing disorder, a learning disability that makes it difficult to understand speech. I'd often think I'd misheard a person and would try to determine what he or she had said by reading facial expressions or by considering what other words could have fit the rhythm of speech. Sometimes I'd get so distracted I'd miss what the person said next.

When I started teaching first grade, the sound of a child using the pencil sharpener on the wall exacerbated my difficulty. I removed it and sharpened all the pencils after school every day. I also asked the kids to look at me when they spoke, but they often forgot or turned away in midsentence. In my second year I decided to tell my students about my disorder. I explained that sometimes I hear *too much noise* and can't make sense of it. I said my learning disability meant that I had to work harder, but there was no limit to what I could do. I added that, when you have a disability, it's important to let other people know what you need from them so that you can do your best. For example, I said, I needed to see their faces when they spoke.

A girl raised her hand and said she had dyslexia and couldn't read yet. Looking around at the other students, she said, "I need you not to laugh at me, OK?" Several students said, "OK. We won't laugh." Then a boy spoke: "I ha-have a st-st-st-stutter." He asked that everyone not try to finish his sentences for him but just listen and wait until he was done. Many little heads nodded.

The disorder that had caused me so much frustration became my key to understanding my students.

--Mary Cowley, "Readers Write: Noise," *The Sun*, October 2015

Children need love, especially when they do not deserve it.

--Harold S. Hulbert



"What do you want to do when you grow up?"

LAUGHTER

“My Father Laughing in the Chicago Theater”

His heavy body would double itself forward
At the waist, swell, and come heaving around
To slam at his seatback, making the screws groan
And squawk down half the row as it went tilting
Under my mother and me, under whoever
Was out of luck on the other side of him.
Like a boxer slipping punches, he'd lift his elbows
To flail and jerk, and his wide-open mouth
Would boom out four deep haaa's to the end of his
breath.

He was laughing at Burns and Allen or Jack Benny
In person or at his limitless engagement
With Groucho, Chico, and Harpo. While my mother
Sat there between us, gazing at the stage
And chuckling placidly, I watched with amazement
The spectacle of a helpless father, unmanned,
Disarmed by laughter. The tears would dribble
From under his bifocals, as real as sweat.
He would gape and gag, go limp, and spring back to life.

I would laugh too, but partly at him, afraid
Of becoming him. He could scowl anywhere,
Be solemn or blank in church or going to work,
Turn grim with a cold chisel, or he could smile
At babies or football games, but he only laughed
There in that theater. And up the aisle
And through the lobby to the parking lot
And all the way home, I'd see the glow on his cheeks
Fade to the usual hectic steelmill sunburn.

--David Wagoner

What's the last book that made you laugh?

In Princeton a few years ago I was lying in bed alone on a Monday night reading Leo Bersani's "Is the Rectum a Grave?" Outside was the deep dark New Jersey night. It was winter. I gazed around my sublet bedroom; I looked at the title of the book. Then I stood up and went to the full-length mirror and peered into it. I thought: You are one sad man. And I laughed so much at that thought that I began to cry.

--Colm Toibin in the *Sunday NY Times Book Review*



LONELINESS

If there is an archetypal sense of loneliness accompanying us from the beginning, then to be alive is also to feel lonely. Loneliness comes and goes apart from the measures we take. It does not depend on being literally alone, for pangs of loneliness can strike in the midst of friends, in bed with a lover, at the microphone before a cheering crowd. When feelings of loneliness are seen as archetypal, they become necessary; they are no longer harbingers of sin, of dread, or of wrong. We can accept the strange autonomy of the feeling and free loneliness from identification with literal isolation. Nor is loneliness mainly unpleasant once it receives its archetypal background. When we look – or, rather, *feel* – closely into the sense of loneliness we find it is composed of several elements: nostalgia, sadness, silence, and a yearning imagination for “something else” not here, not now. For these elements and image to show, we first have to focus on them rather than on remedies for being left literally alone. Desperation grows worse when we seek ways out of despair.

--James Hillman, *The Soul's Code*



LOVE

Your life will have a kind of perfection, although you will not be a saint. The perfection will consist in this: you will be very weak and you will make many mistakes; you will be awkward, for you will be poor in spirit and hunger and thirst for justice. You will not be perfect, but you will love. This is the gate and the way...There is nothing greater than love. There is nothing more true than love, nothing more real.

--Eberhard Arnold

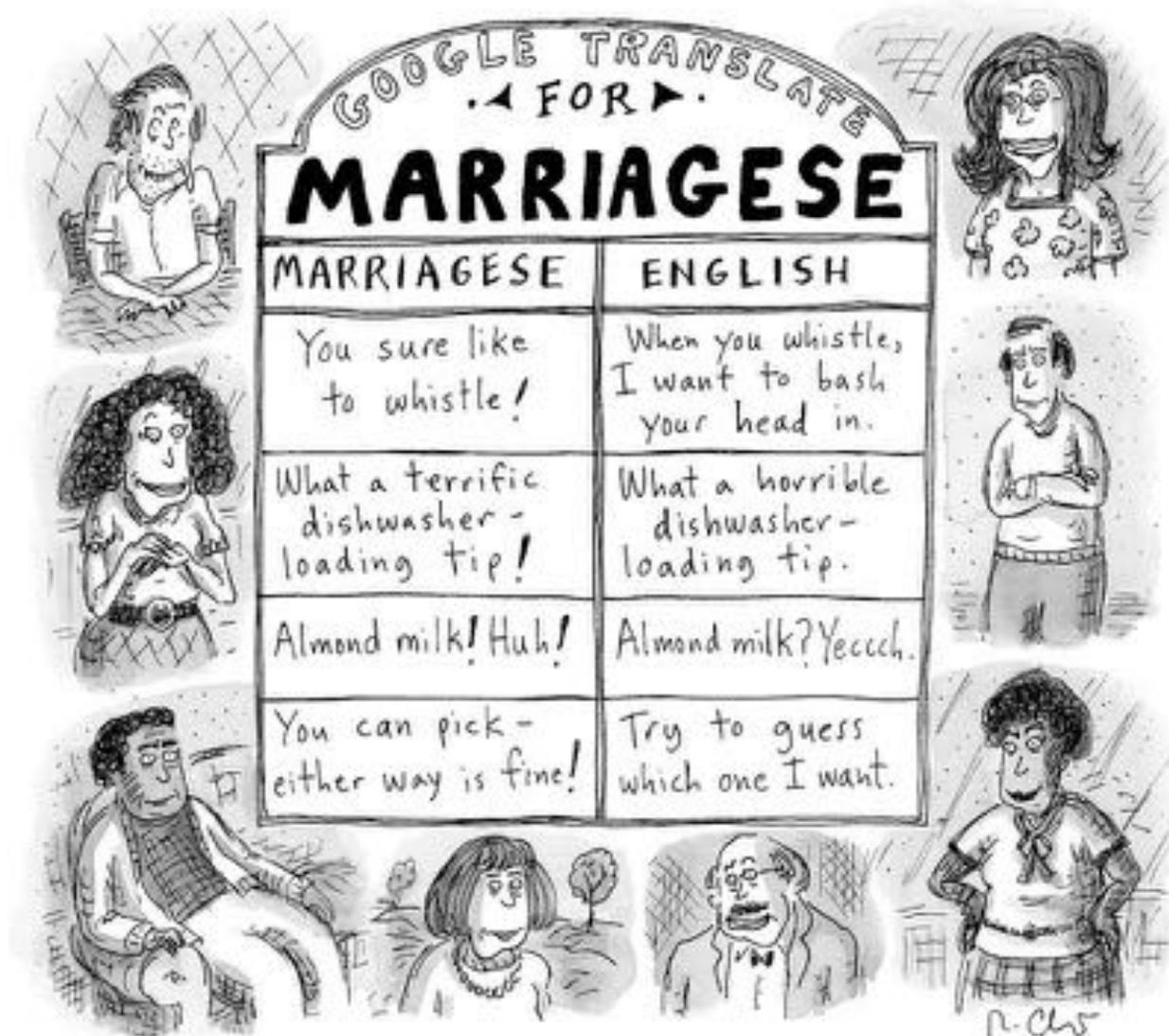
MARRIAGE

What does a good marriage have in common with good writing? Consider these rules from Strunk and White's *the Elements of Style*: "Place yourself in the background." "Avoid the use of qualifiers." "Do not take shortcuts at the cost of clarity." "Do not overstate." "Do not explain too much." To which I'd add: Show, don't tell – though an occasional "I love you" never hurts. And avoid the passive voice – especially of the passive-aggressive variety.

*

The comedian Henny Youngman's most famous one-liner was "Take my wife – please." But he and his wife, Sadie Cohen, were apparently very close. She didn't mind being the butt of his jokes and often accompanied him on his tours. I read recently that Sadie was terrified of hospitals and, during the prolonged illness that led to her death, Youngman had an intensive-care unit built in their bedroom so she could be looked after at home. When she died, they'd been married more than sixty years.

-- Sy Safransky



MATH ANXIETY

“Diagnostic Exam: Do You Have Math Anxiety?”

1. When your first grader asks for help solving a Common Core math problem involving subitizing and stable order, how do you respond? (a) I strangle my child while shrieking, “*This . . . is . . . why . . . we . . . bought . . . you . . . that . . . fancy . . . computer, Liam!*” (b) I tell my child, “Go ask your mother. Your birth mother. I think she lives in Canada.” (c) I ask to see the equation, then discuss it with my child using nonsense terms. Example: “Simply tri-dram the hexabop until the tetramint indoles.” If my child appears confused, I say, “I wish you were smarter.”
2. If you need to divide a restaurant check by four and calculate the tip, do you: (a) Leave your wife’s earrings on the table instead? (b) Hand the server a printed card reading, “I have math anxiety. Please add an appropriate gratuity to my portion of the check. I don’t care if you overcharge me. *I don’t care.*” (c) Calmly hand the check to your husband and say, “Here. Justify your existence.”
3. When you watch a movie in which the main character rapidly scribbles long, complex equations across a blackboard, what are you thinking? (a) I read somewhere that Russell Crowe used a hand double for that scene. (b) I bet that after they filmed this scene Eddie Redmayne fired his agent. (c) In real life, Benedict Cumberbatch can’t remember his PIN number.
4. What is a hypotenuse? (a) A very graceful hypot. (b) An overweight chanteuse. (c) The French word for profound boredom.
5. How do you calculate your car’s gas mileage? (a) By driving off a bridge. (b) I put my head on the hood and listen for the mileage fairy. (c) I ask Siri to do it, and then wait patiently for her to stop laughing and calling me “a sad little man.”
6. True or false: $E=mc^2$ Answer: D-minus.
7. When was the last time you needed to do math? (a) Never, just like everyone else in the history of the entire world. (b) When I was measuring a wall for a bookcase and then decided that I’d rather move. (c) I don’t remember, because the last time I heard the words “subprime interest rates,” “the Dow,” and “refinance,” I blacked out, and when I woke up everyone in the bank was dead.
8. Which would you rather do: (a) Use a slide rule to solve a trigonometry problem. (b) Use a slide rule as a rectal thermometer. (c) Give a slide rule to a math geek as a gift and say, “Finally, you have a genital.”
9. Who is the greatest mathematical genius of all time? (a) The person who invented the accountant. (b) Whoever realized that an abacus is just a decorative accent piece on an East Hampton coffee table. (c) The “Sesame Street” character who, when asked to add two plus two, replied, “Ask a Muppet who gives a damn.”
10. What do you do when you travel to a foreign country and need to figure out the currency? (a) I ask, “How much is that in real money?” (b) I remind every salesclerk who won the Second World War. (c) I hold my American Express card in front of my face and say, in a Pepé Le Pew accent, “Oh, I the-enk ju understand vat I’m talking about, Señor Funny Money.”

--Paul Rudnick

MINDFULNESS

Back in 1979, when I started Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction, I came up with an operational definition of mindfulness that still serves as well as anything else: mindfulness is the awareness that arises from paying attention on purpose in the present moment nonjudgmentally. That doesn't mean you won't have any judgments. In fact, when we start paying attention, we realize that we almost have nothing but judgments going through our heads. Just about every thought has reactive emotions associated with it: liking, disliking, wanting, rejecting, greed, aversion, and with plenty of delusion thrown in to leaven the pot. So mindfulness is about getting access to our own awareness with equanimity and without falling into a stream of conceptual thinking that goes on and on and on.

You could say that mindfulness is about cultivating a relationship of intimacy with oneself. But what does that mean? The body is really a big part of this because most of the time, except under very specialized circumstances, we tend to tune out the body completely. We're in our heads most of the time because it's challenging to stay in touch with the body. So a good place to start as a focus of attention is the breath. After all, as they used to say, you can't leave home without it. And we're always one breath away from not being alive.

The challenge is actually just experiencing one breath in and one breath out. And that means not thinking about the breath or patting ourselves on the back for how wonderfully we breathe or anything like that. It's just the direct knowing of breathing. But breathing is just the object of attention. Mindfulness isn't about the object: what it's really about is the attending itself. The message of mindfulness is an invitation to everybody to wake up to the true dimensionality of who we all are, and to move in a direction of maximizing the good that comes from our activities and minimizing the harm both to ourselves and others. And that could be done on a corporate level, on a national level, on an international level.

I think the reason we're seeing so much interest now in mindfulness is that, as a species, we're starving for authentic experience. But the impulse is to make mindfulness into a kind of catechism, in which some inner circle understands what mindfulness really is and everybody else is deluded. Instead, I think of mindfulness as a big umbrella. The difference between various traditions are unimportant as long as the focus is on creating greater well-being and minimizing harm.

--Jon Kabat-Zinn, "The Reluctant Guru," *Psychotherapy Networker*

NAMES

People in the street will either call me "Prime Minister" or "Justin." We'll see how that goes. But when I'm working, when I'm with my staff in public, I'm "Prime Minister." I say that if we're drinking beer out of a bottle, and you can see my tattoos, you should be comfortable calling me "Justin." It's very, very cool to have the president call up, and I say, "Hello, Mr. President." (Dropping his voice an octave to imitate President Obama.) "Justin, I like to think of myself as a young politician. The gray hair caught up with me, and it'll catch up with you. But calling me 'Sir' makes me feel old. Call me 'Barack.'"

--Justin Trudeau

NECROPHILIA



OUTRAGE

Outrage is a sure sign of a soul awake.

--James Hillman

PAIN

I believe that the soul exists, but not all the time. It has to be whipped into shape, like an egg cream, like a political party, like a slave. But this calling forth of the soul is fraught, for what is whipped is not the soul but the self. The soul will only come forward when the self is effaced, and afterward, when it has departed, it is the body that must bear the pain of the beating. In your search you find yourself on my bed. I close your eyes and I seal your mouth. I fill your ears and I stuff your nose with amyl, I hide your face from you and from me. On the bed you are a naked body and on the bed you are a body without a head. You are a stranger on my bed, your face and all it signifies hidden from me and your body and all it signifies hidden from you. From now on you can only feel, from now on I can only act. Only I can act and I can only act on the shackled pink X that is your body. The black egg that your head has become retains its mysteries, and inside that egg you are trapped. The distant slapping and lashing and beating and punching are powerless blows against a shell that won't crack, and the pain that you feel, but can't see or hear, or cry out against, or know, or describe, is different from any pain you have ever felt before. Because your external senses have been made useless it moves inside of you, inside your body and then, inevitably, inside your mind, and soon it comes to feel like a pat of you. That part of you is a wind, a tornado that lifts you from where you are – my bed, and this world, and your life – and sets you down somewhere else. Later you will be able to say nothing about this place save that whatever is there can't be experienced through the senses, but while you are there you don't even know you're there. Only I know that. When you come back all you know is that you aren't there anymore, and that you hurt. Distant points of violation identify themselves, and the pain you feel in each place is distinct from the pain in each of the other places. For a moment you slip inside each of these pains and for each of these moments you rise a few inches above the bed and are back where you had been. But then you fall, and fall again, again and again you fall until finally a knowledge that is more a yearning than an idea makes you still: you realize that it's only in the moments after it leaves you that you know the soul in terms you can understand, in words, in remembered sensations. That's all. That is all there is, and you know then that you can only lie here bound to the bed at your wrists and ankles but bound to the world by ties even more constraining, and you lie there, and you watch your soul retreat from you, and it retreats from you like the loss of your mother's body.

--Dale Peck



PATRIARCHY

The only way to survive the colonial and patriarchal enemy is to laugh in his face.

--Faith Ringgold



"They learn how to say 'Gracias' and we're supposed to be thankful."

PINTER

Harold Pinter received many letters from strange women, but the following missive sent to his Kensington home amused him: "I would be much obliged if you would kindly explain to me the meaning of your play 'The Birthday Party.' These are the points which I do not understand: 1. Who are the two men? 2. Where did Stanley come from? 3. Were they all supposed to be normal? You will appreciate that without the answers to these questions I cannot fully understand your play." Pinter responded: "Dear Madam: I would be obliged if you would kindly explain to me the meaning of your letter. These are the points which I do not understand: 1. Who are you? 2. Where do you come from? 3. Are you supposed to be normal? You will appreciate that without the answers to my questions I cannot fully understand your letter."

--New York Times

POLITICAL DISCOURSE

Being aggressively, even unfairly, criticized isn't remotely tantamount to being silenced.

--Glenn Greenwald

PUER

Any theory that is affected by the *puer* will show dashing execution, an appeal to the extraordinary, and a show-off aestheticism. It will claim timelessness and universal validity, but forgo the labors of proof. It will have that *puer* dance in it, will imagine ambitiously and rebel against convention. A *puer*-inspired theory will also limp among the facts, even collapse when met with the questioning inquiries of so-called reality, which is the position taken by the *puer*'s classical opponent, the gray-faced king or Saturn figure, old hardnose, hardass, hardhat. He wants statistics, examples, studies, not images, visions, stories. Knowing about these constellations and how they affect what we read and how we react to what we read helps readers find where they are on the archetypal map – at one moment entranced by the revolution in ideas, at another thoroughly skeptical of the bullshit.

--James Hillman, *The Soul's Code*



PUTIN

This may sound weird, but I actually find Putin rather dull as a character. Hitler was a vegetarian. Stalin was a passable poet. Idi Amin ate people. What does Putin do that's so surprising? He's just your standard bully with a bad childhood who's robbing his country blind. Bo-ring.

--Gary Shteyngart

QUEST

In the pursuit of Knowledge, every day something is acquired.
In the pursuit of wisdom, every day, something is dropped.

--Lao Tzu, *Tao Te Ching*

REINVENTION

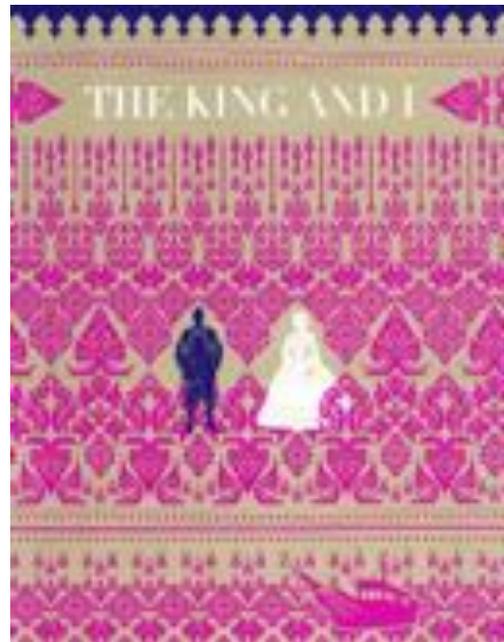
Anna Leonowens, apparently addressed as “Sir” in the Siamese court, was...adept at reinvention. Conversant in Hindi, Marathi, Sanskrit, and Persian, to take on the role of royal governess she adopted the clipped tones of a dyed-in-the-wool English school ma’am. She had not yet stepped foot in England and remains the only foreigner to have lived inside the court of Siam.

The truth about Anna Harriet Emma Edwards, as she was christened, is buried beneath a palimpsest of fictions, many of which she herself propounded...Born in Bombay in 1831 to an Indian or half-Indian mother, who was thirteen years old when she married, and a father who was a lowly employee of the East India Company, Anna later doctored her biography so that her maiden name became Crawford, her birthplace Caernarfon, in Wales, and her father’s rank that of a major. “The most important thing in your life,” she noted, “is to choose your parents.” That observation, which might have been made by Oscar Wilde, was typically resourceful. At the age of seventeen, Anna married her sweetheart, Thomas Leon Owens, and they moved to Australia, then Malaysia, and finally to India, where, in 1856, he died, leaving behind an impoverished widow and two young children. For many women in her position – poor, unprotected, not entirely white – the only direction would be down. Remarriage was the only viable option, but Anna, who would never marry again, instead worked her way upward as a widow. Blending together her deceased husband’s middle and last names to form the exotic “Leonowens,” she elevated his status from clerk to English army officer and knocked three years off her age...

Practical in her ambitions, Anna Leonowens sought neither to propagate new religion nor to purify the earth, but she did win her soul in a harem consisting of nine thousand children, wives, sisters, consorts, and concubines. As well as teaching rational thought to the King’s eighty children and English grammar to his scores of wives, she introduced both underwear and silverware to court life and advised His royal highness on matters of state policy. After five years, she left Siam – a court built on what she dramatically described as “slavery, polygamy, flagellation of women & children, immolation of slaves, secret poisoning and assassination” – and immigrated to America, via England and Ireland. Ever restless, Leonowens then crossed Russia and settled for a time with her daughter in Nova Scotia and her grandchildren in Germany...

Few women lived as inventively as Anna Leonowens, who blew about the globe like chaff...In 1870, she wrote her memoir, *The English Governess at the Siamese Court*. Seventy years later, the book was turned by Margaret Landon into the best-selling novel *Anna and the King of Siam*, which was itself transformed, in 1951, into the legendary Rodgers & Hammerstein musical *The King and I*.

It is fitting that a shape-shifter like Anna Leonowens should find her life story morphed into so many genres. And equally fitting, for a woman with her sense of theater, that she should count among her nephews a boy named William Pratt, who would grow up to be the actor Boris Karloff!



--Frances Wilson, “A Woman Adventurer,” *Lincoln Center Theater Review*, Spring 2015

RINGO

You worked on Ringo's *Stop and Smell the Roses* album around then, didn't you?

He asked me to write a song or two for it. They weren't very successful. I wish that I'd written a better song for him. You can't always do it. But anyway, we had a laugh. We went down to Super Bear in the South of France to do it. He was in a particularly crazy stimulant-laden time and he had decided he wanted to do this song called "You Can't Fight Lightning." It goes on for about 15 minutes. The lyrics are, "*You can't fight lightning.*" It was something to do with freebasing. Lightning, lighting, drugs. So anyway, that was that. It was just a trifle boring, that take. But I didn't have the guts to say, "We should fix this up."

--Paul McCartney, interviewed for *Uncut* magazine



RITUAL

Learning how to bring ritual into our lives helps us face whatever arrives at our door. Ritual is a covering, a mantle that protects us in times of great need. The stories I have shared reveal the ways that we are held within the sacred space of ritual. Once again I encourage you to experiment

with rituals. Gather a circle of people and allow the imagination to inform the moment. We need to build faith in ourselves as ritually literate people. At times we will be asked to create rituals that can dress the wounds of suffering in our community. At other times, we will need to spontaneously create a ritual to help hold space for someone who is in the throes of intense pain and grief. The main thing is that we begin to take risks; that we contribute something to the moment that can potentially offer healing. Once we begin the ritual it is out of our hands; it now belongs to Spirit. Life is far too complex to rely solely on our intellects. We need the invisible hands of Spirit to shelter us, to support us and to offer us the nourishing comfort that comes from that Other World. This concert between the human and the sacred is ancient; it is held in the bones. Trust this bond. It is our healing ground.

--Francis Weller, "Entering the Healing Ground: Grief, Ritual, and the Soul of the World"

Do you have any pre-show rituals or superstitions?

Before every show, I make a gentle suggestion to my castmates that we do an energy circle—gather around and say something to thank all those people out there tonight, the playwright who created this beautiful vehicle, that we're together in this effort. It doesn't fool anybody; it's really a prayer circle, of course, but I don't want to terrify people by calling it that.

--actress Genevieve Germaine Bermingham

ROME

"Really Eternal City"

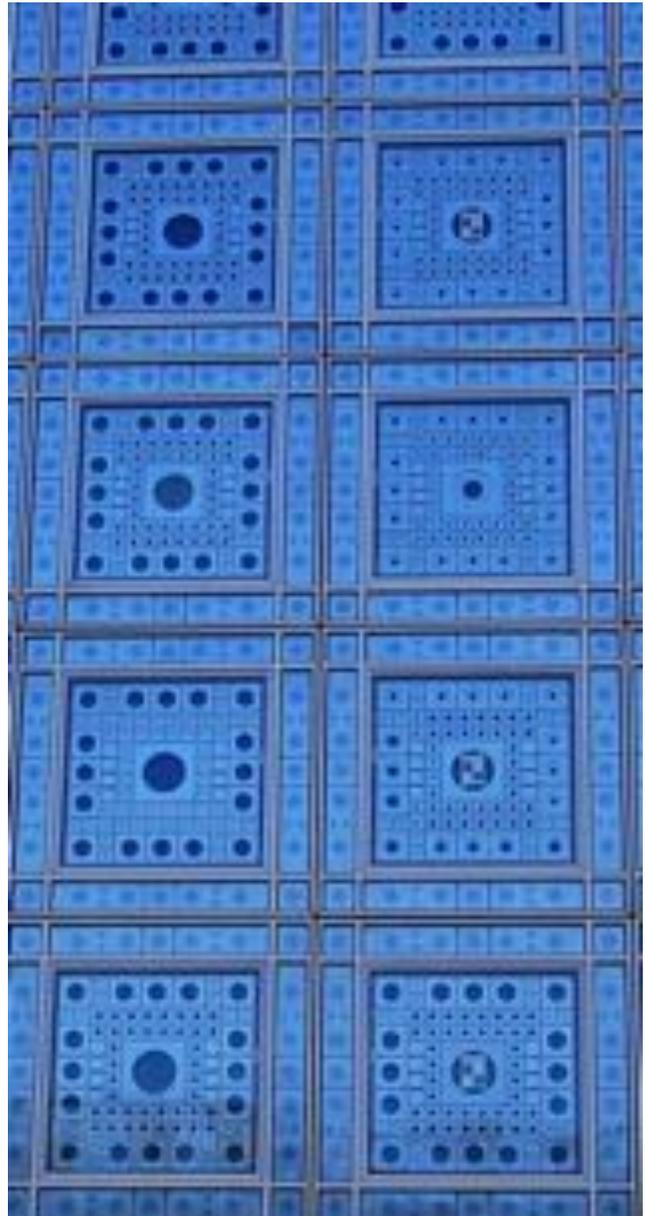
After we'd walked for at least an hour,
heading toward the Vatican
on a broiling August day,
I began thinking about how long
the tour we'd signed up for was going to be,
and how many sacred things would be on view,
and how much complicated information
the guide would tell us about the ancient paintings
and Roman numerals and relics
and tombs and holy knuckle bones.

I knew it would all kind of just melt together
and congeal into one big lumpen mass
of guilt and suffering and miracles
and gloomy old men in sandals.

And as I was thinking this
we were passing through a shady little square
where a couple of bare-breasted marble nymphs
were playing in the fountain,
and there were no tour guides anywhere,
there was no suffering or crucifixions,
nor was there even one important name or date
I would have to try to remember.

And the cheap red wine at the sidewalk ristorante
where we ended up spending the afternoon
instead of going to the Vatican
was wonderful, even miraculous,
as was the spaghetti bolognese.

--George Bilgere



SACRED ARCHITECTURE

Megalomania haunts the actual architect – as the Bible warns with the story of the Tower of Babel, which is not only about the origin of language but also about the megalomania inherent in all attempts to make concrete the grandeurs of fantasy, especially in architecture. Tribal peoples are usually careful to keep their sacred altars movable, their architecture vernacular, but their visions otherworldly.

--James Hillman, *The Soul's Code*

SIGNING

We hung out and signed merchandise after every show in every town...In the early days, we talked to people for as long as they wanted, about whatever they wanted. Once we started touring internationally, these signings would sometimes last longer than the show itself; we'd sometimes play for two hours and sign for two and a half...The signing line is a cross between a wedding party, a photo booth, and the international arrivals terminal at the airport; a blurry collision of flash intimacies. It's a reunion with those I haven't met yet. There are a lot of tears and a lot of high-fiving and a lot of hugging. There's also a lot of asking, in both directions.

Will you take a picture for us?

Will you take a picture with us?

Do you need a hug?

Can I have a drink?

Do you want a drink?

Will you hold my drink?

Why are you crying?

It's not always the fans crying. I've been held by many fans on nights I needed a random shoulder on which to collapse.

I've observed signing lines at other concerts that are not like this, where it's all business and security officers stand there making sure nobody touches The Talent. I've had to *argue* with security officers appointed to my signing lines, explaining that, unlike other bands, we don't WANT security to hurry people along, or shoo them away, making sure they don't stop to talk. I *need* people to stop and talk and hug me, or else I feel like an automaton.

Listening fast and caring immediately is a skill in itself. People bring me compact stories: the song that got them through high school, the operation they just had, the recent breakup, the death of a parent. The story about the sick friend who wanted to be at the show but couldn't make it.

Or the longer, more complicated story about the friend who was supposed to be at the show, but had just committed suicide.

What do you do with news like that? You stop the signing line, you take that person in your arms, you hold them and let them cry for as long as necessary.

Then you get back to work.

--Amanda Palmer, *The Art of Asking*



TIDYING

During her recent visit to New York, Kondo gave a consultation at the home of *New York's* design editor, Wendy Goodman. The apartment—a one-bedroom in Greenwich Village with billion-foot ceilings, plantation shutters, and a fireplace—was the kind of charm-stuffed dream pad that makes a visitor feel wickedly covetous. [Japanese tidying guru Marie] Kondo voyaged inside and absorbed the overstuffed bookshelves, the antique tomato-velvet ottoman, the conch shells, and the silver urns. “At the moment, everything is a big mishmash,” Goodman explained.

Kondo started with the bookshelves. “It’s going to be labor-intensive and time-consuming, but you need to take all the books down and put them on the floor,” she said. “Take them down and spread them in one area. Physically pick each book up, one by one. If the book inspires you, keep it. If not, it goes out. That’s the standard by which you decide.”

“Why can’t I just look at the book?” Goodman asked.

“Because your body is very honest with you,” Kondo replied. “Your body will respond if the book sparks joy.”

Goodman scanned her bookshelf. “That’s a big job,” she said, her voice a little shaky.

“Think of it as an event,” Kondo said. “A festival.”

--Molly Young, *New York Magazine*



TONI MORRISON

With her Nobel Prize and her graven prose and a leonine profile as stately and imposing as anything on Mount Rushmore, Toni Morrison can come across as frankly a bit intimidating — the woman has authority. Add to that her four-decade career writing brilliant and often despairing novels about the black experience in America, and it’s no wonder interviewers frequently want her to proclaim about race relations or the latest tragedy playing out on the nation’s television screens...But there is a less foreboding, more playful side to Morrison as well: The critic John Leonard once reported that she liked to chat with Fran Lebowitz about Court TV, and she told *The Telegraph* that Marlon Brando used to call just to recite her work: “I still have his number in my iPhone! How could I erase that?”

--Gregory Cowles, *New York Times Book Review*

TRIGGER WARNING

I had a teacher once whose strategies and systems for handling triggers were really sweet, and that I use all the time: if I notice myself reacting in a way that is anything other than compassionate, I consider what caused it. I consider earlier versions of that cause in my life -- childhood neglect, trauma, major or minor slights, etc. Then I visualize myself at the age of the earliest cause event and give that kid (myself) what the kid (I) needs, and bit by bit every time someone triggers me, I'm becoming more and more present and whole. I consider it my job as a performer to tease that process out in a safe space of fantasy of live theatre -- it is the best way possible to feel those cathartic moments in sneaky, roundabout ways that aren't as harsh as daily grind life because you have the opportunity to come out of them should you feel the process doesn't match the pace you're processing it all. It'll hit you later, on the train, at the gym the next day, but catharsis comes.

The trigger warning of art is that it is art.

-- Jax Jackson



TRUMP

I would absolutely not have dinner with Donald Trump under any circumstances. Suppose I made him up in a novel. They would kill me. They would say I was anti-man.

--Gloria Steinem

UNDERNEATH

Mythologist Michael Meade says there are three layers of experience. The first is the social layer: “Hey, how’s it going?” “Fine, how about you?” The second layer is difficult emotions such as grief, anger, rage, envy, violence. The third layer is deep soul contact, true intimacy. Meade says that you can’t go from layer one to layer three without going through layer two, and we avoid layer two at all costs. We stay on the surface, where we talk about the weather and who’s doing what on Capitol Hill. We need a way, as a community, to get through layer two. Otherwise, when there’s a tragedy, how are we going to deal with it? If we don’t chew on these subjects, they chew on us....It’s up to us to devise our own rituals. One of the values of ritual is that it has the capacity to derange us, to shake us out of the old forms. We need that derangement, because the current arrangement isn’t working. We have ceremonies, yes – weddings, graduations, church services -- but we come out of those pretty much the same as we went in. You’re supposed to emerge from a ritual wondering what the hell just happened. Ritual connects us to spirit and soul. It can shift us out of our usual state of mind. Ceremony works to maintain and renew social bonds. We need both, but we rarely have access to rituals that are potent enough to break us open.

--Francis Weller, interviewed in *The Sun*



VACATION

Once there was a man who filmed his vacation. He went flying down the river in his boat with his video camera to his eye, making a moving picture of the moving river upon which his sleek boat moved swiftly toward the end of his vacation. He showed his vacation to his camera, which pictured it, preserving it forever: the river, the trees, the sky, the light, the bow of his rushing boat behind which he stood with his camera preserving his vacation even as he was having it so that after he had had it he would still have it. It would be there. With a flick of a switch, there it would be. But he would not be in it. He would never be in it.

— Wendell Berry

VALENTINE

Not a red rose or a satin heart.

I give you an onion.
It is a moon wrapped in brown paper.
It promises light
like the careful undressing of love.

Here.
It will blind you with tears
like a lover.
It will make your reflection
a wobbling photo of grief.

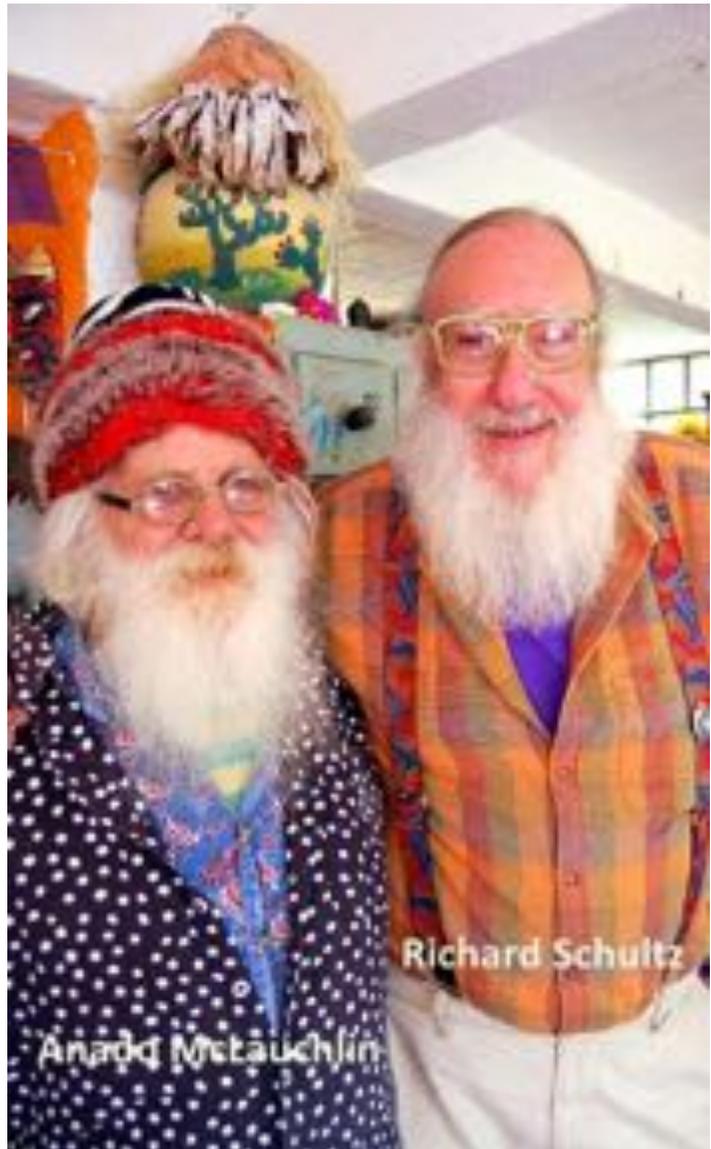
I am trying to be truthful.

Not a cute card or a kissogram.

I give you an onion.
Its fierce kiss will stay on your lips,
possessive and faithful
as we are,
for as long as we are.

Take it.
Its platinum loops shrink to a wedding-ring,
if you like.
Lethal.
Its scent will cling to your fingers,
cling to your knife.

--Carol Ann Duffy



VIDAL

Everything in your eyes is diminished and uglified. . . . You always focus on the faults, on what can be satirized. . . . To see only the ugliness, that is what people do when they do not love. . . . You are not aware that when you paint only cruelly, underlining only faults or weaknesses, you are the loser.

--Anais Nin, in a letter to Gore Vidal about his novel *The City and the Pillar*



VINYL

The first record I bought with my savings was *Discovery* by Electric Light Orchestra, from 1979. I bought it at Sears. I still remember the cover, the jacket with the lyrics on it, and the picture of the Arab boy running away from thieves after stealing the ELO flying saucer. But other senses also intervened: the smell, cellophane's aroma, the texture of cardboard, paper, and vinyl. The secret of vinyl records lies in the senses, in the way we related with the object and its art. The touch which, as I remember, as a young boy having slept with a 45 RPM containing the musical tale of *Peter and the Wolf* between my hands. The feeling that the story was mine as many times as I wanted and with the magic of a wonderful box that extracted all its secrets, and which my alchemist father knew how to operate as many times as I asked. We enjoy our mother's voice and the comforting feeling of sucking on our thumb since the moment we are inside the womb. The same thing happens with the right size of the 33RPM record. The covers, the concept could be admired as contemporary art pieces, thanks to the fact that Alex Steinweiss turned, in 1938, into the father of this concept by adding light and color to the boring and almost anonymous packages.

--Iñaki Manero



WANT

The wasps outside
the kitchen window
are making that
thick, unraveling sound
again, floating in
and out of the bald head
of their nest,
seeming not to move
while moving,
and it has just occurred
to me, standing,
washing the coffeepot,
watching them hang
loosely in the air -- thin
wings; thick, elongated
abdomens; sad, down-
pointing antennae --
that this
is the heart's constant
project: this simple
learning; learning
how to hold
hopelessness
and hope together;
to see on the unharmed

surface of one
the great scar
of the other; to recognize
both and to make
something of both;
to desire everything
and nothing
at once and to desire it
all the time;
and to contain that desire
fleshly, in a body;
to wash it and rest it
and feed it; to learn
its name and from whence
it came; and to speak
to it -- oh, most of all
to speak to it --
every day, every day,
saying to one part,
"Well, maybe this is all
you get," while saying
to the other, "Go on,
break it open, let it go."

--Carrie Fountain



"Is this the wine you selected at random?"



"Gandia, your eyes are like two crystal-blue pools of habitual judgment."

WAR

War is hell, but that's not the half of it, because war is mystery and terror and adventure and courage and discovery and holiness and pity and despair and longing and love. War is nasty; war is fun. War is thrilling; war is drudgery. War makes you a man; war makes you dead.

The truths are contradictory. It can be argued, for instance, that war is grotesque. But in truth war is also beauty. For all its horror, you can't help but gape at the awful majesty of combat. You stare out at tracer rounds unwinding through the dark like brilliant red ribbons. You crouch in ambush as a cool, impassive moon rises over the nighttime paddies. You admire the fluid symmetries of troops on the move, the great sheets of metal-fire streaming down from a gunship, the illumination rounds, the white phosphorus, the purple orange glow of napalm, the rocket's red glare. It's not pretty, exactly. It's astonishing. It fills the eye. It commands you. You hate it, yes, but your eyes do not. Like a killer forest fire, like cancer under a microscope, any battle or bombing raid or artillery barrage has the aesthetic purity of absolute moral indifference - a powerful, implacable beauty - and a true war story will tell the truth about this, though the truth is ugly.

To generalize about war is like generalizing about peace. Almost everything is true. Almost nothing is true. Though it's odd, you're never more alive than when you're almost dead. You recognize what's valuable. Freshly, as if for the first time, you love what's best in yourself and in the world, all that might be lost. At the hour of dusk you sit at your foxhole and look out on a wide river turning pinkish red, and at the mountains beyond, and although in the morning you must cross the river and go into the mountains and do terrible things and maybe die, even so, you find yourself studying the fine colors on the river, you feel wonder and awe at the setting of the sun, and you are filled with a hard, aching love for how the world could be and always should be, but now is not.

--Tim O'Brien, *The Things They Carried*

WIDOWS

My mother's playing cards with my aunt,
Spite and Malice, the family pastime, the game
my grandmother taught all her daughters.

Midsummer: too hot to go out.
Today, my aunt's ahead; she's getting the good cards.
My mother's dragging, having trouble with her
concentration.
She can't get used to her own bed this summer.
She had no trouble last summer,
getting used to the floor. She learned to sleep there
to be near my father.
He was dying; he got a special bed.

My aunt doesn't give an inch, doesn't make
allowance for my mother's weariness.
It's how they were raised: you show respect by fighting.
To let up insults the opponent.

Each player has one pile to the left, five cards in the hand.
It's good to stay inside on days like this,
to stay where it's cool.
And this is better than other games, better than solitaire.

My grandmother thought ahead; she prepared her daughters.
They have cards; they have each other.
They don't need any more companionship.

All afternoon the game goes on but the sun doesn't move.
It just keeps beating down, turning the grass yellow.
That's how it must seem to my mother.
And then, suddenly, something is over.

My aunt's been at it longer; maybe that's why she's playing better.
Her cards evaporate: that's what you want, that's the object: in the end,
the one who has nothing wins.

--Louise Gluck



WORDS

When he diagnosed my three-month-old, Fiona, with a chromosomal disorder, the redheaded, cherubic medical geneticist did not use the phrase “mentally retarded” — thank God, or the gods of rhetoric, or just the politically correct medical school the young doctor had attended. (He was my age, thirties, about to start a family of his own.) This was in 2012, one year before the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* replaced “mental retardation” with “intellectual developmental disorder.” So he could officially have said “mental retardation.” Instead he said that most people with Wolf-Hirschhorn syndrome “have intellectual disabilities to some degree.”

If [he] had used the term plenty of doctors still use when diagnosing children with my daughter’s syndrome, I would have fallen down a rabbit hole of grief...“Intellectual disabilities” was new, fresh, curious. “Most children like yours have intellectual disabilities to some degree,” the geneticist said, doing what champions of “person-first” language recommend: putting people first in the sentence and their condition second. He described something my daughter could *have*, like a pebble in her pocket or a cowlick in her hair, rather than declaring her to *be* something, giving her a label, a sticker on her shirt: *Hello, My Name Is Mentally Retarded. Hello, My Name Is Stupid. Hello, I Am the Cousin of Moron and Cretin. Hello, My Name Is Broken.*

The word *cretin* is from the eighteenth-century French *crétin*, meaning Christian. As in: *Even though you’re disabled, you’re still a child of God.* But if I were to say, “Hello, cretin,” to you, I doubt you’d get good Christian vibes. Before *imbecile* and *moron* and *cretin*, we had one overarching category: *idiot*. An idiot, declared a sixteenth-century English lawyer, “is so witless, that he cannot number to twenty, nor can tell what age he is of, nor knoweth who is his father or mother.” In 1910 American psychologist Henry H. Goddard placed people who scored below average on IQ tests into three categories. An “idiot” was an adult who functioned at a two-year-old level. (Today we use the phrase “severe intellectual disability.”) A “moron” was an adult who functioned at an eight-to-twelve-year-old level. (Today these people have “mild intellectual disabilities.”) The word *imbecile* was reserved for a person in between a moron and an idiot. A hundred years ago most people with Wolf-Hirschhorn syndrome would have been called “imbeciles.” I hope my daughter achieves the diagnosis of “mild intellectual disability,” but I know this is an optimistic goal. I also know that if I were living in the early twentieth century, I would be optimistically wishing my daughter might become a moron.

--Heather Kirn Lanier, “The R-Word,” *The Sun*, May 2015





"Touch anywhere to begin."

WOUNDS

When our wounds cease to be a source of shame and become a source of healing, we have become wounded healers....Our own experience with loneliness, depression, and fear can become a gift....Our own bandaged wounds will allow us to listen to others with our whole beings.

--Henri J.M. Nouwen



"A heart would be great, sure, but what I'd really like is a working human penis."

WRITING

What genres do you especially enjoy reading? And which do you avoid?

The genre I enjoy reading is what is quaintly called literature. I can't count the times I've encountered strangers who ask what sort of stuff I write (the party, the book-lined den, zinfandel and canapés, "So you're the writer?"). Is it sci-fi, horror, thrillers, romances? What can I do but bow my head in mortification and 'fess up: "Literature." I have never been a fan of genre writing of any kind, because generally speaking it provides only one element I look for when I open a book of fiction: story. All right. Fine. Story is primary. But what I want — the richness of language, beauty that sweeps you away — is often missing in genre writing. For me, a thrilling read is Faulkner's "Light in August" or Coetzee's "Disgrace."

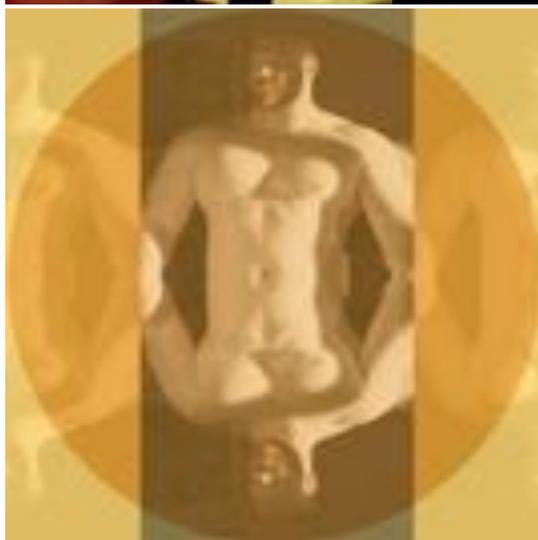
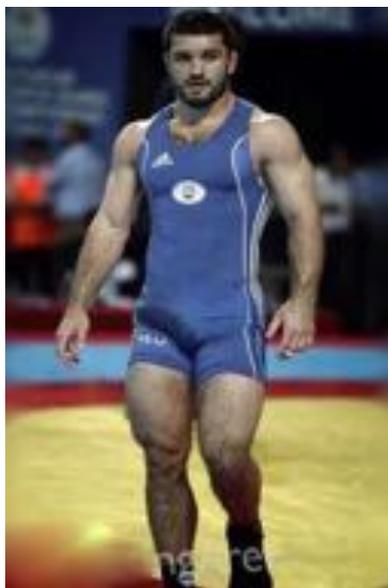
--T.C. Boyle

Serious old writers (and often the more comedy, the more seriousness) belong, body and soul, irony and metaphor, to word and thought; and also to aspiration, that metaphysical yearning for the literary sublime. Aspiration is not the same as ambition. Ambition forgets mortality; old writers never do. Ambition wants a career; aspiration wants a room of one's own. Ambition feeds on public attention; aspiration is impervious to crowds. Old writers in their youth understood themselves to be apprentices to masters superior in seasoned experience, and were ready to wait their turn in the hierarchy of recognition. In their lone and hardened way of sticking-to-it, they were unwaveringly industrious; networking, the term and the scheme, was unknown to them. In their college years, they might on occasion enroll in courses in "creative writing," though unaware of the vapid redundancy of the phrase: courses presided over by defeated professors who had once actually published a novel and were thereby rendered reverential, but afterward were never heard from again. Old writers were spared (by the nonexistence of such things) the institutionalization of creative writing M.F.A. programs in the universities, taught by graduates of M.F.A. programs — a cycle of M.F.A. students becoming M.F.A. teachers teaching M.F.A. students who will in turn become M.F.A. teachers: a Möbius strip of job-manufacture. Old writers in their youth were resolutely immured in their first novels, steadfastly enduring unworldly and self-chosen isolation; they shunned journalism, they shunned coteries, they shunned parties, they shunned the haunting of magazines for review assignments, they shunned editorial work, fearful of being drawn into the distracting pragmatism of publishing — magnetized instead by the lure of the *Ding an sich*.

--Cynthia Ozick



XXX





YEAR IN REVIEW

I am aware that this compilation doesn't accurately reflect the global events that dominated the news this year. There were a few pockets of genuine good news (marriage equality, Truvada). But the frequent eruption of senseless killings, the evolution of ISIS, wave upon wave of refugees and internally displaced people, and the Republican candidate clown car are among the dismaying phenomena of 2015 that repeatedly broke my heart and/or aroused my fury. In some ways they had more impact than anything else that happened, and they loom like a depressed and depressing cloud over everything I might say in summarizing this period of time.



Top Theater:



1. A View from the Bridge – Ivo van Hove’s impossibly intense Broadway revival of Arthur Miller’s, staged within Jan Versweyveld’s evocative stark set and lighting, an excellent cast headed by Mark Strong, Michael Gould, and Nicola Walker

2. Between Riverside and Crazy – I’m thankful that Second Stage brought back the Atlantic Theater Company’s production of Stephen Adly Giurgis’s deep, dark well-deserved Pulitzer recipient, full of amazing performances (Stephen McKinley Henderson and Liza Colon-Zayas – pictured below -- with Ron Cephas Jones and Victor Almanzar) directed by Austin Pendleton.



3. An Octoroon – the kind of big, messy, important, risk-taking production that keeps me engaged with theater. Playwright Branden Jacobs-Jenkins had key collaborators in director Sarah Benson, eight brave actors, smart producers (Theatre for a New Audience extended the life of the show that began at Soho Rep), and a design team at the top of their game (especially Mimi Lien, who certainly deserves the MacArthur Foundation fellowship she won this year).

4. John (Signature Theatre) – Annie Baker’s long astonishing play staged by Sam Gold on Mimi Lien’s hyperrealistic set with four terrific performances: Georgia Engel, Lois Smith, Christopher Abbott, and Hong Chau.

- 5. Ghost Quartet** – a sweet and haunting chamber piece from Dave Molloy, composer of *Natasha, Pierre, and the Great Comet of 1812*, performed in the cozy setting of the bar at the McKittrick Hotel.
- 6. And That's How The Rent Gets Paid** – Jeff Weiss and Ricardo Martinez's East Village epic revived at the Kitchen featuring a cast of veteran and emerging downtown stars under director Brooke O'Harra's fine-tuned cat-herding.
- 7. iOW@** (Playwrights Horizons) -- playwright Jenny Schwartz gave herself an amazing amount of freedom with this piece, one of the most aggressively odd-shaped plays I've ever seen in how information is delivered, how characters are introduced, how the story advances, the use of music (gorgeous and scrupulously unpredictable score by Todd Almond), etc. Kudos to director Ken Rus Schmoll and a super-game cast.
- 8. Composition...Master-Pieces...Identity** (Target Margin Theater) – I don't know how he does it but David Greenspan again inhabited Gertrude Stein's prose with effortless genius.
- 9. Gloria** (Vineyard Theatre) – another fine example of Branden Jacobs-Jenkins' gift for merging social commentary, shrewd humor, and extraordinary performance opportunities; Evan Cabnet directed the fantastic six-member cast, among whom Jennifer Kim and Ryan Spahn stood out for me.
- 10. Hamilton** (Public Theatre) – I had my reservations about the most acclaimed musical of the year (the hip-hop score is monotonous, the staging is theatrically square, and author Lin-Manuel Miranda's performance struck me as charmless) but there's no denying that this retelling of early American history by black and Latino performers is smart, conceptually ambitious, and fiendishly well-written.
- 11. Steve** (New Group) – Mark Gerrard's smart, hilarious gay comedy about sad stuff, impeccably directed by Cynthia Nixon with a fine cast and a seriously great performance by Matt McGrath.



Honorable Mentions:

- Eclipsed* (Public Theatre)– Danai Gurira's original play about the experience of women during Liberia's civil war with an exceptional all-female ensemble directed by Liesl Tommy
- Ada/Ava* (3Legged Dog) – unusual, inventive, emotionally absorbing shadow puppet play created by the Chicago-based Manual Cinema
- Spring Awakening* – DeafWest Theatre's revelatory revival of Duncan Sheik and Steven Sater's musical adaptation of Frank Wedekind's play with a cast full of impressive Broadway newcomers directed by Michael Arden, noteworthy set by Dane Laffrey.
- Grounded* (Public Theater) – Julie Taymor brought her theatrical magic to this small honest play starring Anne Hathaway as a disillusioned and war-damaged drone pilot

Preludes (LCT3) – another exceptional eccentric musical event from the team of composer Dave Malloy and director Rachel Chavkin starring Gabriel Ebert on another dazzling Mimi Lien set.

Disgraced – Ayad Akhtar’s play superbly directed on Broadway by Kimberly Senior.

Living Here (Foundry Theatre) -- Gideon Irving’s one-man musical performed in living rooms all over NYC (including mine)

Raul Esparza in *Cymbeline* in Central Park

Keith Hennessy’s *bear/SKIN* in the Abrons Arts Center’s American Realness Festival

Bob Crowley’s sets and costumes and Robert Fairchild’s performance in *An American in Paris*

Daniel Oreskes, Cameron Scoggins, and Tom Phelan in Taylor Mac’s *Hir* at Playwrights Horizons with a set by David Zinn that screamed “toxic America”



Other Culture Vulture High Points:

South African photographer Zanele Muholi’s show *Isibonelo/Evidence* at the Brooklyn Museum

Anna Teresa de Keersmaker’s *Partita* in the White Light Festival

The new Whitney Museum

Habeas Corpus, Laurie Anderson’s collaboration with Guantanamo Bay detainee Mohammed el Gharani at the Park Avenue Armory

Love and Mercy, Bill Pohlad’s harrowing, arty, moving, thrilling biopic of Brian Wilson with an incredible performance by Paul Dano – my favorite film of the year

ZINC

Zinc, *zinco*, *Zink*: laundry tubs are made of it, it’s an element that doesn’t say much to the imagination, it’s gray and its salts are colorless, it’s not toxic, it doesn’t provide gaudy chromatic reactions—in other words, it’s a boring element.

--Primo Levi, *The Periodic Table*

2014 THANKS TO

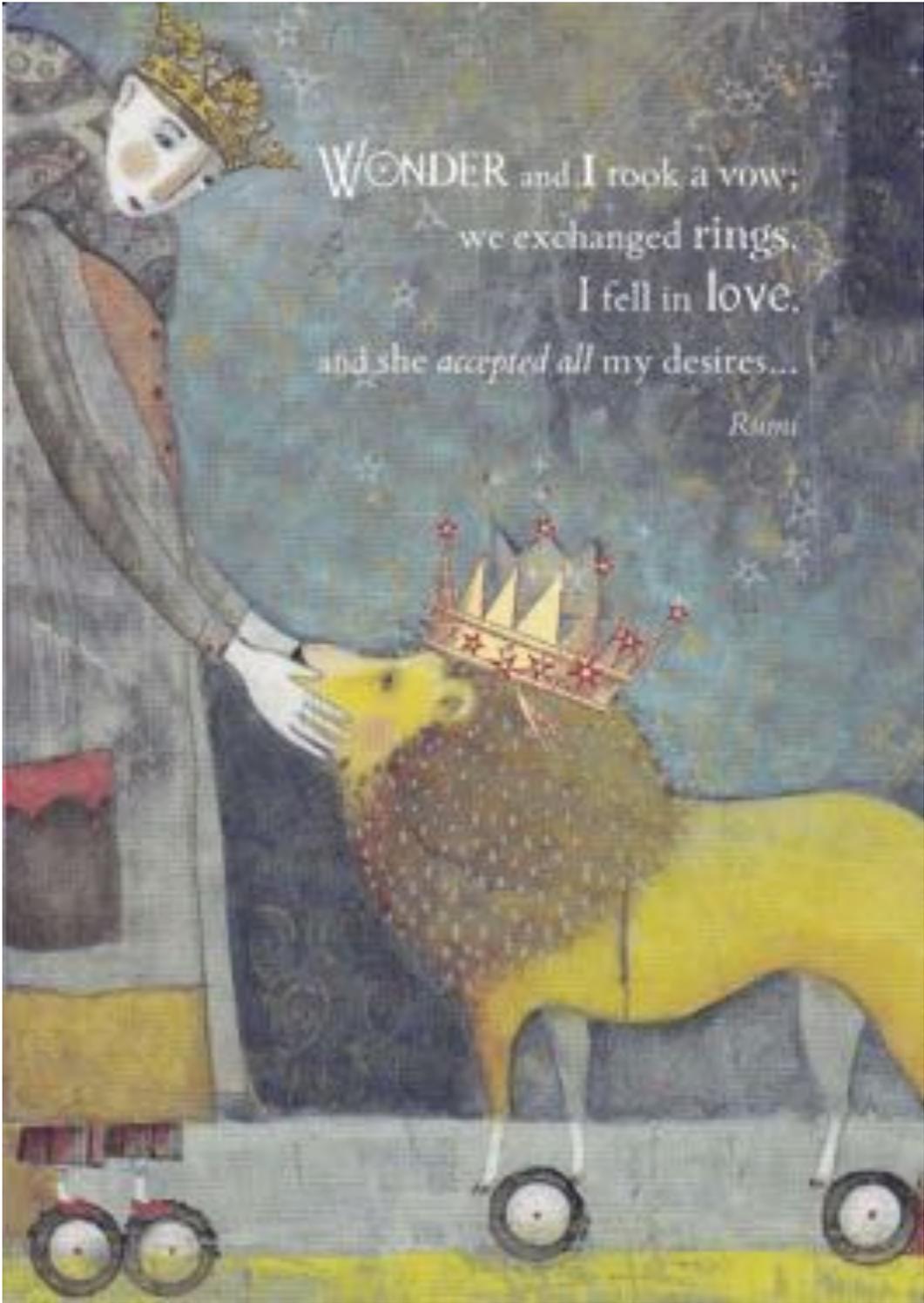
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RIP

RAFAEL BEJARANO * BILL BYLEWSKI * MALCOLM BOYD * MARIO CUOMO * EDWARD HERRMANN * MARY ELLEN MARK * RACHEL ROSENTHAL * DELL WILLIAMS





WONDER and I took a vow;
we exchanged rings.
I fell in love,
and she *accepted all my desires...*

Rumi