

LOST IN THE DIN

Why Your Opinion on Politics and Religion  
Means Nothing

*and*

Mine Means Even Less

ESSAYS by:

Henry Edward Fool

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Author's Note: When I told my wife what I was up to, I ended my explanation with the phrase, "a task which only an idiot would undertake." She gave it some thought and then very kindly said (and quite convincingly by the way) "I'm trying, but I can't think of you as an idiot."  
"Yeah, well, this book should help you with that," I said.



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“If you’re not cynical about the situation, then obviously you’re not very well informed about the situation.” *Frank Zappa*

When Gandhi visited the United States for the first time, they took him all around New York City and showed him the sights. After the tour they asked him, "Well, now that you've seen New York City, what do you think about Western Civilization?" Gandhi replied, "I think that would be a good idea."



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Give a man a fish, and you've fed him for a day. Give him a book, and you've given him a doorstep.

## FAIR WARNING:

There probably isn't a single statement in this book that won't have you thinking, 'My god, that's the product of a simple mind.' That's how this book works. Read what I've said on any matter, and you'll recognize immediately how dreadfully, laughably, infuriatingly wrong I am. Almost as immediately you'll see, in blinding clarity and the starkest possible contrast, how undeniably correct your view is on that very same matter. But, unless you find no entertainment whatsoever in such stuff, that shouldn't stop you from reading the damned thing. It didn't stop me from writing it.

I feel like I should warn you that I am neither an intellectual aristocrat, nor will I ever openly admit to owning the first three seasons of *My Name Is Earl* on Blu-ray. So, any feeling of superiority you may experience welling up inside while reading this book, whatever its basis, will be perfectly justified. When it comes to politics, maybe you should know this going in, that when I am not shamefully uninformed I am usually at very least terribly misinformed, and my unshakable political thoughts have all been built upon that solid foundation, though sometimes I rely on fragmentary and unreliable information as well. With the exceptions of Charles Krauthammer and my very dear wife, I assume that's just the way everyone does it.

I'll be beating several dead horses along the way, employing a variety of techniques, and wondering what a more reasonable person might have done instead. But I hope to balance that nicely with suppositions so peculiar,

statements so outlandish, and conclusions so obviously incorrect that they could only be meant as jokes or, depending upon your mood, intentionally misleading.

With that in place, there's this:

Moon Zappa was the prize one time on an LA-based TV dating show. Three young studs were backstage with their fingers crossed hoping to win her. The first guy came bouncing out all muscles, teeth, and monumental, irrepressible self-approval. Once he was seated, Moon made this simple request: "Tell me how you feel about back acne, excessive body hair, and cellulite." The guy's perfectly chiseled jaw dropped, his crystal-blue eyes bugged out, he was knocked completely senseless. TKO. He just sat there speechless, dumbfounded. (Back acne? Cellulite?) Nothing his mother had done to convince him that he was the golden center of the shimmering silvery universe had prepared him for this. I guess he'd imagined himself dashing out on stage to meet some long-legged, blonde bimbo coyly asking, "If I were a muffin and you were a big hungry bear..." Instead he got Moon Unit.

It took him a while to recover, but eventually he asked Moon if she would repeat the question.

When she did, the poor guy just sat there gaping until the hostess of the show came over to revive him. (Excessive body hair?) She gently helped him onto his feet, placed a compassionate hand firmly in the center of his back, (Back acne?) and sent him stumbling off stage. (Cellulite?) On his way out, he staggered face-first into one of the floor cameras.

Moon's point was simple: *If you can't face reality, then we don't even need to talk.*

I like that.

So, let's go with that. That'll be the theme of this book. Together we'll face reality: you, from your side; me, from some distant planet.

## INTRODUCTION

This book is in large part a response to the overly serious, politically driven, somewhat hyper young zealot who told me one evening that anyone who isn't busily *trying to change the world* is wasting his life. He used a catchier, more erudite phrase than perpetual political agitation, which I cannot recall, but that is what he was stumping for. He honestly, passionately believed that a bunch of people stomping around in the streets, carrying signs and shouting catch phrases—in those hours when they aren't out begging for signatures on petitions—has real effect on things political. Putting the foolishness of that belief aside for the moment, I countered by asking what he thought of musicians whose life-long commitment to their craft didn't afford them time for *the leisurely pursuit of protest*.

I anticipated fireworks concerning my phrase *the leisurely pursuit of protest*, but got only a flippant response damning all musicians, all writers, all artists (cartoonists too, I'd guess) who weren't using their craft to demand social change. Art for Art's sake, I was told (as if I might not have ever heard it before), is a crime. This from a kid with a Maori pattern tattooed around his wrist.

With my wobbly old chin firmly tucked, my wiry eyebrows raised at full staff in mock indignation, I began offering the names of musicians whose work I truly love, only to be informed, one by one, that they had all lead useless lives. Scott Joplin: life wasted. Stan Getz: the young revolutionary had never even heard of him, so surely that was a wasted life. According to the kid (he'll be known as



*the kid* from here on out), even the great cellist, Mstislav Rostropovich—who was banned from his beloved homeland for his unwavering stance against the Soviet regime—hadn’t done enough. He told me this straight-faced. When I looked at him more carefully to see if he was serious, I discovered that he was. At that point, I knew with a certainty that the young man didn’t know what he was talking about. Not that such insight gave me any leverage, because, though in complete disagreement with him, I didn’t know what I was talking about either.

The difference was that I admitted it.

I don’t know a damned thing about politics, never have. More peculiar perhaps, I don’t wish to know a damned thing about politics. For me, that day spent without any incoming information whatsoever concerning politics, is a happy day. (Well, has a better chance at any rate.) My indifference, which I stated to him clearly (or at least as clearly as I have stated it here, just now, to you) seemed to rattle the kid more than what he had first perceived to be my opposition to his sacredly-held political view.

The difference here was I wasn’t trying to sell him on *my* point of view. (And you can relax, because I’m not trying to sell you either.) I don’t care enough about politics to argue about it, and that doesn’t bother me. It did bother the kid however. To him, politics is a serious matter and unless you’re arguing about it, you’re not taking it seriously enough. So, you can imagine his response when I told him, “I don’t know enough about politics to even talk about it.”

The kid had no doubt whatsoever that *he* knew enough about politics to educate *me*, if I was willing to shut up, listen, and learn.

I am always willing to shut up and listen, but almost never willing to learn, and I told him as much, but that didn't stop him. He was not only convinced that what he knew about politics was right—which is the disease in its advanced form as far as I can tell—he was also convinced that it was his sacred task to force his wisdom down my somewhat unreceptive saggy old throat. As far as I could tell, he believed it was not only for *my* own good, but for the good of all humanity that I understand, accept and prepare myself to cooperate with his vision—such was the wisdom he wished to impart. But, instead of falling to my knees, trembling in gratefulness before him, I remained standing, grinning like an old idiot, foolish belligerence bubbling within me.

I regret to say that at some point at the very beginning of his lecture I may have laughed. He immediately fixed me with a cold and unforgiving eye.

“You don't get it, do you?” he asked with equal parts accusation, frustration, anger and incredulity.

“I guess not,” I said without resistance.

I'd learned a very long time ago that when someone in the heat of politically driven passion says, “You don't get it, do you?” it's just quicker, cleaner, neater and more efficient to admit it. If you have any acting ability, you might want to hang your head in shame, when you first recognize this unforgivable fault within yourself.

Actually though, I did get it. Or, I thought I got the gist of it anyway: he had wisdom to dispense and it was vital to me, whether I recognized it or not, to receive this wisdom. What *he* didn't seem to get was the very simple fact that I wasn't interested in politics; that I thought there might be other things of value in Life. He saw my indifference to politics as criminal. I saw his indifference to Stan Getz as a very great shame. But, I wasn't about to sit him down and slap on a disc while coaxing, "Listen—just listen—*this* is beautiful." I've made that mistake enough times in my life to know the results going in. I also know that those times when anyone has done that to me—sat me down to listen to something they thought wonderful—the music they've wanted me to listen to and admire has usually been just some god-awful useless crap which, but for a courteous upbringing, I'd have walked away from hoping never to have to hear again.

I tried to tell the kid that I did get it; that I understood what he was saying; that I just didn't share his beliefs concerning either the weight or the urgency of most political matters. In fact, the people involved most deeply in the damned stuff seem to agree with me in the matter of urgency. It takes Congress a thousand years to decide if they are going to establish a panel to determine whether a particular matter should be considered for a study to determine if it should be introduced as an appropriate matter for consideration by an already established committee, or a new committee should be formed to study it further. And, if it ever does come before them, it's very likely to be tabled for later consideration. This is why very few Firemen ever run for political office.

Out of kindness I reiterated what I thought I'd heard him say: that unless you were out in the streets, with a reddened face and veins popping out all over your neck and forehead, shouting demands with your fist in the air, you were part of the problem. I then told him what I thought: that if you were out in the streets you might as well be out there strolling around with someone eminently huggable and well worth flirting with clinging to your arm, or out there with no greater purpose than to enjoy the day. Out of that same kindness I stopped short of telling him that sitting in a park, on a bench, under a nice tree, pretending to read a large book with an impressive looking title, while lost in utter mindlessness, probably has the same political impact as whatever it was he would have us all doing instead.

Here's the crux of it:

*Unfortunately*—and I mean that in the most sincere way—my complete indifference to politics doesn't prevent me from holding a political opinion. It does not prevent me from thinking that opinion—whether solidly based on fragmentary misinformation or utterly baseless—is right. It does not keep me from defending that opinion when necessary with any amount of vehemence I feel might be called for, or from attempting to sell it to others. Nor does it prevent me from voting.

That's the very essence of this book.

(I may say it a hundred different ways, but that's pretty much all I have to say.)

But, let's go back a step.

When I told the kid anyone would have to be an idiot to deny Rostropovich's influence both in music and politics,

he snorted derisively. His view—which was merely ideologically driven lunacy—would not allow him to consider even the simplest, most undeniable fact which did not conform to that view note for note.

As I was looking at him I found myself wondering why so many kids who have surrendered their ability to think for themselves, and have taken up the (frequently bloody) banner of mindless ideology, look so much like Leon Trotsky. (There's a simple undeniable fact for you.) I began wondering if this rah-rah attitude about changing the world through politics might be detected in the genes. If it can, I'm sure it's closely tied to a gene that doesn't allow them to see their own privileged position clearly...or perhaps a gene that forces them to resent it.

The kid didn't appear to have any appreciation whatsoever for the freedom that allowed him to choose his own personal blindness—a freedom which at once also stoutly defends his right to go around spouting his philosophy in the presence of old men who stupidly do not care to hear it. While leading *his* wasted life, Rostropovich was forced to flee his homeland, for (amongst other things) refusing to lie about how wonderful things supposedly were in that awful place. Years later, when the great cellist was invited back to play in Red Square, in the midst of a coup, and later still at the Berlin Wall, while the crowd brought the thing down chunk by graffiti-covered chunk, the kid was probably still laying around, swaddled in red diapers, screaming red-faced, rejecting the very bottle that fed him the pap he was now regurgitating in undigested chunks in my presence.

Maybe Rostropovich *could* have done more. Maybe he could have stopped playing the cello long enough to tear down that wall himself single-handedly. Of all the people gathered there he may have had the greatest right to do that, as well as the deepest understanding of that event's significance. But, he chose to play the cello instead. Does that tell you anything?

It speaks volumes to me.

Meanwhile...the kid was still busy trying to convince me—an old man who clearly didn't give a damn—that we can influence politics, and thereby the world, and all *for the good*. It was with great difficulty that I reined in my urge to tell him, “My god, you're a tenacious, arrogant and stupid little bastard.”

That was my unspoken observation however.

“Actually,” I began to tell him, but stopped before completing the thought.

What I had been about to say was that I thought the world would be better off with more people studying the cello and fewer people out there marching around, chanting lame-brained slogans off-key and out of sync, in the streets. I'm not sure that's entirely true—which is why I stopped—but that was my thinking for that very brief moment.

I stopped to give the matter some thought. (Yes, we're still allowed to do that, even in the midst of political discourse.) I was befuddled because, in a very real way, I admired this young man. I was observing him fairly closely, and I really enjoyed his passion. In a very real way (again) I think *that*

is the level at which we *should* live out our lives. I'm fairly sure his strictly focused devotion to changing the world (for what he himself deemed to be *the better*) is the very same stuff that allows someone to become a great cellist; it may well be the prime essential. I respect passion, and I admire commitment and I have never said a bad thing about determination (all things I do not myself possess), but I'm not so sure that such passion, commitment and determination applied to changing the world through politics is not a dangerous thing... not to the world of course—I'm pretty sure, the world will take care of itself—but to the kid. The world, I'm beginning to believe has pretty much had its fill of us and our politics, but the kid still has a great deal of life ahead of him.

If I had thought it was my job to save this kid (and I didn't) I'd also have to assume that my bold/awkward attempt would only be rejected; most likely met with nothing more than a sneer. And so, Good luck to you, young man! Good luck and fat chance. Those were my parting thoughts on the subject. Though unexpressed, they were probably clear enough. (The kid and I seemed to be pretty well tuned into each other at that point.)

*Good luck and fat chance* is not a convincing argument of course, and for him to tell me that I was leading a useless life—a fact of which I am already very well aware—is only kicking a useless old man when he's down. So, we had both offered unconvincing arguments, and neither of us walked away a new convert to a greater cause. I thought the kid was a young idiot. He thought I was an old fool.

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The fact is we were both right.

The entire history of mankind, at every level, is the story of one person trying to impose the tyranny of his opinion upon others. The extent to which violence, force and coercion of every sort has played in persuading them to accept that opinion, says something about how strongly we each cherish our own. But, it says nothing about the real value of our opinions. And, so, let's do that here.

We all have our opinions, none of them mean a thing.



## BOOK ONE

### THE MILIEU

If Book One is anything it is a lamentation.

It is not a lamentation of the now-lost, possibly valuable, flippantly unexplored, carelessly ignored, nearly forgotten past (both recent as well as ancient), but of the ever-emerging, future-now-present-(don't blink)-now-past and the ever-expanding, never-ending, black-hole dumping ground of personal opinion within which that ever-emerging, ever-collapsing, present/past exists. At no time in the history of man have so many people been so desperate to have their personal value recognized by others. Here's news though: All of this shamelessly self-centered *communication* among thousands who have never met (and have no intention) is not communication at all. Yammer all you want, you're still alone. But, perhaps that's not news.

Either way, it is unnerving, as well as somewhat ironic, that we have become a world of typists in our eager efforts to reach each other, because, as a writer, I can tell you that writing may be an abstract form of communication, but it is not conversation. It is anything but. Writing is in fact one of the most effective ways of distancing yourself. People write so they can get their thoughts out without the constant interruption that they'd have to withstand if they were sitting around talking to another living human being. (Believe me, I know.) So, this new found reaching out, through the internet, is not reaching out at all, it's more

like: ‘hold your questions till I’m done talking about me, and, I am not really done talking about me quite yet... oh, wait, I just had another thought’. It has the appearance of people attempting conversation, but it is actually people entrenching themselves further, sending up flares of distress hoping to be *Liked* while, at once, hoping never to be found.

Just as an aside: for me, it’s a weird world in which we casually broadcast nude pictures of ourselves throughout the known universe, yet bluster with indignation if, by that same vehicle, some company discovers our interest in ubwogs and sends us an email trying to sell us some at a discount. But, let’s set that aside for now. I’m here to say something either useless or meaningful about the value of opinion. I leave it entirely to you to decide which.

We now find ourselves slogging around in a world in which we are continually told that everyone’s opinion counts. But, this exuberant, almost universal, new-found value in every man’s opinion can only lead to finding no value in anyone’s opinion—which is, I think, probably a saner situation anyway, IF we would only stop texting long enough to recognize it. What’s insane is our failure to recognize it for what it is, and what it is, is noise. It’s just noise, nothing more.

In quainter times we knew that every man had an opinion, and thought little of it. These days, we’re supposed to take an additional little step and wonder what his opinion might be. The implication is then that we will also *care* in some way about that opinion. And, embedded in that caring is the

quiet little hope that we'll probably agree with that opinion. Agree or not, I think there is additional hope (maybe even belief) that these strangers—all out there somewhere—will, in turn, yearn to know what our thoughts might be, with the same implication of caring and agreement attached. Yet is anyone wondering what the source of this almost universal desperation could be?

I am.

Thus the sadness.

Something here ain't right; something's out of whack. And by that I mean, I don't see any real evidence of this caring, this universal desire to get to know and understand each other, out there on the streets. I mean that, although we're told that we should strive to understand the thinking of those who have openly declared their continual yearning to behead us all, we still suffer mental anguish while debating whether we should address a stranger in an elevator.

"Where is the knowledge that is lost in information? Where is the wisdom that is lost in knowledge?" T. S. Eliot asked that. Of course—each trapped within their own peculiar and particular wealth of knowledge—the kids all ask, "Who is T. S. Eliot?" And how do you even begin to fight a thing like that? Meanwhile, if there is a rap artist out there named Wuz-Is, I don't know anything about him, and I honestly feel that I can lead a full and happy life without that knowledge. I assume Wuz-Is is doing OK without knowing anything at all about me. So, as far as *that* goes, mutually assured ignorance is bliss.

I feel I have to kick that dead horse just one more time.

My wife and I were out walking the dog, a term which means letting him off leash in the park with the hope that we might catch him again sometime later and hold him long enough to leash him up and drag him, unwillingly, homeward. About 10 minutes after he'd disappeared I managed to track him down, far from the designated dog run area, prancing around in amongst the ivy, at the bottom of a steep ravine. I was doing what I could to coax him out of there—which meant doing everything I could *not to drive him further away*—when a gaunt, bearded guy of about my age (old but not frighteningly so), with binoculars and dressed like some kind of a cartoon bwana in khaki from head to toe, came swiftly up the path shouting, “Get that dog out of there!” If he'd have been waving a riding crop it couldn't have been better.

“Get that dog out of there!” he commanded. He was saying this with such unquestionable authority that I almost didn't laugh. Somehow, I'd stumbled into a New Yorker cartoon.

I'm always amazed at how many strangers assume they have authority over me; I'm even more amazed at anybody dumb enough to assume I have any authority whatsoever over my wife's dog.

“This is no place for dogs!” he said sternly. And he said that with such ascendancy that I nearly didn't laugh a second time.

“I'm trying to watch a Hermit Thrush!” he said snappishly. I was practically in tears. My god, W. C. Fields could have learned a thing or two from this guy.  
Hermit Thrush!

Now there were tears in my eyes.

I didn't have the chart with me at the moment, so I couldn't pull it out and unfold it and point out the part where it says that a guy trying to coax his wife's dog out of the ivy supersedes the needs of anyone trying to watch a Hermit Thrush, but I'm sure that if I had, he would have simply reached into one of the many pockets that he had on his many-pocketed light tan poplin vest and pulled out his own chart and, with trembling umbrage, read aloud the part which said, "There is no act or action more vital than watching a Hermit Thrush, and especially that vile and senseless effrontery known as dog walking."

So, there you have it in a nutshell. (I'm kind of assuming you would want it that way.) We each have our priorities. We each assume others can see the undeniable value in ours. Some of us assume that, once they see things more clearly, others will dump their own stupidly held ideas, take up, at last, the banner of truth, and begin marching in lock step with us—though just slightly behind perhaps—toward a better, more reasonable world.

With that in mind, this is the way things should have played out, if they had only worked out to my new-found friend's liking.

My wife arrives to find me hunkering down in the bushes. "What are you doing hiding in that shrubbery?" she asks. "Shhhhhhhh...." I say, placing a finger upon my lips. "Did you find the dog?" she asks. "Shhh... please..." I whisper. "Yes, I found the dog."

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She whispers back, “Well, I don’t see him; where is he?”

“I ran him off.”

“You... ran him off?”

“Of course...”

“But...”

“Shhh... please.”

“But...”

“Look,” I say. “Up there. It’s a Hermit Thrush.”

Someday soon, all of this will be settled. We’ll be told the relative value of watching Hermit Thrushes and coaxing dogs out of the ivy, in much the same way as today we’re told what a disastrous decision Brianna has made by choosing that new hairstyle... whoever Brianna is.

## THE DIATRIBE

Suddenly we find ourselves in a world in which every person under the age of (my guess) 47 feels compelled to broadcast by one means or another (or, when desperate, by any means possible) every single thought that goes through their minds from the moment they wake up in the morning until the time they fall asleep exhausted, late late at night, with calloused twitching thumbs. In this world, the fine thoughts, discoveries, insights and minute-by-minute challenges these young people must face are all apparently (I've been informed) *followed* by thousands, tens of thousands or even hundreds of thousands of close personal *friends*. These friends are then, in turn, each driven by an undeniable desire to respond and claim a little attention of their own in the ever-emerging, ever-growing, ever-new, ever-old, never-ending din.

A note of concern:

These poor kids are living out their lives at such a frantic pace that they may actually lap us before our run here has come to an end.

It is a contrived world in which we now find ourselves living, in large part invented controlled and dictated to us by 23-year-olds. It is a world at once encouraged and (I must guess, necessarily) supported by people who, older, should be wiser and indifferent to such nonsense, but who instead feel compelled (I do not know by what) to catch up, join in and take their place in the relentless idiotic onslaught, instead of trying to inject reasonable restraint into the melee. Witness, for one example, any (formerly

respectable) TV news station which now encourages its viewers to *tweet* to them and, when they do, runs the mindless influx on a scroll along the bottom of the screen just as though it might mean something. (I am not here implying that it doesn't, I'm stating it directly.)

Apparently the kids can't be stopped. *Twitter* was built upon, and continues to grow "on the simple concept of ...What are you doing—right now? What are your friends doing—right now?"

Right now? Why 'right now'? There's something—not desperate (because it's beyond that), not trivial (because it's less meaningful than triviality), not even childish (because it's not that complicated)—but spooky about the desire to reach out and tell everybody (anybody for that matter) what you are doing *right now*. Right now I'm typing. Right now, I've paused to think. I have no idea why this bothers me so much, right now. Right now I'm still thinking. Right now I'm wondering why ANYONE would care to track what I'm doing right now. (It's a little weird that anyone should even pretend to care.) I certainly don't give a good goddamn (as my granddad used to say) what others are doing right now. It's none of my business. Do whatever the hell you want right now, leave me out of it...right now.

In fact, leave me out of it later too.

Most of the kids right now are probably wishing that others would shut up about what they are doing right now so that they could say what they are up to right now. And that growing desire has not gone unnoticed...thus the restriction



on how many characters you may use for each tweet. It's a way of saying, "There's an awful lot of stuff that needs to be said right now, and we want to make sure it all gets said, right now." Nobody asks, 'But...why?' Why do I have the urge to tell you that I just listened to Champion Jack Dupree sing Junker Blues? I didn't, but how are you to know that? And, more importantly perhaps—if importance can be shaved in such fine increments—what difference does it make? I love that song, but what difference should that make to you or anyone else? Why would I assume it means anything at all to anyone? I do not know. Worse yet, I do not care.

If this news - that I don't care - hurts, I don't care about that either.

I have no idea why I feel that the second-by-second narration of one's life is an indicator of something much bigger and more frightening than we can see at such close proximity... but I do. Though I cannot see what lies ahead, I hear an ominous rumble, and it's building. The kids are being (joyfully, eagerly) swept away by a technological tsunami and we have no idea what the destructive force of the thing is or what kind of devastation it will leave behind... but...as long as they're occupied. From here, it all seems harmless of course. It's harmless; it's fun. It doesn't really matter that an entire culture and its history is being scrapped in exchange for the right to chatter incessantly via keypads and webcams, while gutting the dignity of a language. We were brought up under the heavy stricture: *If you've got nothing good to say, don't say anything at all.* Those days are gone of course, and these

days every new technological development seems designed to encourage everyone to keep up a continuous chatter, whether we have anything to say or not. Certainly, if you've got nothin' good to say, the internet would be an excellent place to say it.

I think—right now it occurs to me—that we have not yet learned our lesson here: that you can create the most killer app in the world, and sell it to everybody on earth, and it won't grow a single blade of wheat, or add one shingle to a roof or sole a shoe, or help you to appreciate more deeply someone you hold warmly in your arms. It might put a Lamborghini in the garage of the app designer however. Just to make myself look even more foolish, more reprehensible, more reptilian, let me say this: it's spooky.

What we don't know, and cannot see coming, because of all this input-input-input-input, is spooky. It's spooky in part because, as Bob Dylan warned a very long time ago, "Meanwhile, outside, life goes on all around you." It is spooky in part because, as said, the increasingly rapid onslaught of input is not an improvement on life, and all the twittering in the world won't get you any closer to those things that really count. The fear is that it can only separate us from them, distracting us from the best, the beautiful, and the most important things in this world. It is this life all around us with which we must contend if we are to find any happiness. But...I'm not sure I can get any closer to it than that. I don't know why this disturbs me so. More frightening is the fact that so many people are so comfortable with it.

Focusing on whether you may have selected the wrong fingernail polish, and attempting to wrangle thousands of your social network friends in on the debate is certainly a small crime, but a crime nonetheless. It may be (only) a crime of omission but maybe it is the ultimate crime of omission, because the thing you've forgotten (or set aside or overlooked) is Life itself. (As any self-help charlatan-quack might tell you.)

On television the other day I saw a young man dismiss the Constitution of the United States of America by saying, "It was written by people who lived most of their lives in the real world." He said it with a sneer. There's a frightening differentiation for you. The statement was delivered in a casual tone that implied that *the real world*—you know the one in which we laugh and cry and look into each other's eyes—is an inferior sort of reality. Worse still is the underlying belief that some other world (the web, for only one example) *is* a form of reality. If I'm the only one struggling with that, perhaps it's for the best. And perhaps it's best forgotten, or forgiven. Let's move on.

Where these worlds collide there are real-time consequences and real-life dangers. Count the drivers that are speaking on cell phones as they turn the corner awkwardly in front of you using only one hand, and you realize the epidemic proportions of the problem. Witness only one person so goddamned stupid that they have their head down, texting, while they speed along the freeway, and you gain a sense of the seriousness of this addiction. For that, I've written a little song.

Henry Edward Fool

I got off the coffee  
And I got off the beer  
I got off of many things  
I once held quite dear  
So, when it comes to quittin' things  
There ain't no better quitter  
I got off the Facebook, man  
But I can't get off the Twitter

I got off the racetrack  
Just drop those ponies cold  
I got off pornography  
My stash has all been sold  
When it comes to breakin' chains  
I'm seldom ever bitter  
I got off of the YouTube, dude  
But I can't get off the Twitter

I got off the cigarettes  
And I got off the weed  
I just turned my back on 'em  
And never felt the need  
I got off the whiskey  
Dropped it without a jitter  
I'm thinkin' bout droppin' email too  
But I can't get off the Twitter

I got off the cell-phone  
And I got off TV  
Quite frankly, son, neither one  
Ever meant that much to me  
I got off the rare roast beef  
And I'm feelin' so much fitter  
I got off the Google search

But I can't get off the Twitter

I got me off of all that stuff  
But I can't get off the Twitter  
I can drop damn near anything  
But I just can't quit the Twitter

This much I think we can agree on: for anything to have value it needs to exist for us, if not in a physical sense, at least for a moment in time; it needs longevity. For anything to have real value you need to have it in your life for a while. That's why people leave a theatre discussing the show—to keep it in their lives after the curtain drops...to assure themselves that what they just witnessed wasn't a complete waste of their time. If a thing is of value our tendency is to want to fix it in some form. This applies perhaps especially to words. That's why our place is strewn with little bits of paper: napkins, matchbooks, envelopes, post-its, each with the cleverest insight ever ascribed to the human mind scribbled illegibly upon it. But, the value of *things-said* in that *other world*, our friend, the internet, become increasingly worth less as second by second a thousand new, fleeting, flighty thoughts drive out what happened only seconds earlier. (I am tempted to put in an argument for books here, but won't.) Welcome to the Internet, an alternative world in which millions of people chatter endlessly in every form and format, and where everything lives on forever, but lasts only a millisecond. Is there anything of value out there? Who could possibly know? But, I'm sure you're as bored with this as I am at this point.

Henry Edward Fool

Wow, that coffee was strong.

## WE ADVANCE EVER ONWARD WITH OUR HEADS SCREWED ON BACKWARDS

I feel compelled to say that when I was the age of the kids who now run the world, the old folks were in control and they made that clear in every possible way. For example, I recall one time when 250,000 of us (35,000 by official accounts) made an attempt to shut down Washington DC. What most of us wanted to do was to send an unequivocal message to the President of the United States that our opinion counted for something, and that, in our opinion, the United States of America was conducting a vicious, stupid, unproductive and immoral war over there in Viet Nam. In our innocence we thought that The President might want to hear what 250,000, or even 35,000, of us citizens thought.

But, instead of coming out and listening to our grievance, he sent the lowest underling he could find outside with a microphone to tell us to shut up and go back to wherever we had come from, or be arrested. In essence his message to us was that our opinion did not count. Without further warning police came at us in hordes on pale blue Vespas, rounded us up like cattle, and threw every goddamned last one of us into Robert F. Kennedy Stadium, which made an excellent make-shift prison for anyone whose opinion bore no weight whatsoever but rankled nonetheless. From among the 35,000 who were there on that day by official accounts, more than 78,000 of us were arrested.

For additional proof of who was in control, we need look no further than Lawrence Welk or Lucille Ball. Their continued presence in our lives sent the clear, pie-in-the-

face, kick-in-the-ass, message that our opinions, our ideas, our desires meant nothing. Though we were the largest segment of the population (and I believe we still are) what our generation might have liked to see on TV did not matter; the old folks were in control, and, like it or not, where there should have been Iron Butterfly (or at the very least Peter, Paul and Mary), there was Lawrence Welk; where there should have been Firesign Theatre, there was I Love Lucy. Game, set, match, Old Folks!

At the time I can remember thinking that this was unfair; I thought that our opinion on these matters should be heard, should maybe even be considered. But we had no say, not even when it came to the wars in which we were active, sometimes forced, participants. We could protest all we wanted, it would change nothing. In those days, protests against the Vietnam War were ignored, when they weren't labeled treason. Now that we've evolved, 200 kids with nose rings pitch a few tents outside some bank building and their concerns are handled by the press in the same way a mother responds to her newborn baby's cry. These kids are the best America has ever offered, doing what citizens have the right, the duty, the noble obligation to do: live like pigs, make stupid decisions about utterly senseless matters by weirdly orchestrated consensus, and fornicate in tents. This is NOT all sour grapes, I assure...well, maybe some.

Now, of course, by some strange twist, kids rule the world and our opinion still, or perhaps once again (you choose) means nothing, and once again, there is nothing we can do about it. Nothing. These days it's Aqua Teen Hunger Force



and Saw XII whether we like it or not. And though I like Seth Green and I like Green Day and I'm pleased to see "green ideals" taking root a thousand years after we were all declared idiots for sowing those same silly seeds, I still think we're heading in a wrong direction. Texting and blogging and chat and IM-ing and social networking sites and cell phones soon to be (as I predicted many years ago) surgically implanted, only create *a pretend community*.

A pretend caring

A pretend culture

A pretend advancement of civilization.

And depraved, self-centered, indifference.

As for social network *friends*, let me follow Voltaire's line of thought and say that politicians have their fellow statesmen, their underlings and their constituency, but none of them have friends; charlatans have their accomplices, but have no real friends, salesmen have their associates and suppliers and marketers, but no friends; celebrities have their handlers and their agents and their fans, but no friends; in the social media you, as intriguing as you may be, may have your followers, but you might ask yourself if you have any real friends among them.

Worse than the self-delusion of it all is the undeniable fact that many of the people—whatever they may call themselves—who wish to drag cyber-reality into the real world wish to do so for unacceptable reasons; some are merely scam artists, some are dangerous human beings. Either way, we don't really need more and swifter vehicles for the delivery of that kind of stuff.

When I was a young school boy the admonition was: “Concentrate on one thing at a time, finish what you’re doing, then move on to the next thing.” These days, beyond multi-tasking, there is the ever-increasing input of random information. It’s no longer enough to watch a tennis match, NOW (...now...) you can divide your TV into six screens (eight, I’m now told. By the time this sees print 12.) and watch 6 (8 or 12) different tennis matches at once. This is a tremendous breakthrough and, despite what Nils Bohr might have said on the subject,<sup>1</sup> kids now have the ability to simultaneously hold, if not contradictory, at least strangely associated views on a wide variety of disparate matters. The proof is found, well... everywhere. And now you can do it all in the palm of your hand or a 2 ½ inch screen. Porta-culture.

But where does that lead us? Because it’s not the size of the screen that matters, it’s what’s on it.

I detect, for example, some confusion in a world in which kids see beheading their pixelated enemy as the very height of video game entertainment, yet are expected to display shock (real or otherwise) when they hear of actual beheadings in some distant land which looks surprisingly like the video game landscape they play in.

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<sup>1</sup> Apparently, Bohr, having difficulty thinking of his recently incarcerated son as the good kid he knew and raised and the criminal that he was, determined that the human mind can only hold a single thought at a time. According to Bohr, you can shave thoughts pretty fine and exchange them fairly rapidly, but basically, it’s one thought at a time for us humans. Hobbes said as much many years earlier. “When a man thinks on anything whatsoever, his next thought after is not altogether so casual as it seems to be.”

Fool that I am, I find it equally difficult to understand how a television network with ‘diverse cultural programming’ can run a program urging us to look into our jaded hearts and make every saintly effort necessary *to understand the culture* of our (somewhat boisterous, ever sullen) self-declared enemies, and follow that program directly with a segment ‘celebrating’ our misunderstood gay, lesbian, and trans-gender pre-pubescent youth. To put these things together with equal *acceptance* requires a strange kind of genius, a flexibility of thought, that I do not now possess, and have no *hope* (take that in the most damning way) of attaining. Does that network not recognize that these people whose culture we should strive so diligently to understand would, given the chance, slit the throats of every single last one of our poor misunderstood gay, lesbian, and trans-gender youths? (Or, at least that’s what our very dear misunderstood enemies themselves continually claim.) I would find it easier to understand a program on how young orphaned ducklings survive in the urban landscape followed by a piece on the joys of drunk driving. And, old foggy that I am, I’d prefer to watch those shows one after the other, rather than both at once on split screen.

I had better confess here, and quickly, that although I’m working on it—I truly am—I can’t seem to get myself in the position where I can embrace those who, given the chance, would slit all of our throats. I would of course study their culture and give it some thought and try to understand them, if I thought for one second they were willing to study our culture or try to understand us, or give us a single thought that didn’t shield a barely contained urge to slit all our throats. Still, I beg for the same saintly

effort in your attempts to understand me that you might give in your attempts to understanding those who chant Death to America...though, from experience, I dare not expect it.

The news is not all bad, of course. In our previous, slow-moving, dark, dank, dismal, one-thing-at-a-time, face-to-face, relatively chatter-free world we could not discover whether or not shingles was contagious without first making an appointment with a real doctor... in the real world. We certainly couldn't call up a video of Sue Thompson singing 'Norman' so sweetly, so charmingly, on Hullabaloo in 1963, while gawky girls in plaid, woolen, knee-length skirts alternately did the frug and hully-gully behind her. Nor could we switch instantly to something more dignified, say Rostropovich playing Bach in the Basilique Sainte Madeleine in Vézelay, when the wife looks in to see what we're up to. Now, THAT's progress. It's certainly worth scrapping an entire society for, and that's what we seem to be doing...and with some real urgency. Disregard for the past seems to me to be a dangerous foundation upon which to build a culture. That's my opinion. It's destined to go unheard... at least in this pitifully anachronistic format...

Recently, I gnawed on that for quite a while. I may have even broken a few teeth on it ('though these days the old teeth shatter fairly easily without any recognizable cause), until I realized that the problem is not whether or not our opinions are heard, but that we cling with sharpened claws to the erroneous idea that, heard or unheard, our opinions

matter. Quickly now, what was your grandfather's opinion on anything? What were that good man's expectations?

Buddha seemed to suggest that the only problem with expectation was the disappointment that was bound to follow. So, shouting, "*I* think this..." or, "*I* think that..." into the black hole that is the Internet (for me at least) is time that could be better spent alone, on my boney knees in a cobblestone alley, somewhere in a wholly despicable part of town, late at night, tearing what little there is left of my hair out and wailing, "Where the hell is this all headed?" I guess that's the question. That, and "Does any of it really mean anything?" To be honest, I cannot say whether I fear the answer to that question or welcome it.

Whether it means anything or not is a matter of opinion and, perhaps, a matter of perspective. Those of you who feel that your opinions count (mean something in the scheme of things) must know a comfort I will never experience.

This idea—that a person's opinions *should* matter—is a nice, somewhat naive idea or course. I like it. I wish it were so. But, it is at once a little bit of a problem. It is a little bit of a problem because that concept is the root of manifold additional, actual, real-world societal problems. This is especially true when it comes to what should be *thoughtful matters*, but which, in this world, are too often reduced to *shouting matters*; Politics, Religion, Race, that sort of thing. That's my opinion. I realize it doesn't amount to a hill of beans...a thought which seems to separate me out

Henry Edward Fool

from much of the rest of the shuffling, snorting, derisive self-possessed herd.

For the kids, there is not enough time in the day to declare all the things they feel the gnawing, aching need to express. For me, express it or not, I realize at last that my poor opinion serves no real (by that I mean, productive) purpose. Unfortunately, there is no freedom in that realization. To have an opinion and believe it to be of value (whether it be or not) is superior to having an opinion and recognizing its damnable uselessness. Believe me, I know.

I tell you all of this for a reason of course, and the reason will become clear (or not) in time. It hardly matters.

## THE OLD SWITCHEROO

It hardly matters at what point the cart got before the horse, or how it happened, there is no doubt that it is there now, and pulling us steadily forward, whether we wish to go or not. If we trace the trajectory of this trend it can only find us—as we all must now recognize, and much sooner than either imagined or imaginable—dwelling in a world of breast-feeding babies, all texting as they suckle, AND, of course, a rapidly expanding babe-in-arms social network, with each chomping at the bit (as it were), anxious to input their own goo-goo and poo-poo thoughts. The foundation for that is already firmly in place, with technology expanding exponentially and a growing populace increasingly less informed about anything that didn't happen to them personally—or at very least to one of their 186,000 social network friends—in the last 2 or 3 hours.

The kids 're not just self-centered; enthralled by the reemergence of barbarism, they're delighted by their own childish cleverness. For reasons indeterminate the 23-year-olds who now run the world have not yet abandoned their fascination with words like 'puke', 'fart', and 'poop', implanting them frequently in every form of media available. They also seem to have a true fondness for the word 'masturbate', using it unblinkingly, as if it might be a challenge, and on occasion even spelling it correctly. BUT, on the other hand, they refuse to turn their brave backs on tradition, clinging to our long-standing American fixation with bare female breasts. Much to their credit, they have somehow wrangled our (their) females into sharing that giddy interest, convincing them that only breasts of the

most exaggerated sort mark females worthy of attention. In response, the women, always more honorable than men, have taken that suggestion further in reality than previously imaginable anywhere other than in cartoons. I'm being unjust of course—the kids *have also*, through the miracle of orchestrated thought and the wonders of near-legislated multi-cultural education--diversity training drills and rote regimented acceptance—taken the first step toward universal brotherhood by embracing their *brothas* from the 'hood (*amongst othas*) by adding words like 'ho' and 'bitch' to their, every-day vocabulary, and with admirable commitment, beotch.

Misogyny aside for a moment (just toss it over there with the Stupidity) the problem here is not so much the words themselves and not the fact that whole herds of wandering young idiots enjoy role-playing, living out their pseudo-defiant lives pretending to be drug dealers, pimps and *gangstas*, it's that too many intelligent kids actually believe themselves to be punks or revolutionaries or cyber-criminals, at any rate cultural separatists of one sort or another. Nonetheless, calling every person, male or female, *bitch* instead of *dude* can only be seen as a step in the right direction. Cradling your scrotum while you amble down the boulevard glaring at the world through hooded sullen eyes is, these days, taken as a sign that, in the future, it will be a better and more accepting world. I believe that tattoos and piercings served that same purpose in the preceding generation. For us, it was long hair.

It's funny how rarely things change; in the world from which I come actions designed solely to attract attention to



yourself, while simultaneously proclaiming your utter disdain for the rest of humanity, were looked at as signs of some kind of goddamned idiocy. And - I find it difficult to turn loose of that cherished view.

In the world from which I come, even as kids, we tried to *avoid* looking like idiots (although photographic evidence has proven somewhat difficult to unearth.) Still, I'm fairly convinced that if I had walked down the street coddling my balls back then, it would have been taken differently. The crowd would not have simply yawned and moved on. The flickering thought, 'Just another kid coddling his balls' had not yet, in those days, been invented. Even today, for me to do that, despite the increasing necessity for such support, would probably be somewhat misunderstood.

Ah, but it's a changing world and, admittedly, I'm not adjusting to it very well. These days I find it too easy to be critical of things which are stupid, ridiculous and just plain goddamned wrong. Additionally, many/most people I speak to find it easier to detect the flaws in my thinking than to look truthfully at the world around us, and at their own kid's truly weird behavior. "Unacceptable" has become a forgotten word among parents, and now I'm told it may be illegal to use such terms in the presence of a child in California, for fear it might bruise their self-esteem. In San Francisco, where I sit and watch my life slowly ebb away, there are laws against hurting another person's feelings, unless that other person is the Great Oppressor of course, a reasonably self-reliant, white, hetero-sexual, married male.

Let me confess here quickly (though not quickly enough probably) that this is all a little confusing for me, because whenever I meet one of today's kids face to face, one-on-one, they almost always seem nice. They are good natured, strangely respectful, as clear thinking as might be expected, and it leaves me with greater hope for the future...despite the disturbing trend which no one who cares could or should (I think) ignore. I speak of that whole graphic-violence-equals-entertainment thang...and I don't want to mention the sudden societal indifference to pornography lest I look like either a hypocrite (which I am, but can't admit to here) or a prude (which I am not.)

If you go to any website which allows comments—and that is almost prerequisite to website survival these days—amongst the serious discussion, whatever the matter might be, are comments in weird vulgar vernacular, non-sequiturs from who knows what vicious, stupid, post-cultural reality. Those which aren't proudly spewing vitriol are gushing with the kind of childish pith that embarrasses our entire (for lack of any better word) society. Memorable among them for me (I cannot say why) is this exchange: “Lax, nigah. LOL.”, and the response: “4Q beotch! NOT LOL” (These things stay with me, like the nagging memory of something I've stepped in, lingering long after the grievous task of removing every trace of the foul stuff from the creases of my sole.) In a discussion about a female cellist's bowing technique someone somewhere feels the urge to write, “She shoulda had bigger tits!” and finds a kindred spirit: “Yeh! I could hit that! Do she ded.”

“Do she ded.” I like that.

The most elevated translation which might retain the integrity of the statement—"I agree. I'd love to bed her, except for the fact that she's been dead for many years."—doesn't improve the thought much.

Among the comments under a video of Tammy Wynette singing "Stand By Your Man" some genius has written, "Tampax Wynette!" Welcome to the depth, if not the breadth, of our brave new world. (Do she ded 2, beotch.)

Yes, I realize that it's unfair and small-minded of me to mock rather than embrace the nu illiteracy.

OMG, I am such a dork.

## SELF-ESTEEM and its role in the ME-NIVERSE

Just to beat that dead horse once more, and once more on the dusty old personal front:

I once made the mistake of adding a comment to an online discussion during the last U. S. presidential race. I said something like, “Perhaps you should listen more carefully to what McCain has said about this; it’s not very different from what Obama has said.” In response, I became the center of the discussion and, more than immediately, the target for a dozen attacks. Taking the opportunity to teach acceptance and tolerance by example, my new open-minded, multi-cultural, diversified cyber friends called me a puppet, an asshole, a moron, a stupid bastard, a mindless zombie for the Republican regime... none of which I am. (Well, maybe a moron, but anyone who fires enough shots into the dark has the chance of hitting something.) These attacks went far beyond *questioning the motives of those who disagree with you* (which is small-minded enough). Believe me, these kids put the ‘mean’ in the ME-niverse.

All of this viciousness was launched because I suggested there was not a great deal of difference between the two candidates on *one particular issue*. I had the gall to suggest that someone might listen to what was actually being said instead of remaining dug-in, firmly entrenched, deadened, enshrouded, blindfolded, shackled to thoughtless, mindless ideology and deaf to indifferent reason. It was a lovely experience from which I learned not a lot, but enough. In the cyber-world such attacks are for the most part ignored, but can hardly be, and probably shouldn’t be (for

the sake of whatever we may have left), but (after all) must be ignored because, what are you gonna do about it? If that sounds like a challenge, it is, but the real challenge may still be hidden behind the internet's back.

Just as an aside, I am basically apolitical, and with no dog whatsoever in that presidential fight, I had, up until that point, amused myself by observing the process with the casual, superior, all-knowing eye of relatively smug detachment. (Have some wine.)

Still, it causes one to wonder just exactly what kind of a world is being shoved down our waddled old throats by the insensible, run-away juggernaut of open-ended, ever-changing I-think technology. I mean only this: if someone is some kind of a goddamned idiot, mind ablaze with psychopathic or socio-pathic thoughts, I don't need to know about it and I don't *want* to know about it. Nonetheless, it's difficult, if not impossible, to avoid on the net. For me, it is a peculiar world in which, embedded in a discussion of fore 'n' aft rigging someone has the urge to insert the Finnish words for duck shit, but that's my problem. Even more peculiar, from my narrow point of view, is the fact that the commenter should find someone of similar thinking out there who responds approvingly, at length, in Italian, and they are joined by a third who posts a photograph of the stuff. 'WTF?' as the kids say.

As my very dear wife says, "There are whole worlds out there of which we know nothing."

(And, of which I dearly wish to remain knowing nothing.)

Whether these comments come from people who are; young, foolish, drunken, stupid, on drugs, all of that, or just your average, abnormal, everyday evolutionary embarrassment, it hardly matters. I'd rather live my life without being exposed to them. I'm sure they'd feel more comfort being surrounded with idiots of their own ilk, rather than being judged by reasonably-educated, basically civilized, somewhat less-than-self-centered, somewhat more staid, bitter old balding bastards like me.

Still, there is enough Internet to go around...and around, and around again.

Given the technology as it is, I'm absolutely sure that there is a website somewhere (or two or three or more) where the cup size of great dead female cellists is openly and eagerly discussed in childish terms—let them go there. (They might meet Robin Williams.)<sup>2</sup> Also, there must be at least one site dedicated to contriving clever takes on the names of country-and-western greats (Conway Twitty comes to mind for some reason). And, my guess is that there are thousands of sites (perhaps millions) where those who absolutely refuse to either listen without prejudice or think for themselves can nestle up snugly with their political compatriots in a vicious snapping defensive little circle and

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<sup>2</sup> I once attended an Opera fundraiser in San Francisco where Robin Williams spoke about how excited he was that his wife was pregnant again, because that meant “BIG TITTIES!” Very soon, he gushed, “big titties” would return. He went on to declare, again, childishly/shamelessly/unnecessarily, how much he loved “big titties”. The crowd simply loved it. The man's an idiot.

pat each other on the back while tracing every discontent in their lives back to either George Bush or racism. (Others seem to be able to trace every problem on earth all the way back to Jimmy Carter.) But, I'll take no side in that matter. I CAN'T take a side in that matter because, in the most fundamental sense, I'm no better than the rest of them. I trace my discontent back to my own laziness as a youth and my feckless devotion to occasional, internally confined, admittedly-baseless bouts of self-aggrandizement, and can't do much about it.

#### A NOTE:

All that I've said so far is really *the compassionate view*; it's not that I like what I see happening around us, but I truly understand first-hand the desire to be heard... as well as the gnawing regret that I'm not. Like those I criticize, I wish fervently to have my say, and hope, as fervently as anyone, that someone out there will hear my pitiful cry. That will be remedied of course in time, when the internet strikes its friendly colors.

## My unreasonable fear of SUBJECTIVE REALITY

The kids all have this thing going called Subjective Reality. They're being seduced—wittingly or unwittingly—into subscribing to it, believing in it, hoping for it, and living their lives as though it may actually exist. Subjective Reality is the foundation for many of our current movies and video games and based on the idea that thinking makes it so. It is the thing that allows some and encourages others, to live outside the law, without the rules, courtesy and consideration for others that the rest of us (voluntarily) live under. It's also silly and childish and has very little to do with the actual shared reality we all work within, and, it's dangerous. It's especially dangerous when a young man with a gun tries to drag all the training and skills he acquired in video game reality into this one, with the hope of scoring big points by killing as many real people as he can. These real people live real lives in this real world and are both really innocent and really shocked that any kid raised thinking that mayhem is fun should ever attempt to have a little real fun by creating real mayhem.

Of course, if you raise your little boys on television, movies, and video games, teaching them that violence and mayhem is entertainment, a few of them are bound to get the wrong idea and may grow up thinking that violence and mayhem is entertaining. And if your little girls are continually taught, by those same delivery systems, that the greatest contribution they can make to our world is their body, then some of them might somehow get the strange idea that their body is the greatest thing they have to offer in this world.



That's what we've done of course. That any of these kids grow up capable of thinking a civilized thought is a tremendous testament to the independent nature of the human spirit. But, I think the kids are scared. They've submerged themselves in non-reality because they can't face what they can't ignore. And, unfortunately, the only ones who seem insensitive to the signs of an entire generation's *fears* are their parents and the teachers. The rest of us, from our greater distance, can't help but notice them killing each other in schoolyard cleansings, and hanging themselves, and stepping out in front of trains. Their addictive fascination with violent fantasy worlds—as if the world we live in isn't violent enough—is preparation for what they see as an increasingly violent world. When this other reality training spills over into what us idiots continue to refer to as the real world, everyone all around is all surprise. Nothing these kids has done has raised any flags of concern.

Denying the rapid, massive, exponential escalation of cruel and meaningless violence doesn't seem to be helping things. I know that the world has never been at peace or that atrocities of every unimaginable sort are not, at this very moment being perpetrated in distant lands, but I'm saying that, for a very brief while there, we had separated ourselves a bit from that. Alas, it must have been too much to expect and these days many people seem to want blood. You don't have to look very long or very far to discover statistics that will prove that teenage suicides have actually steadily decreased since 1950, and so, I suppose that means things are just fine. The experts who say just the opposite however express concern. But whatever your opinion on

the matter and whatever it may be built upon, unless you are in the field doing something about it, it's all wasted breath and there's no need to either express your view or get upset with those who may question it. In fact, one of the benefits of not expressing your view is that you avoid unnecessary confrontation with people who feel the urge to express theirs.

We're no better. For some reason which I cannot understand our generation has taken to Facebook like desert ducks to a pond in an oasis. The first time I opened up FB I discover my friend Ron in a heated online argument with some chick he has never met about *tattoos*. I interrupted to say "Ron, what are you doing? How did you manage to find yourself in an online argument with some chick you never met, about tattoos? What kind of a world are we living in?" I could not have been either more surprised or more delighted, but the question remains, What kind of a world is this and how does it fit in the real world?

My belief, though I struggle to explain why, is that this concept of subjective reality is dangerous on every front. It unchains the brutal side of anonymity of course, but there's more to it than that. To some degree being awakened to the viciousness of others puts something into play that the rest of us are probably better off not knowing about...and not just because there's nothing we can do about it. It goes beyond disturbing our blissful ignorance. As said, I have difficulty explaining my discomfort with the proliferation of subjective realities. I know this much: I don't like it.

## SELF-E-VALUATION

We all want to feel that our lives are worth something; that we might have something to share; that someone somewhere might be listening to our needs with a sympathetic ear. I don't fault anyone for having that desire, but I find it unfortunate that, for so many of us these days, it seems to be the sole, overwhelming, driving force in our lives. I heard that some kid in Jersey stopped texting for almost seven minutes, and by the time they got to him, he was very near death.

Please now let's move away entirely from all things digital toward more general, non-IT things (things therefore a lot less irritating) and view the matter at a greater distance, in the real world, beyond reach, where there is no signal. To accomplish that, we have to go way back to 1998.

Del Mar, CA 1998

Of course, not having been raised the sole male child of an aging beach-bleached blonde divorcee in Southern California—and therefore having no direct knowledge of what it is like to be the very center of the universe and proper recipient of all the admiration 'n it—I can hardly be expected to relate to all the Adams, Justins and Jasons in the world, but I understand something about them nonetheless. Oh, and here's good news, I've been informed that some of them, while skidding toward their 40<sup>th</sup> birthday with the brakes firmly locked, are considering leaving home for the first time. Mommy will be broken-hearted to see you leave, of course, but the world at large will be falling all over themselves to welcome you.

When someone asks me how I'm doing, I may say, 'Fine, thanks for asking,' and, thinking I'm done with it, turn and walk away; end of transaction. But that doesn't mean I'm critical of the kid behind the café counter who, when asked that same question, feels compelled to gush out every detail of every occurrence in his life since his twelfth birthday (curiously that was about the time Daddy left to live in Malibu with Kimberly who, obligingly, pumped out two little ones each more precious than our coffee server could ever be, except in the eyes of Mommy). I feel sorry for that poor neglected kid of course, but take comfort in knowing that his blog must really sizzle.

I have never had any pressing desire to tell any poor listener everything that has ever happened to me—in fact have felt it a kindness not to—but that's not the point. The point is that I recognize it as unreasonable to expect that anyone *would want to hear it*. This, I think, is what separates the generations (for the moment). 3

So, I was temporarily confused one evening as I leaned on the railing of the beach-front motel where I once worked and a surfer in the parking lot opposite shouted at me, "Dude! Did you see where I put my car keys?"

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3 I've developed the ability to look almost anyone in the eye and, without either blinking or emitting nervous laughter, contend that my writing is not about me but about the people whose paths I have crossed. I can see how some might see it differently. But, the somewhat lofty accusation that I tell these tales only from my point of view continues to throw me. And, I find such stuff a bit strange coming from anyone who carries a cell phone and twitters.

After I told him that I hadn't, he snarled sarcastically, 'Oh that's right, YOU weren't paying attention!'

I found it a little perplexing that he *had* paid attention to the fact that I *had not* paid attention *to him*. Apparently he'd noticed that I hadn't noticed when he had, like a god, arrived, parked, emerged from the car that his mother had bought him, shrugged on his wetsuit, and hid his keys. Doting attention was what this godlike creature had been raised to expect, and those who didn't give it to him stood out in his mind as having neglected their unspoken, but no less sacred, duty. Now we have an entire generation (or two) who seem to confuse their neediness with entitlement, their arrogance with charm, their every thought, with brilliance. They also confuse their shared whining with community. If you type 'I have a hangnail!' on any one of the various *social networking* sites, you can expect back an immediate, "Oh, you poor kid!!! I had one, one time, and it was just awful!" This parking lot event concerning car keys took place in the halcyon days before social networking, but the expectations were the same.

Ideally, the scene should have gone like this:

"Old Dude! Hey, Old Dude! Did you see where I hid my car keys?"

"Yes, Magnificence, you placed 'em under your right rear tire! Allow me the honor of retrieving them for you."

Then, I'd have jumped over the wall that separated us, rushed to the scene, recovered the keys and, while bowing, offered them to him with trembling hand, my heart filled with warmth knowing that I had been of service to a younger, better-looking and happier, BMW-driving being.

But, no, I hadn't paid enough attention to this young Adonis when he arrived in that shiny new mechanical replacement for an absent daddy's love. I was wasting my thoughts on other things while he shrugged on his wet-suit, hid his car keys, and went dashing off in perfect form to the beach, surfboard tucked under one bulging tattooed arm. So, naturally, as any superior being would, he carried this wound within his breast, like a searing bolt, while floating about out there upon the waves, amid the plankton, under a golden sky. *I can't get over how that old dude leaning on the rail of the motel was so self-absorbed that he didn't even look up to envy me.* It was just impossible for him to imagine that *anyone* would *ever* have *anything* better to do than admire his hair, his pecs, above all, his abs (abs are very important to that generation)...and take careful note of (*Maybe you should write it down if you're too lame to remember, Dude*)... where he put his car keys.

My indifference offended him greatly. The greater offense of course was, when he chastised me for not paying attention, I showed no remorse whatsoever. So, he glared at me for a while before climbing into his car.

Then, at that very moment, I truly understood something. I understood that we really do have a problem in our world.

But let me say that if I seem particularly heartless when it comes to this matter, it is only because I am particularly heartless when it comes to this matter.

Here's hope however—maybe it's simply my problem.

Maybe it's merely my personal lack of vision.

So, if I'm having difficulty understanding the structure of a world in which every male *child* of every divorced (or soon to be divorced) mother is the center of the universe, when I'm gone, the problem will go away with me. So let's, if we can, try to find it in our hearts to stop blaming it on the kids. As far as they can see things are just fine. Or maybe not. Certainly their superficial fixations are an effort to get away from the mess we all find ourselves in; they are purposefully distancing themselves from an untenable situation—exchanging a reality over which they have no control while latching on to a trivial reality over which they have control—doesn't mean they are unaware of the very real mess we are in. It may mean just the opposite, that they are excruciatingly aware, or would be if they could face it.

But, that's a kind of Russian roulette. I mean only that while they fill up every available space in the blogosphere with snide comments about Britney's sad choice in footwear, there are still a lot of pigs to be slaughtered if these kids want hot dogs.

In fairness, this problem has been with us for a while. Look at that shameless idiot Peter Abelard. The difference is, kids these days would make Abelard seem timid, humble, unassuming, and withdrawn. Not to mention that fact that Abelard's demands for celebrity were nearly unique in his time. Today such striving is almost universal. Who could possibly say how vast the majority of our population is now driven by those same self-celebratory needs?

Sometime in or around 1968 I recall a lovely little creature of a happily ragged sort skipping up to me and asking in a sing-songy eager, smoke-laden, breathy voice, “Hey man, do you want to go out to California with us? Out there,” she said dreamily, “*EVERYONE is a STAR!*” I didn’t even have to think about that. “Christ no,” I said (perhaps somewhat huffily), “that sounds like Hell to me.” It’s peculiar that I should maintain such a position for so long, when so many of my other views, in that same period, have changed nearly 180 degrees.

And, so it comes, unavoidably, to this. I cannot help but notice that all of my left-leaning friends have changed as well, but in a peculiar way. When we were in college together, they were all against government. Government was the enemy. Now, too many of them seem to be for government. They want government. They want government, and they want plenty of it. They want government to give them things and to watch over them and to look after them and to keep an eye on people they don’t like. S’ funny because, as I recall, when government was keeping an eye on us, back then, 40-some years ago... none of us liked that very much.

Speaking strictly for myself I have to admit that the fact that I *still* have no marketable skills, at age 64, is not the fault of any rich guy. No matter how he got his, I can’t use his success as an excuse for my failure. That I am not a salesman of any sort—despise the variety of slimy forms available in that sleazy occupation—is not the fault of those who have developed the shameless craft and have no such qualms. That I have no grasp whatsoever of how money



and finances work is not the fault of those who do, and that I now find myself in a somewhat frightening situation because of these various ineptitudes, is not the fault of government. So, I can't expect government to remedy it. And I don't.

But, what most of my friends, on either side of the fence, seem to have recently realized is that none of this is really a problem, unless you think there might be more serious things in this world than Cartoon Network and more important things than your cell phone's ring tone. So, for me, it's a problem (and not just because I don't own a cell phone). But, we're all entitled to our opinion.

(Now, we're getting to it at last.)

## BOOK TWO

### OPINION

#### THE VALUE OF OPINION

That we are each entitled to our opinion is not an elephant in the room, it's a festering, seeping, sore-riddled elephant, and we're all making efforts to ignore it... such are the times in which we live. More unfortunate still is the fact that this problem—*that we are each entitled to our opinion*—is one of the most basic, deeply rooted, and sacredly held beliefs in what's left of this society. It was carved in stone a long time ago, and remains both immutable and inalienable.

What few can admit is that the sanctity of this concept is, of course, utter nonsense. For proof, gaze for six seconds at any graveyard headstone and wonder what that person's opinions light have been on any subject. But, it's also utter nonsense because to have an opinion does not mean that opinion is correct; it doesn't even mean that opinion makes any sense. Because we have an opinion does not mean that opinion is worth anything. That's what we seem to be missing. That's where we make our mistake. And, unfortunately, that's usually where our thinking ends.

“Everyone is entitled to their own opinion” is sacrosanct, but it opens innumerable profane doors. Taken too seriously this noble concept can be a dangerous thing, and these days, we all take it fairly seriously. Whenever some foul monster surfaces and our entire nation cringes in horror at the long list of his atrocities, between our outrage

and our gasps of incredulity, we always ask, “My God, what must have been going on in that sicko’s mind?” What was going on in that guy’s mind was this very same sacred concept. He had an opinion and no matter how unusual, weird, vile, monstrous, or criminal, he was entitled to it. These days, for the sake of diversity, we’re more likely to defend that right than either question it or condemn it. We may not like what that guy did, but—though to jail he must go—cannot deny him the right to do it. Perhaps some day we’ll evolve; become more accepting of such behavior, and he’ll be looked upon as a groundbreaking martyr to a noble cause.

Unfortunately, recognizing the simple truth that opinion is not sacred, that everyone’s opinion is not of value, that some opinions are wrong, knocks our (current, emerging) view of the world all out of whack, and nobody wants that. So, we pretend that it’s not so; we pretend that everyone’s opinion *is* worth something, does mean something, and does count. Let me be blunt, if only for a moment, and for this one time only.  
It doesn’t.

The idea that it does can only lead to mayhem.

I’m not telling you that your opinion is worthless, means nothing, and doesn’t count, though it might be a better world if more of us felt that way. I’m only saying that I’ve finally come to recognize that *my* opinion is worthless, means nothing, and doesn’t count. Looking back I now realize that my opinion was always worthless, has never meant anything, has never counted.

Henry Edward Fool

I'm guessing it never will.

If I were to tell you that there is tremendous good news in that fact, you might not (yet) believe me.

One thing at a time...

## THE PROBLEM EXEMPLIFIED

“In religion and politics, people's beliefs and convictions are, in almost every case, gotten second hand, and without examination.”  
*Mark Twain*

What nonsense! Until I read that statement I'd always thought of Mark Twain as a straight shooter. Come on, man! *In almost every case*, Sam? I think we can get quite a bit closer to the truth than that, without having any unseemly contact with it, of course. Let's try this: In religion and politics, and practically every other matter on earth, people's beliefs and convictions are usually gotten second hand, and are then mindlessly espoused, many times with great pomp, and viciously defended against examination, scrutiny or questioning of any sort.

With that in place, let's begin.

We have a problem.

The problem is that we are all *entitled to an opinion*, and we each like to believe that our opinion is correct; in fact, we are convinced of it. (Or, at least I cannot at this moment think of anyone I've ever met who harbored an opinion which he was convinced was wrong.) As if that were not enough, these days we are (why, I do not know) being continually told that our opinion matters. And - we like to believe that, of course. As said, I'm no better than the rest of 'em and I think I can prove it, right here, right now. In looking for an almost perfect example of the problem at work, I had to look no further than my own mirror... the

one in the bathroom, where the lighting has been carefully adjusted for maximum disenheartenment.

Though not a deep thinker, a clear thinker, or even a keen observer (though I've been accused of that more than once by others who, by that statement alone, prove not to harbor that trait themselves), I am not disqualified from having an opinion. And I've been so wrong about so many things so many times that it always startles me a bit to discover that I might be correct about something. Nonetheless, the lack of these basic qualities does not prevent me from believing that my opinion counts. Although the consistency of my flawed thinking can be quite trying to others, that sad/deplorable (your choice) tendency only makes me all the more exemplary of the problem.

Like many of my nagging multi-flawed brethren, I sometimes find myself content in life nonetheless. I wake up on occasional rare days relatively pleased with myself for no reason that I can determine, thinking that I might know something I suppose, or that I once did, or that I still have hopes, but secure in the fact that I'm entitled to an opinion. But, like the worst of us, I find that, compressed tightly enough by damnable, nagging, trivial circumstance and the on-going, unjustifiable, disregard of Fate, I sometimes begin to smolder. And, should it seem completely inappropriate (the wrong place and certainly the wrong time), I can explode in an unpredictable—ultimately unexplainable—embarrassing public display of childish rage. Most of you can thank God that you are better than me in that respect. Nonetheless, when it comes to opinion, mine's as good as any saint's, and, like every saint, every

sinner and everybody in between, I feel fairly certain that my opinion is correct. I am entitled to an opinion and despite my many flaws, however numerous and whatever their nature, my opinion counts—or so we're told—and best of all, seek as I might, I find no flaw in my thinking.

Admittedly, I have no idea what it means that my opinion *counts*. I'm hoping it means that others will listen to it, consider it, and realize where they've gone wrong.

This is unlikely of course because I'm too passionate. I've always been too passionate, and that, in our world, discounts my opinion considerably. I've always been entertained (and by that I mean thoroughly disgusted) by the societal pretense that only the mentally deranged ever lose their composure or express themselves with escalated emotions (not to mention rage), and that the cool, condescendingly, self-assured, somewhat smug guy, with every hair in place and the really nice-fitting Brioni suit (you gotta admit he looks good in that suit), is always right. In the movies we are gently encouraged to, and always expected to, side with the emotionally-saturated, slightly deranged character; in reality, given the choice between someone displaying the slightest (unseemly) *emotion* and some mindless puppet without a heart, the throng always chooses the puppet, admires him, showers him in wealth and adulation, and, in politics, re-elects him.

So, I'm the other one. I'm the unhinged one. That's me. But, here's the point: however dark and embarrassing that self-portrait may be, it does not disqualify me from having an opinion. Nor does it keep me from thinking that my

opinion is correct and therefore should mean something. In my own warped way of thinking, especially in those times when I care far too much, and perhaps just a bit too openly, about whatever the matter may be, the greater my belief that I am right, the greater my unseemly behavior. So, here I am, a complete mess of a man, a public embarrassment, the perfect example of our problem at work. *This* mess of a man has an opinion and, despite the total lack of courtly behavior, his opinion still counts.

Meanwhile, *that* man—the heartless, soulless one, driven only by selfishness and greed—has an opinion and it counts too. That’s the problem. The math is simple: if a moron like me and a bastard like that can each have an opinion, ANY damned fool can have an opinion. And - surprise, we all do. We cling to the righteousness of that rule. Further, if an idiot like me and a bastard like that can each think that his opinion is correct, where does that leave us? How can everybody have an opinion and every opinion be correct?

Let’s dig deeper.

As the perfect example of the problem, I don’t need to *care* about something to have an opinion about it, and I certainly don’t need to know anything about it. Give me a topic (any topic) and I have an instant opinion on the matter. I have an opinion on everything from Art to Zoology. I have an opinion on things like homosexuality and race too, though I hesitate to say so. We’re entitled to an opinion and our opinion means something, but, if it doesn’t toe the party line, let’s just keep that opinion to ourselves, shall we? Apparently for some of us to even raise such issues brands



us. So, we've decided that it is better to walk on egg shells for a thousand years rather than call a spade a spade, and take a very small painless step in the direction of Truth. At times it takes real effort to ignore the truth. But, I've drifted...

Name a subject and I can tell you immediately how I feel, and from the tone of my voice you will know that I have no doubts whatsoever (only witness what I've said so far.) The care and raising of pigeons (especially someone else's pigeons), I have an opinion. Neoplasticity (whatever that may be), I have an opinion. Along with this skill comes my ability to look at a blurry photograph of anyone accused of a crime and tell you immediately whether that person is innocent or guilty (and, I'm always a bit surprised at how many of them are guilty AND more surprised still at how frequently judges and juries get it wrong). I can even look at a person and determine if they are of a criminal nature. (Apparently cops have that very same ability, and find the indicators manifest in nearly every upright-ambling one of us, and many while seated and unmoving.)

My response (my opinion) is never knee-jerk; it is *many times faster than knee-jerk*. It takes place in micro-seconds, (If a nano-second is quicker than a micro-second, then this process takes place in split nano-seconds.), and requires no thought whatsoever on my part. Ask me about stocks, real estate, the nature of things physical or metaphysical and I'll have an answer for you. It doesn't matter how much or how little I know about the subject; it doesn't matter my sources (or lack thereof); it doesn't matter if I know anything at all about the subject. Give me a topic, I'll look you in the eye

and give you the truth. It's amazing the number of books I haven't written on subjects about which I know absolutely nothing but about which I harbor a firm, bullet-proof, rock-solid, unshakeable opinion. For some reason politics, religion and race all spring to mind because I feel most comfortable in fields where I know I'll find myself surrounded with large gatherings of others who share my belief... just plain people passionately defending their flawless opinions built upon nothing and reinforced by years of unflinching commitment.

When I have an opinion on a matter it will be (far more likely than not), intractable, firmly set, immovable and immutable. At the very same time my opinion varies depending upon my position in the matter, when the matter affects me personally. For example, when I am crossing a city street on foot, I really wish all those goddamned cars would give me some more room and the drivers would exercise a little more patience; when I am behind the wheel, I wish those goddamned pedestrians would hurry up and get the hell out of my way. From any perspective it's difficult to see how anyone could deny that I'm right in both cases; drivers really should exercise a little more patience when it comes to pedestrians, pedestrians really should consider how badly their presence screws up the pressing urgency of vehicular progress.

It's difficult for me to stop with but a single example of this phenomenon. So, let me ask this: why is the slow poke directly in front of me always driving as though he has no real desire whatsoever to ever get anywhere and the truck driver immediately behind me is driving as though he were

engulfed in flames and I'm the sole obstacle between him and the nearest source of water?

My very clever wife points out the somewhat irritating fact that, in this case, I am the truck driver's slow poke, and at once the slow poke's truck driver.  
(Just ignore that woman.)

We (my truly wonderful wife and I) find ourselves walking *our dog* on the beach several times a week. (In California people who own pets are known as *Animal Guardians*, and walking a dog on the beach involves a multitude of legalities impressed upon us from every conceivable authoritative source except common sense.) And, I've discovered something about myself in the beach/dog walking process. When some large dog starts getting maybe just a little too rough with our (slightly smaller) dog, the owner of that big stupid vicious goddamned slobbering mutt always dismisses it in the blithest possible way by saying, "Oh, he's just playing."

Really? If I walked over and punched that same owner in the mouth I don't think "I was just playing" would stand up firmly enough in court to dismiss the case brought against me. Just playing? What the damned beast is actually doing is getting himself wound up tighter and tighter and, with each snap of his big jaws, he's pushing himself closer to that point where his wildest instincts kick in and overthrow his domestication entirely. At that point he'll take our poor little doggie by the throat and drag him off down the beach never to be seen alive again. That's what he's doing. And, that's not play.

What the hell is wrong with these people? I ask myself. (I've stopped asking my very dear forbearing wife that question because she's tired of hearing it). So, let me ask you, Why can't the owner of such a beast ever see that his big ugly stupid vicious mutt is dangerous and needs to be, under all circumstance, on a short, stout leash? Why don't they get their animals under control? It's unacceptable and irresponsible to bring a dog like that onto the beach. I have more to say, but I'm sure you've heard enough... to agree entirely with me... or at least enough to understand (perfectly) what my poor wife must have to put up with.

Later—same pleasant little stroll—when our dog chases down a clearly frightened, puffy-little white, curly, toy-like (utterly useless) creature (not even a dog really), my view has taken a reversal. Perhaps in the interim I've evolved; perhaps I've come to see the wisdom in what the owner of the big stupid vicious slobbering mutt told me a few minutes earlier. As our dog drives the tiny wide-eyed innocent into the sand and throws himself on top of the squirmy, kicking, bundle of squealing fear, I do not and cannot, quite honestly, perceive any problem whatsoever. "He's just playing," I assure the rapidly paling owner as she stands by looking first aghast and then terrified, and finally (really quite unnecessarily) furious.

"Why don't you get control of your dog?" I'm asked with completely uncalled-for snappishness.

"Pah..." I say with a knowing smile. How does one address such idiotic concerns? "He's just playing," I snort. My reply is a courtly mix, equal parts good-natured, regal understanding and utter derision.

“That’s the way dogs play,” I explain.  
But it never seems to comfort them.

We live in a world full of idiots, and I’ve discovered that most of them either own large vicious stupid dull-eyed slobbering beasts who are far too rough and want nothing more than to eat our poor doggie, or tiny little useless trembling fluffy fear-filled creatures which really need to toughen up a bit if they are to survive in the very real world of the California dog beach. As I’ve just demonstrated, there can be three quite different opinions as to what constitutes ‘play’ between dogs, and two of them are wrong. You don’t have to be a genius to realize that. This conclusion comes from the simplest of simple observations.

Either way, as soon as I know how I feel about something, any subsequent input becomes usel... unnecessary.

When I’m told that Missy, the pit bull, sleeps with the Lunkhead’s grandchildren, it only cements, in my mind, the inevitable (perhaps imminent) horror that awaits the Lunkheads when they wake up some bright blue morning to screaming. There are some things which I know, going in, are obviously, and by that I mean simply and undeniably, a matter of right or wrong, good or bad, acceptable or unacceptable, black or white, left or right. That there are so many things like that in our little world makes things easy for someone like me. My opinion on so many matters comes to me almost without thought.

Some matters may require thought, but, if granted, it will be a begrudging, protective kind of thought. Mainly, I’ll be

looking for the flaws—I mean, for anything that might contradict my view—in order to eradicate them, thus eliminating further consideration. Generally, I’m comfortable knowing that somewhere inside of me the truth already resides, and that the truth is anxious to make its presence known. It’s a merely a matter of being honest to myself, and to remain entirely honest to myself I must stand prepared to reject anything which might sound like reason (assuming I hear it at all) when it doesn’t agree with my pre-established position on any given matter. Once I’ve made up my mind, the discussion is pretty much over; there is rarely any wavering. Any additional information I may seek on the matter will come, purposefully and decidedly, from sources with which I already agree...and sources which, in their wisdom, agree entirely with me.

It is a rare man indeed who subscribes to any magazine which doesn’t tout his own views as if they were the Word of God. He’s about as rare as the man who doesn’t sneer openly, or cackle sarcastically at the sight of any magazine which doesn’t. Oh, wait, that’s the same guy, isn’t it? I’d have to get a look at his face to be sure that it isn’t me again.

An aside: Just the other day I saw James Carville (well-overly-self-assured political commentator) on TV—a guy I’ve always kind of disliked for his smugness—and he said something like this: I read an article by so-an-so *in favor of* (some matter which I forget), and I agreed with every point. I was thinking, “Of course you would, you idiot!” Mr. Carville then said this: “And I read what what’s-his-name said in *his* article *against* (that same forgettable matter),

and I agreed with every point.” I was stunned. I have NEVER, ever before, (EVER) heard ANYONE make such a statement concerning politics in my entire life here on this planet. Never. (And I don’t expect to hear it ever again either.) So, you might reasonably ask, did my opinion of that Carville idiot change after witnessing that feat of shameless honesty? And I’ll admit again, perhaps somewhat obliquely, that I’ve never ever heard anyone make such a statement before.

That’s not to say I haven’t seen anyone waffle or contradict himself, or back-pedal, or straddle the fence or hold out until they determined which path would be most politically advantageous, or take a tremendously long time to decide a very simple, clear-cut matter wrongly. This guy said that he had read something and saw the wisdom in it and read an opposing viewpoint and saw the wisdom in that too. So, though I’d disliked the guy before because I knew him to hold political ideas completely out of sync with my own (despite the fact that I harbor none), suddenly I found myself disliking him even more, because, now I knew him to be an unabashed liar.

Really, to have someone look you straight in the eye and tell you they can see both sides of ANY issue clearly is akin to having an American male look you in the eye and declare that he’s never driven drunk. I, simply, do not believe it. NO MAN on earth can hold two divergent opinions on any single matter. Those who pretend to, only pretend to.

Nonsense is nonsense.

You do yourself a disservice by clinging to nonsense.

Henry Edward Fool

A somewhat necessary note:

Although my very good wife has successfully taught me to see the other side of things, she has not yet been able to teach me to understand, accept or respect the other side of things. To see the other side is the first step she tells me, but, for me, seeing the other side of things is also the final step. When it comes to seeing the other side of things, I am like the child who has proudly learned to count to three, and now, asked to count to four, finds himself completely at sea.

To compensate for this, I waste a lot of time sneering at the other side of things or laughing at the other side of things or stomping around in our little rooms bellowing about the other side of things, when I should be lowering my head and making courageous attempts to plow my way through the barrier that holds me back from evolving toward a nicely balanced arbitrational whatever.

I am, of course, awash in humiliation while admitting that I cannot, for one moment, no matter how brief, do more than glimpse the other (no doubt wiser) side of things. My only hope is that this inability of mine might prove to be a source of entertainment for you rather than the irritant it seems to be for those poor souls who must either work with me on a daily basis or share my bed at night.

There's only one side to that one.



## CELLO BY MAIL

Maybe 5, maybe 6 years ago I bought a cello through the mail. At the time I thought it was an idiotic thing to do, but did it anyway. I'd tried to buy a cello in the normal manner—you know, actually handling the thing—but discovered, in the entire Bay Area, there were only cello dealers with cellos far too expensive for me and music stores with rental cellos for school kids; there didn't seem to be anything in between. Unfortunately, when it comes to cello, I'm an in-between sorta guy.

So, I started poking around on the internet and found a place called StringWorks, with a lot of good reviews, and I drooled over the models that were slightly beyond my reach financially and far beyond my skills actually. And after a few months of that I bit the bullet and ordered one of the models just slightly out of reach.

On their website the thing was shown to be a lovely soft golden color, and it just looked gorgeous. I had no idea what the thing might sound like, but it was a mid-price instrument and it had to sound better than the rental I'd spent the last 6 months thrumming around on. When it arrived I tore into the packaging and immediately went into a rage. In the box lay a deep dark monstrosity, not the lovely golden beauty I'd seen on their website and had dreamed of. I didn't even finish unpacking it, let alone tune it and play it. To my untrained eye it looked like the cheap rental I'd been messing with. I refused to even remove it from the box. I was crushed, I was angry. I was furious when I picked up the phone.

“Your website, I said, “shows a lovely golden colored sylph-like instrument, and what you sent me is some heavy-looking, dark red monster of a thing. It looks exactly like the cheap-o rental I’d been playing on!” I whined.

A young man was in the midst of *talking me down*—calmly trying to convince me that I should at least play the thing a bit before passing judgment—when a voice in the background snapped, “Let me talk to him.”

Then something interesting happened. A woman got on the phone and she was angrier than I was. She told me that she had personally set up that instrument, and that she had tested it, and that it was one of the best examples of that model that she’d set up, and...” I forget what all else. She was like a lioness protecting one of her cubs. I was so impressed with that woman’s defense of that instrument that I thanked her. I apologized to her and I thanked her. After listening to her, I had no doubt whatsoever about the quality of that instrument.

So, I began playing that instrument, and, even before it developed the warmth it now has, my cello and I became good friends. My life is certainly better with that cello in it. So, what can we learn from this? Here we had two people, a woman, someone who knows something about cellos, and me, who knows nothing about cellos, and we both have our opinion of a particular instrument. For reasons that cannot be understood, I was convinced that my opinion mattered.

I was wrong. I couldn’t admit it at that moment, but I was completely wrong.  
My opinion meant nothing.

## WHAT I KNOW

Anyone who has ever overheard any cell phone conversation, or spoken to an economist, or listened to any politician for more than 11 seconds, can testify to the bristling self-assurance most of us possess while discussing matters about which we know absolutely nothing. To know nothing about a subject almost compels one to have a strong opinion on that matter...and, then, of course, that opinion demands a voracious defense whenever challenged. Hunkering down deeply entrenched, wrapped in smoldering blustering umbrage, I always find myself in a pretty good position to lob accusations out into the world. Looking out from such a stronghold it's clear that only an idiot would harbor any POV other than the one I somehow find myself defending. If it wasn't so common, I guess it would be embarrassing to admit that my opinion is every bit as strong on subjects about which I know *nothing*, as it is concerning things about which I may actually know a thing or two. It's not embarrassing though, because it's normal human behavior. It's a problem, but it's normal.

Unfortunately, admittedly as well, those things about which I personally know a thing or two are very (*very*) few indeed. At the moment I cannot, for some reason, think of even a single one (well, the price of common lumber in the San Francisco Bay Area in the 1980's, maybe); which in a peculiar way makes my point, because, though I have almost no expertise in any field, I have absolutely no lack of opinions. Worse still, it must be admitted, upon further investigation, that I really know very little even about those

select few things about which I believe I know a thing or two. Try saying that four times, backwards.  
Honestly...for if I am anything, I am ridiculously honest.

For the sake of *the illusion of thoroughness* however (a ploy I've picked up inadvertently by watching politicians, with caution and from a great distance) these few things—about which I believe I know a thing or two—are here listed: the small, privately-owned hotel business (not the hospitality industry per se, simply how small hotels work), blues musicians (not the Music Industry, not musicians in general, but blues musicians), and big fish/small pond doorstep, throw-away publishing. What I know of these few things, I know from my own almost embarrassingly limited personal experience, coupled with what I've overheard while eavesdropping on others who have far more experience than I in each of those matters.

I know about the hotel business, because I am presently in it (in it, not of it), and have been in it (not of it) for nearly twenty-five years (by the time this sees print, probably thirty). I know about bluesmen because I once dealt with them on a regular basis for a number of absolutely delightful years. I know a little about publishing from having published a very small monthly blues magazine for three or four truly blessed years. Several years later, one of the largest, most widely recognized and highly respected publishers in the Music Industry published my “authoritative” introductory book on analog recording and got it out on the shelves just in time for the massive digital explosion to render almost every technical aspect of that work utterly useless; so I also know something about embarrassment.

With that experience came further insight into the true nature of the publishing business however, and for that I am most thankful.

One might reasonably say then that I have a right to an opinion on these few select things (how to take a reservation, how to interview a blues musician, and how to produce a throw-away publication on a regular basis), or at least certain select peripheral aspects of them. I do not claim to have the same right as someone who has actually run a hotel; someone who has worked **INSIDE** the music industry; or someone who has published a successful, widely distributed, generalist print publication. From their point of view, my opinion on these matters, based on my tiny, almost unperceivable, laughably limited experience, is utterly worthless. They are correct, of course. But, I still claim *the right to an opinion*. My opinion may be virtually baseless or at best questionable; *my right* to that opinion is, however, unquestionable.

And here is where, I think, the trouble begins.

One's right to an opinion is held sacred in America, and I (example that I am) wallow in that right. It is because of that sacred right that I feel completely free to formulate an opinion on all things. (Yes, I realize that this may sound familiar, but this is like a bruise which pleads for continual poking.) So it is here, at this point, that things become maybe just a little bit confused. Here is where I make a kind of casual leap (hoping that nobody will notice) and begin to think that *because my right to an opinion is sacred*, that opinion itself is sacred.

And, then just one more little leap lets us land fairly solidly upon the belief that if that opinion is sacred, it can only be correct.

Unorthodox as it may seem, occasionally I remind myself that this just isn't so. I must continually remind myself that because I have a right to an opinion does not mean that my opinion is always right or even occasionally right or even ever right. It's a hard sell though, and, difficult for me to believe, even knowing the source as well as I do.

Secretly, whatever openness to new thought I pretend, inside I'm clinging to my original thoughts on any subject; my instincts tell me that, more likely than not, my very first thought was probably correct. I admit that this may sound a little goofy, but, while I'm huffing and puffing and pacing around gesticulating wildly, offering up my insights as if they might be pouring through me directly from some divine source high, high above, I am often convinced that they are. True or not, I demand the right to have and to hold my opinion, to defend it and protect it, to nurture it and coax it into growth, AND attempt to foist it upon others, until death us do part. Goofier still, much of what I've offered up as my opinion throughout the years, has started out as a kind of trial balloon. I was just testing to see how it might sound, or to see what the reaction of others might be.

Turn around once and I find myself defending that almost randomly established now-cherished position. Turn around again, years have past, and that statement has somehow become a galvanized part of who I truly am. Now, I've held that position for so many years that I no longer have the

ability to look at it objectively, if I ever did. Better still, at that point there's really no longer any need to examine it; I'll argue the point with anyone.

I'll admit that I've said things which I didn't mean, and regretted it immediately (who wouldn't admit that?), but it's asking too much of me to admit that I have ever argued points that I have no real understanding of, and no real interest in, with genuine (contrived) fervor. After my defense of this thing about which I am indifferent proves successful, it becomes a part of my act, a part of who I am.

Whatever the source of such pure idiocy, I frequently expect others to recognize and admit to just how very right I am in matters about which I really could not care. Unfortunately, those poor self-deceived fools, who are every bit as wrong as I am right, prove to be also as stubborn. Why they refuse to listen to reason and simply abandon their ridiculous position for what we both know to be true, I will never (perhaps cannot ever) fathom.

The other side of that foolishness is a statement frequently—and *incorrectly*—credited to Voltaire: "I do not agree with what you say, but I will defend unto death your right to say it." My god, what nonsense! Purer nonsense has never seen ink. No lofty statement ever issued from the pompous manipulative duplicitous mind of man has ever been so full of pure bull-pocrisy.

A thousand wars, ten thousand battles, a million duels, a billion fistfights, and almost every marital squabble from the beginning of time has been fought in order to protest,

suppress, or eliminate all together, another person's right to say a thing. A more truthful statement might be:

"I do not agree with what you say, but, if you say it again, you do so at your own peril."

On the personal front, no person holding an opposing opinion to my own has ever (EVER), under any circumstance that I can recall, conceded that my opinion is even worth listening to, let alone worth fighting for. Fighting against, is another matter.

Still, I'm allowed to have an opinion, no matter how ill-informed, lame, stupid or embarrassing, and to cling to it unreasonably and, in this world, I can now publish it quickly, easily, so that all humanity might benefit, or get a good laugh out of it, or take up arms (which seems to be the option of choice these days). The common assumption seems to be that the entire world is out there waiting to see what I might say next, and the default belief is that they'll all agree with what I say. And God knows—as you might have already gleaned—I long to hear what every man woman and child on earth might have to say at any moment on any subject whatsoever, whether it involves me or not. I wait, poised and eager to listen. Such is the natural benevolence instilled in every man that draws breath... or, so we are now told. We're just one big loving community. If you agree, tweet.

To those who claim that man is, by nature, a social creature, I ask, Then why are the happiest days of *my life* spent either alone with a musical instrument or in the delightful presence of my wife, who makes a lovely music



of her own just by being in the same room with me? And what is to be made of this yearning hope, burning like a small fire within me, that I might occasionally attain blessed solitude, with no contact with anyone, for a very long time?’

Briefly, I think this: by nature Man is a creature with a mouth and a mirror. The internet seems to bear this out. Most of us like to hear our own voice and we like what we see while brushing our teeth. We pretend to believe that others may like our grating voice and admire what they see as well. For reasons unknown, this thought comforts us.

On the other side of that same coin we discover that Man is a creature who, at the highest level of social development, strains to bear, without wincing openly, the irritating sound of any other man’s voice. If that other man’s voice is spouting an agreeable opinion, our most elevated social being might condescend to smile and nod while inwardly attending his own distant thoughts, or accumulating a list of corrections. And that is because, even if someone is in complete agreement with us, they could not possibly know as much as we do.

Growl and pound your chest, if you disagree.

## THE RIGHT TO REMAIN SILENT

“I have nothing to say.” *ANONYMOUS*

When they arrest an *alleged* criminal, officers of the law are required, by law, to state to that person their rights. The statement begins—according to TV anyway—“You have the right to remain silent”, and ends with the question, “Do you understand these rights?” So, you have the right to holler; insist on change, demand justice for the poor teacher who works an entire 9 months and only hauls down \$79,000 a year, with benefits, and cry for those who must somehow try to live off the meager sum the government gives them each month from the tax money I pay while working in a dead-end job I hate for a man who despises me. Protest all you want, you have that right. But I’d like to claim the same rights as any suspected criminal; I’d like to remain silent. Stupidly, I’d like others to understand and respect that right. It’d be nice if they shared my yearning as well, but that’s not going to ever happen.

Quite naturally anyone might say, “Well, this is a pretty big book for someone who wishes to remain silent.” And about that, I can only say this: That’s the very nature of man, isn’t it? He says one thing and he does another.

Nonetheless, I’d like to bow out. I’d like *not to say* anything at all about any political matter I admittedly know nothing about—which is every political matter—and I’d like to stop worrying about things that I can’t do anything about—which is every political matter.

That’s what I’d like.

## MUST HAVE OPINIONS

These days, I'm not simply *allowed* to have an opinion—I am *expected* to have one. If I don't have one, I'm encouraged to get one, and then, I'm expected to defend it. Naturally, once you have an opinion, that position must be defended against assault by other/wrong opinions. But we've been through that more than enough already, and it's unnecessary to discuss further.

So, let's discuss those who have no opinion.

Who the hell are all those idiots?

In each of the endless, ever-emerging polls there are always a percentage who claim to have no opinion...who are they? What kind of a life must they be living without exercising their near-sacred right to an opinion on every matter on earth? [If you guess correctly, there's really no need to read the remainder of this book, so it's worth a shot.] Whoever they are, no one wants to be thrown in with that crowd. So desperate are we to get an opinion that, whenever we find ourselves lacking one, we cling to the first bloated thing floating by. Birds are living dinosaurs and the pyramids were cast. I've argued both those points, straight faced, just as if I believed them, and just as if I cared. Why? I cannot say. What do I know about either one of those things? Nothing. Not a thing. Do I care about either of them? Well, I'll tell you this much, I can put on a pretty convincing show that I do.

As said, many opinions are—I believe—merely trial balloons set adrift to see how high they might go before

they are brought down by common sense, undeniable physical reality, or, my wife's favorite weapon, the introduction of cruel, un-retractable, documented fact. More peculiar than our overall, offhand disregard for the opinions of others (or at least those opinions that stray too far from ours) is our need to obtain an opinion. That need is so strong that we seek out the opinion of others and once attached to it, prance it around in public as if it might be our own, and not a rental.

More peculiar still is the ready acceptance of the opinion of certain select, highly respected (for what reason we do not know) personages. How such authority is recognized is probably a sub-rational matter, but however we find these leaders, these masters, these guides, these Life coaches, these charlatans, once we find them we enshrine their cherished thinking on almost every matter. Next step: we lay claim to their undeniable wisdom and carry it around, protected within ourselves, a golden mantra, throughout our lives (or at least until their scam comes to light), taking every opportunity to espouse it for the benefit of others. (Note the distance I've quietly placed between myself and *others* here. To bring myself back into the picture while maintaining the subject, I'll have to show how unaffected I am by such nonsense.)

When I was in college, about 45 years ago, one of the school's more influential painting instructors made a point each semester of living openly with one of his freshman students (still a shocking, somewhat defiant act at the time). When the next semester brought in a new batch of likely lovely young and vulnerable candidates from which he

could choose her replacement, he usually did. By this method the man established a large faithful following. So, that buffoon once declared to his fawning fans that *every car should be red, or red is the only color any car should ever be, or any car that was any color other than red should be relegated to the scrap heap* or something along those lines...who knows, I don't recall precisely; I didn't like the guy that much, and my car was green. Let me say very quickly here that I find that, somehow, I like him even less now that time has passed and he's a comparatively successful painter and I'm still writing long-winded, short-sighted books that nobody will ever read. That aside, whatever else he may have offered, his snake-like ability to sequester innocents inside his bedroom until the next batch hatched, and the superiority of red cars are all that I recall about the man.

So, naturally, from that simple statement there emerged an explosion of red cars on campus. Kids who admired this guy for his waterbed-based, dope enhanced, supposed sexual prowess, and his long black silky hair, were dying their own hair black and having their old wrecks painted red; others were buying red cars. Some, because their car had been red all along, thought that surely that must mean something about the innate depth of their personal insight into the universal metaphysical construct of ultimate archetypical automotive-color-whatever. One of these idiots approached me one time pontificating about red cars and I feel good enough about my response to report it here.

“Do you ever have any thoughts of your own?”

But, once again, though I scoff at such behavior, I really little differ. I'm no better than either the seducer or his blind and blindly devoted, thoughtless admirers. I have held so many borrowed opinions so closely for so long that it would be difficult to recognize them as anything but the product of my own mind, and usually that's how I try to sell them.

If you're interested, I think all cars should be a nice creamy off-white sort of color, or maybe a slate grey.  
(If I was clever I would have said silver.)

For your entertainment, I would love to delineate the almost endless quotes and thoughts and ideals and quips I've taken under-wing and nurtured (and maybe tweaked just a little bit for my own purposes), and brought up as my own...but shall not. On the other side of that coin, I can't recall anyone ever having told me that anything I have ever said to them has ever given them either pause for thought or something to actually spend any time thinking about.

But quickly: I once woke up in the middle of the night with a grand literary vision. My god, it was wonderful. I had not only dreamed the overall plot but, chapter by chapter, the story as it unraveled, in detail. I wrote it all down, filling up three pages of notes and fell asleep delighted at having been visited by Genius. The next morning, over coffee, I remembered the inspiration and, raced into the next room to find my notes. With pride swelling my breast and driving my eager heart, I showed these pages to whatever woman I happened to be living with at the time, and, after reading, she said, "Congratulations, you just wrote Silas Marner."

Makes you kind of wonder where Mary Ann Evans got the idea, doesn't it?

So, yes, I've taken proud ownership of thoughts which are not mine and—after years have passed—sometimes find myself admiring my own thinking. If you will admit as much, then we are alike, you and I. I'm sorry to be the messenger of such sad news, but thank you nonetheless.

It is an honest man who can admit, even to himself, that he is a dishonest man.

## BLESSED AUTHORITY

Because I have a formal education in Art it is a subject in which I hold very strong opinions—as one should in such extremely crucial human matters. My degree in painting entitles me to pontificate about anything having to do with Art—be it sculpture, conceptual art, folk art, pottery, paintings on velvet, or what qualifies a piece to be slapped up on your refrigerator door. Art is my playground. Any grand opinion I may offer is typically offered from the high pulpit, with the chin up in an appropriately dignified attitude. Trepidation that someone else in the crowd might also know a little something about Art is held at bay unless and until that someone (worse case—of greater authority) shows up and declares himself. Meanwhile, I remain THE local, immediately available, source of information, insight, knowledge, true unquestionable wisdom, on all matters artistic. And I must say, I glow in that light.

“Is that a Larry Poons?” I am asked. At first I am humbled of course. I blush like a school girl, because there is no greater honor in our society than to be asked your opinion. Many a day is spent in building anticipation of that, all-too-rare, fond moment. And OH Glorious Luck, to be asked about something I actually know something about. There is a kind of eminence in that.

“Yes,” I say. “Yes, that IS a Larry Poons.”

My affirmation is delivered with such crispness that you might think I AM Larry Poons; that I had actually done the painting myself, or, that I am perhaps close personal friends with the man, OR, at very least, may have once slept with his daughter, (assuming he had one), though I’m not admitting to that here.



## WE'RE TOO SURE...perhaps

Could the “unsure” and ‘don’t know” people in the polls have more wisdom than we might suppose? If their attitude is based on total, dedicated indifference to politics, perhaps they do. Maybe that’s where it’s at. Without going all the way to Buddha we might find people somewhere in between who have discovered that indifference to politics adds to their health, their happiness, their lives. Possibly there are good people out there who, having set politics aside, now understand that there is no crime in trying to live a bearable life with limited governmental intrusion and less nagging concern over things they can do nothing whatsoever about. But, maybe not; it’s just something to consider for a moment.

There are also those, like my very dear wife, who informs herself and knows enough about an issue to see more than just the black and white. In those times when my fist comes down and I declare a thing to be this or that, she often says, “It’s more complicated than that.” Then she proceeds to introduce me to several crucial factors of which I was completely unaware, which do indeed cause me to re-think what I’ve said with such assurance. In those times when for me there can only be one answer, and I don’t see how it could be any other way, my dear wife, with no investment in the outcome whatsoever, and seemingly having given the matter no thought whatsoever, comes up with three or four obvious explanations. Then I see how unreasonable it is to think myself reasonable. I have never been able to reason myself out of a paper bag. From this I know that we do ourselves a favor by admitting that we do not know.

However that one works out in your mind, in most cases those who say, I don't know, are being a lot more honest with themselves than those of us who have decided. And that's because most of us who have reached a decision have reached that decision based on limited (purposefully or otherwise) information, ideological commitment and a strangely belligerent personal self-assurance based on who knows what. We see things through a filter and don't even realize that we're being self-deceiving. The person who checks-off the *not sure* box, admits as much. Let's talk about Syria. Do I know anything at all about Syria? Nope. Do I have an opinion about Syria? Yep.

Would I open my big fat mouth and declare openly what that opinion is without qualm? Yes. Would I sneer and criticize anyone else who openly declares an opposing opinion? You bet. How 'bout you?

A little exemplary tale.

One time I said something to my friend, Bruce—I forget the specific matter, but it was a commonly understood, long accepted, scientifically proven fact—and he responded, “I don't believe that.” Because this was not the first time he'd responded in that peculiar way, I was not surprised. But, because it was not the first time he'd responded that peculiar way, it was also not the first time I considered strangulation as one option for bringing him around to a clearer way of thinking.

“Bruce,” I said, “this is not my personal opinion, it's a fact; it's universally recognized, commonly accepted fact.”

“Well, I don't choose to believe it,” he repeated.

“You have no choice in this matter, Bruce,” I said. “This is a fact. You can't NOT believe it. It's a fact. It exists. That's

the way it is. It's out there. It's undeniable. It's real. There is no other option. Personal opinion does not enter into it." He looked me in the eye, shrugged and said, "Well, I don't choose to believe it."

"You can't choose not to believe it," I shouted at his back as he walked away. "It's plain, goddamned undeniable, FACT,"

"Well, I don't choose to believe it," he said with cowardly indifference, as he retreated. This is the point at which I considered running him down in his own hallway and strangling him to death. Yes, he was an old friend, but my god... So, I understand if anything I've said here has wound you up so tightly that you feel the need to strangle me. I understand the impulse, but maybe strangulation is not the only answer.

The point is that a friend of mine, a person who had known me for years—and who continues to like me despite that—thought I had said something questionable; and despite my unshakable position, continued to question what I'd said. He was wrong however. That's the point. It was infuriating, and there was nothing I could do about it. He was sure that I was wrong; I was dead-certain that he was.

So, for me, the question emerges: Could other things be like that? Could the rest of us be firmly convinced about something, and also be completely wrong about it?

Well, maybe you could be, on occasion.

I am almost certain that I probably am on most occasions. And upon that solid foundation I build my political outlook.

## BOOK THREE

### POLITICS

Politics should be a *thoughtful* (dignified, even noble) matter (the precedent for that was established long ago), but our fixed belief that a person's opinions are sacred often reduces politics, at every level, to a *shouting* matter. I'm sure we've all had enough of that in our lives already. So, I'll try to remain calm as long as I possibly can.

In the matter of Politics—something I know absolutely nothing about—I hold strong, lofty, unassailable opinions, because this, after all, is America and anyone who doesn't take a solid, somewhat aggressive, stand on political matters isn't contributing in a way respectful of the once proud, rapidly declining State in which we luckily find ourselves. If you're not prepared to squabble about current political matters then you're not taking life seriously enough. The man who finds himself initially sputtering and eventually screaming red-faced into the face of a complete stranger and calling that man foul names, takes his politics as every good citizen should. Me, I'm indifferent. So I take up my banner not to take up any banner at all. And I do that because I'm convinced I'd be taking up the wrong banner, or, at best, taking up a banner without any reasonable understanding of what that banner truly stands for.

In my teens, I frequently found myself declaring, somewhat proudly, "I don't choose to participate", and for a while I thought, even more proudly, that statement was pure, uncut belligerence on my part. I knew it was not a respectable

stance and I liked that. Or, at least I liked it a great deal more than any of the respectable stances I'd noticed. Now, of course, with the passing years and my nose and ears continually growing, I can look back and from this sage perspective see clearly that, by chance, I was correct. It was pure belligerence; it was the thoughtless uncompromising conclusion of a contrary nature. My political stance then, was to purposefully take no political stance. It came quite naturally to me. What's peculiar is that I even took the time to consider politics at all.

In America today—especially today—no political stance is still seen as a political stance, and it is still not a respectable one. So, in a very real way, having no political stance is the most rebellious position one might take, dear Radical. To declare your independence of the tyranny of politics is... liberty of the truest sort. But, because I'm apolitical doesn't mean I'm heartless, or selfish, or stupid, or at least not all three at any one time. It does not mean that I don't care either. It only means that I would prefer to be left out of it. Please, if it is at all possible, leave me out of it.

Of course, as you might guess, my desire to be left out of things doesn't mean I have no opinion on political matters. Far from it; I have as many opinions as everyone else, but prefer, given the choice, to occupy my time with things that I find more bearable. My wife is French, and so, that gives me a privileged window upon matters of an international scope as well, but I prefer to be left out of those matters as well, beg me in cooing tones though they will. Despite all that, hypocrite that I am, ask me about Iran and, as expected, I will hit the ceiling. Do I have an opinion about

Iran? You're goddamned right I do. Am I passionate about Iran? Does this burst blood vessel tell you anything? Of course I'm passionate about Iran. How could anyone NOT be passionate about a thing like that? Do I know anything about Iran? Well, you know, very little. But, that doesn't prevent *me* from having an opinion and it doesn't prevent me from wringing your neck if your opinion goes against mine.

I'd really prefer to deal with something I can actually do something about however. (Why do I feel I need to add: And that is not a crime?)

I listen to the news coming from that part of the world of course, but during its delivery I do a lot of fidgeting and gazing about the room as if stupefied. For some reason I find myself tugging at my lower lip, idiot-fashion, while the commentators go on and on and on about the Middle East, leaving me further and further behind as they trudge slowly, endlessly onward. Admittedly, I know less than most good people...or at least less than most good people claim to know. Does it help if I say I sometimes feel bad about that? If I were to admit that I don't really give a damn about the Middle East, where would that leave me? I have my suspicions, and so, I won't admit that quite yet. But I will say this: If those people want us out of there, let's give them what they want. Let's take the billions of dollars we give to countries which despise us and simply leave. If they yearn so desperately to continue to live in the 14<sup>th</sup> century with tribal culture and goatherd economies, we shouldn't try to persuade them or convince them or attempt

to drag them into a better or (as some would have it) a different state. Personally, I truly don't give a damn, but in the most aggressive way.

My dear wife tells me that the flag burners in these countries represent only a very small part of those countries. So, thank you for that. Let's give that small part of those countries what that small part is askin' for and maybe, with us gone, the larger part of the populace will do something about them, in order to tap into the funds we'll be taking with us when we go. Yeah, I know you can't condemn an entire country because of a few, but there's no reason we should have to fall victim to their wacko fringe. "You guys take care of your problem—make it safe for us to be there—and we'll be glad to talk to you again. Meanwhile, we wish you luck." Many others, who are much more informed than I am, tell me that if we pulled out of every country that takes our money and hate our guts, someone else (China seems to be the favorite) will step in and establish economic relations with them. I say, Fine. Let China deal with 'em. Let China give them their money and become the focus of their blistering discontent. Let 'em see China as the ultimate evil on earth.

For reasons I am at a loss to explain, I do think about Iran a lot. I do. Naturally, like any sane person I wonder how long we are going to let that goddamned stupid little prick dick around with us. And like any reasonable person I've been going around for years screaming about what *I* would do if *I* were in control. This occasionally involved pounding on some available nicely-polished wooden surface and setting knick-knacks a-rattle. Exclusively for your delight, here's

my rant: Every time that stupid little prick placed *one* brick upon another—ONE BRICK—in such a way that it even *looked* like it *might* become a nuclear facility, I'd fly in and level it. And, if he did it again, I'd fly in and level it again. But it's far too late for that now and sadly or thankfully (your choice) I'm not in control...in every sense of the word it would seem. When it comes to Iran, I'm not in control. But, boy, if I were...

What if I were to say that, *because* I'm not in control, *because* I have no say in that matter, more important to me than Iran is my very dear wife's happiness? This is something I do have some control over. Until whatever the hell it is that's going on in Iran impinges upon that, I'm pretty much staying out of it. What if I were to say that there are people whose job it is to take care of Iran—they're paid pretty well, and some of their pay comes out of my wallet—and that they might (it's possible) know more about that kind of thing than I do; and we are pretty much in their hands when it comes to things Iranian whether they know what they're doing or not, whether we understand what they're doing or not, like it or not. No matter what *we* think, *they* are going to do whatever *they* think is right or necessary or most suitable or will advance their own careers. It hardly matters; what they say and think and do, whatever their motives, might have some real effect on Iran. Anything I might say or think or do has none, and cannot, and never will. The destruction of an occasional precious knick-knack somewhere in northern California probably has little effect in Iran.



At least they—the ones we’ve put in place to deal with such stuff—have a shot at it. I want to state this as concisely and clearly as I can. I am not indifferent, I am not apathetic, I am not decadent. Being apolitical doesn’t mean that I don’t care, it only means that I reserve the right to care more about things I can actually take action and do something about. I care about the people in my life and the things around me. To focus on that is no crime.

There are so many things that need to be addressed, fixed, reformed and we’ve put people in place to do that work.

Naturally, I hope what they decide to do in these matters is the right thing—not that I know what that might be—but, what if they don’t? Either way, they aren’t asking me for suggestions. Though I have my fair share of ideas, they ain’t askin’. I have things closer to home to worry about anyway, dogs and wives and mortgages and this damnable itch and wait a minute, where’d this lump come from? Is it selfish of me to tend to these matters first? Or would it be, as some would have it, more noble of me to pretend to struggle to understand the Iranian side of things? Actually, as far as a State doing what they wish without the interference of any other State—something I’ve heard that stupid little prick espouse—I see it. And I agree with him. But that door swings both ways and we need to do what we need to do too. One brick upon another...)

As for the rest of that apparently miserable neighborhood, I don’t know anything about the Middle East (if that is what it is). Here are just a few of the many things I don’t know about it. I don’t know how many U.S. troops are *in that*

*area of the world* or, really, what they do there. I mean, I don't really understand the nature of their work there or whether it is going well, or going not so well. I imagine it's pretty hot and pretty dirty and pretty tough and a thankless goddamned endless task. I know I wouldn't want to do it myself. It has to look that way to anyone, no matter what side of the fence they may find themselves looking from. But, there's a lot of screaming on either side of the issue back here at home, where we sleep peacefully in our soft, warm beds at night and walk our dogs on the beach during the day, and just generally live our lives without the fear that someone who we have never met or talked to wants nothing more than to blow us into little tiny bits of flesh and sudden saddening realization.

If passion were the means by which to judge such stuff, I'd have to conclude that all sides are absolutely right when it comes to the Middle East. And, if you've decided it's necessary for you to be there, thank you for your very good and noble work and may God protect you.

I cannot tell you the names of the indigenous religious factions that are involved in the mess over there (because I don't know them and will not take the time to learn). From what I gather, they all emerge from the womb, their little arms flailing around wildly in the air, desperate to lay their tiny hands upon any weapon small enough for their chubby little fingers to grasp and operate in a lethal manner. Apparently the various sects all raise their children to hate each other with so much venom that the poor kids can hardly sit in one place for any amount of time unless it's to study how to kill someone who might hold even the slightly

variance of their own personal beliefs and sing songs about that sweet day's arrival. Apparently, they have all been brought up in this joy-filled manner for countless generations and, if the past is any indicator, will continue to do so for generations to come. I know even less about the religious sources which inspire and perpetuate such savage, brutal and just plain goddamned stupid behavior. (Apparently life isn't hard enough for them.) Most of them claim to be adherents to 'The Religion of Peace' and "the Party of God". I don't know anything at all about such a wretched peace, or such a vicious god.

I know this much however—their common hatred for the United States of America is not, at present, yet strong enough to divert the majority of them from the minute by minute sacred task of hating and killing each other. We can thank their god for that. Still, some of them are working on it and, as I write this, their hatred for the United States seems to be advancing in leaps and bounds. Of course, I won't even hint at my opinion on that matter here; it's not the place for it. But let me say only this, their ideas about how to establish peace strike me as maybe just a bit too primitive. Sure you can achieve a temporary sort of peace by beheading everyone you don't particularly like, but the remaining relatives may prove somewhat more resistant to your follow-up offer, assuming they've learned their lesson.

The select few (or so we're assured) who have diverted themselves to focus their hatred upon *us* probably think that we are a nation of near-sighted, small minded, greedy, self-serving, grinning, mirror-worshipping maniacs who

joyfully do everything we can every minute of every single day to distance ourselves further from God. They probably think that we've created our own weird, little, artificial, imitation reality, largely built upon the vilest aspects of man's greedy nature and the most vulgar imaginings from the darkest foul and forbidden parts of the male mind, which (by definition alone I would guess) has nothing whatever to do with Life or the real value of the best things which Life might offer. And they'd be right.

What honest man among us could argue with that keen observation? I mean, who would even attempt to deny it? If that is what they think of us, no wonder they envy us and hate us with equal passion; no wonder allure and repulsion are inextricably entwined in their feverish minds. No one I know would bother to pretend he didn't understand such confusion on the part of any outside observer. Many of us are beginning to feel that same confusion ourselves but cannot yet either understand it or admit it or put it into words. It's pretty comfortable here right now, though if we ever looked at ourselves with any seriousness, it would probably become pretty damned uncomfortable. And I think many of us sense that.

Nonetheless, neither my complete lack of information on *them*, nor my peculiar, albeit oblique, somewhat vague attempt to understand how they see us, has prevented me from readily formulating and thereafter forever clinging dearly, firmly, unflinchingly to my own small-minded, now sacred, and therefore necessarily correct, opinion. The perceptive among you may have already detected that

between the lines. Nor does it prevent me from nurturing my misunderstandings, quietly, humbly, silently, either sullenly or smugly, at any rate protectively, perhaps just a bit fearfully...or from expressing it boldly, defiantly, whenever I find myself in the midst of others (oh, how rare it is) who I'm pretty good-goddamned sure hold the very same opinion with equal or greater fervor and or fear. Nor has it prevented me from seeing how others who hold weird, deviant, unjustifiable and unexplainable opinions—opinions different than mine—are all morons.

The only difference, I suppose, is that I can dismiss the misguided in this world without feeling the need to confront them, correct them, chastise them, or dispatch them to another world.

## OUR LACK OF APPREHENSION

“It’s easy to imagine the person who does not agree with you is an idiot. The difficult thing is to imagine that they are rational, like yourself, and, like yourself, they’ve reached their conclusions honestly.” *Darryl Mockridge*

We find ourselves in a world in which everybody knows that they themselves are right and anyone (everybody) who doesn’t agree with them is wrong. Very few of us seem to have any qualms at all about expressing the fact. That is not to say that some of us are not without charm, many of us are full of wit, a few wear the false face of Sincerity in a perfectly convincing manner whenever that might prove useful. (It’s all in the eyebrows.) That aside, many of us assume that there are some truly good people out there, and many of us remain convinced that we can be counted among them. (I make no such claim myself.) Fortunately, in this world, the good people all agree with us; unfortunately we have no idea what’s wrong with the rest of ‘em. The feeling that anyone who doesn’t agree completely with you on every aspect of every matter is an idiot, seems to be almost universal, and it doesn’t matter what the cause or issue.

Only a complete fool ever says, “I don’t know.” Forget the semi-mystical wisdom that those who know don’t say and those who say don’t know. (I’m already 12,000 words into proving that one on my own.) So, where does that leave me?

It leaves me thinking.

The problem is that the best of us and the least of us alike confuse our instinct—our natural inclination, if that's what it is—with inspiration or genius or Fate. And that would be OK if we take the next step and recognize that there are various types of genius, some more flawed than others, some evil, some unkind, and then take the further step to at least consider the possibility that our own instincts may themselves be flawed. Perhaps it *is* legitimate to accredit every one of us with genius, but why does such broadcast genius leave us with so many conflicting views on every issue facing mankind? There is a thing called dilemma which I almost never find myself confronting (such is my vision), but I'm sure some of you must.

## THE FLICKERING OF SELF-DOUBT

It is easy for anyone to say what they would do in another's situation; and that is the essence of, perhaps all personal, community, national, as well as international conflict. This *instinct* that we do the right thing and will do the right thing and would, under any circumstance do the right thing, comforts us. We cling to it with a kind of pride; there's joy in it too because it allows us to judge others, who clearly have not done the right thing and wouldn't recognize the right thing if they pulled it out of their pocket and, after unfolding it, successfully deciphered the almost unreadable notes written along the edge in their own hand.

Couple that instinct (inextricably it would seem) with each individual's survival-based tendency to be self-approving, self-convinced, self-deceptive, and things become not only complicated but, at times at least, uncomfortable, volatile and dangerous (hopefully for the other guy).

Take the example of an old priest, doctor, lawyer, car salesman—whomever you might have the most respect for (or, if you choose, find most reprehensible), who in the dark of night, while driving home, strikes a pedestrian with his automobile and, confused or simply awash in self-concern, drives off, leaving his victim to die in the crosswalk. Upon hearing this tale, without any further information, a response is triggered within each of us. With no details, no facts, no statement from any witness, we each automatically take a position on the matter. In deference to his profession, his age, or by considering the fact that accidents are, by definition, accidental, some might say that



his suffering will be punishment enough for his crime. Some may even believe that. Others would condemn the man...and for very much the same reasons. Others will withhold judgment until they know more about the perpetrator, his state of mind, the victim, the situation. Whatever the so-called thinking behind our stance on this matter, we are blind to myriad flaws in our position but see all too clearly the flaws in any other position.

That is the very crux of the dilemma, for those of us who recognize the dilemma at all. Occasionally, for a glimmer of a moment, we recognize that there may be legitimacy in some small part of another view than our own. Thankfully, due to human nature, this is a passing thing. We shake it off quickly and, as quickly begin to shore up our position against any further confusion of thought. Or, at least, that's my method.

In this particular matter—which some would label an open 'n' shut case of hit 'n' run—there are those among us who seem truly saddened by the loss. Though unrelated in any way to the victim, they somehow understand what the victim's family must be going through. There are those who harbor deep-felt compassion for the old man driving late at night. They know what it's like to have a foggy windshield or a moment's distraction at the wheel. Others are outraged, and don't seem to really need a reason. If asked, it's about 'injustice'.

So, there I am stomping around in the living room, slamming things around, alternately muttering and bellowing, barely able to put my indignation into words,

and all before any of the people involved have either names or likenesses. I don't know a damned thing about the matter, but I find myself embroiled in it. How? Why? For lack of anything better to do? No, it's the injustice I see.

Let me confess here that were I seated upon a collapsible stool, at some street corner, involved with my cello—just getting nicely underway, finally recapturing just the right touch upon the strings—and an old priest, doctor, lawyer, car salesman (any one of which I would love dearly) struck down a pedestrian, or mowed down an entire herd of the waddling, dawdling bastards, with his freshly detailed Mercedes—which by rights should be mine—and, after giving me a frightened glance, drove off, leaving his moaning victim or herd of writhing whining victims to die in the crosswalk before my eyes, I would find it a completely unnecessary disturbance and, if asked, I wouldn't know who to blame. As a driver, I'm surprised more pedestrians aren't mowed down intentionally. As a pedestrian, I believe that more city streets should be closed to traffic entirely and planted with grass and lined with trees and benches. I enjoy birds.

Nevertheless, ever heroic in my own mind, later, while carrying my cello home, where I might get some work done without all the hubbub, I begin to build a good case for my thinking on what I'd witnessed. Meanwhile, people who were not there, not anywhere near the place, who have only heard of the incident, no matter their lack of information, begin to build theirs.

## TRUTH FROM THE FRONT

When I was in Nicaragua I stayed (humbly) in a little pension near the InterContinental Hotel in Managua, where all those who could afford it so proudly stayed. That hotel was where all the newspaper and weekly news magazine reporters stayed. The lobby of the InterContinental was the standard meeting place for many travelers, whether they stayed there or not. So, in the morning I would meet up with someone there and prepare to go out amongst the people—you know, check things out for myself. And each morning, almost immediately after breakfast, these hotshot reporters took to the bar and settled in. They were an impressive lot—grumpy and stern-looking at first, loud and jovial as the day wore on, and their posturing was difficult to ignore. When I came back from my excursion, in the afternoon, those same big-time foreign correspondents were still in that bar, having a great time. From appearances, they hadn't even moved from their seats.

At three o'clock a silent alarm went off and they would all dash out of the bar, race across the lobby toward the phone banks, and grab any available phone. There they would call their editors and file their story for the day. (You can smell the sour grapes already, can't you?) At that point I took a seat on a couch nearby and listened to them (comma) one afternoon (comma) as they dictated their columns (comma) and it gave me great insight into the manner in which this was done (period. Next paragraph.)

I had the distinct feeling that while I was out in the countryside poking around under an ever-oppressive sun,

these guys stayed inside, in that nicely air-conditioned bar and only got up to empty their bladders. So, who knows the source of the information they used in those reports? My guess was that they were fabricated from US State Department reports—which were floated around there daily—mixed with hearsay, mutually-contrived half-drunken bullshit, and what they overheard from people, like myself, entering or returning to the hotel after being out in the real world. One day I was sicker than usual and hung around the hotel lobby all day, and, as I'd suspected, those clowns did not leave that bar for that entire day. YET, when three o'clock rolled around they all dashed toward the phone bank (comma) and filed their reports as usual (period, end end end.)

I'll pretend I don't know why that bothered me so much, and admit that it was none of my business. If these correspondents for large respectable news magazines were winging it, what did that have to do with me? Still it nagged. And when I got home sweet home again I fired off a brief note to the Editor in Chief of U. S. News and World Report. It was the only news weekly I subscribed to, because they handled things consistently in an impressively even-handed manner. I told the editor where I'd been and what I had seen in pretty much the same way I've just told you. Caught up temporarily in a kind of rhetorical righteous indignation, I (huffishly—if that's a word) ended my note by saying: 'I'm surprised and somewhat saddened to discover that U. S. News and World Report should swallow whole whatever the State Department puts out.' Lick it, seal it, stamp it, drop it in the old mailbox on the corner. Congratulations. Good work, citizen!

Boy, that was a mistake!

In response—almost immediately—I got a scathing letter from the Editor in Chief of U. S. News and World Report, saying (amongst other things), “We DO NOT swallow whole anything from any source!” Of course there was nothing I could say to that. I was impressed (frightened) with the gentleman’s passion for the integrity of his publication. But now, almost thirty years later, I would like to say this to U. S. News and World Report: Bullshit. Just because you don’t want to hear it doesn’t mean it’s not true.

(new paragraph) Things happened down there (bold, cap)  
EXACTLY as I told you they had.  
(period, end end end)

On the other hand, I remember clearly one evening, back in San Francisco, when a gentleman turned and looking down upon me, asked somewhat regally, “And WHEN was the last time you were IN Central America, Mr. Fool?”

It might be better if you knew that, prior to that wonderful moment, this somewhat huffy gentleman had been going on and on about El Salvador this and Sandinistas that, and Central America and Communist insurrections he had known, and whether it was all worth it or not, and I had been standing there quietly listening. Then, he mentioned something he’d read in Newsweek. I interrupted to say, “Chaaaauh! Those correspondents all hang out together in the hotel bar all day. They only get up to read the State Department’s daily press release, and to parrot it over the phone as their personal observations from the front.”

After I said that he turned to me, and raised up upon his impeccable heels and looked sternly down upon me, and, sure of victory, with an unwavering critical glare and swelling condescension inquired, “And WHEN was the last time you were IN Central America, Mr. Fool?”

Oh GLORIOUS moment!

I was immediately filled with an effervescent joy of the purest sort. I could have floated up off that floor and, while hovering there at eye level, looked him straight and unflinchingly in the orbs and shouted: I was there last week you smug, unbearable bastard. LAST WEEK! But I didn’t. I remained calm about it, and meek—the perfect balance to his smugness—and very quietly told him that I had just recently returned.

So, here’s a question for you. Did that man take the opportunity to ask me anything further? Did he stop huffing and puffing long enough to do that? Did he consider for even the briefest moment that I might provide him with additional information with which to temper his view? No. He glared at me as if I might be the enemy for a bit, let out a little puff of aristocratic air to dismiss any value I may have mistakenly thought I might possess as a fellow human being, turned and walked away. He knew at that moment which side of the *give ‘em guitar strings or bomb ‘em fence* I stood. And I knew the same about him.

It’s a big fence.

And that’s OK.

But, offered a ladder, neither one of us would have taken it.

## THE REAL PROBLEM

Here's an interesting thought:

On those matter about which I am absolutely certain that I am correct; matters about which I may actually have some firsthand knowledge; matters of which I have enough passion to have read about extensively and have gathered facts from sound, reasonable and assumedly unbiased sources; matters which I have discussed at length with others who have done, in their own time, the same kind of investigation; matters which have found a place to dwell within my heart of hearts for long hours, weeks, months, while I mulled over the facts in all aching honesty and purest innocence, and have finally drawn a conclusion without prejudice; *in those matters* there are, out there, maybe not so far away either, other clear thinking, intelligent individuals, good people who, like me, have actual firsthand knowledge and who have discussed the matter with other informed individuals and who have read about it and thought about it and have anguished and wept and prayed over it, and maybe even have spilled a little of their own blood in pursuit of the truth in the matter, who have, in all honesty, without any doubt, reached *the exact opposite conclusion*.

THAT is the problem.

Personally, I have problems trying to accept anyone who looks me in the eye and tells me up is down, and I have been know to handle it badly. Thankfully, it only becomes painful when that person who is telling me these lies is someone I know to be irreproachable in all other matters.

At times we really do seem to be suspended between two contrasting realities and some of us see only the one and some of us see only the other. It's a kindness on my part to use the phrase 'at times' though, because this possibility is driven home relentlessly every hour of every single day. I don't think it used to be that way... but maybe I'm wrong. OR, maybe I'm just grumpy. But, every single day I am confronted with people saying things (almost always of a political nature) which are simply not true. I look at them and have to believe that they know that what they are saying is not true, but they show no signs of anything other than sincerity. I look them in the eye, and they do not blink. Many of these statements are not only untrue but are blatantly the exact opposite of the truth. How can this be? One of us must be wrong; I'm sure it's not me, they're sure it is. Their unflinching passion is proof of that.

Unfortunately, my sudden withdrawal from the field of battle is too often seen as an admission that I realized, due to their persuasive powers, how very wrong I am.

Either way, that is the problem, and we can't face it... or won't face it... or don't know how to face it. Few of us have begun to figure out what to do about it. But where does that get us? It doesn't get us anywhere. It leaves us where we lie, out in the woods somewhere, lost, thrashing away wildly... half of us either liars or deranged.

In the intro: I said, ... *though in complete disagreement with him, I didn't know what I was talking about either*...and I stand by that. I still don't know what I'm talking about. I wish I did, but I haven't the vocabulary



necessary to convince myself, let alone you. More importantly, I don't believe that it matters. If you're right and I'm wrong, I'm good with that. If I'm right and you're wrong, I won't hold it against you. I won't even try to convince you otherwise. Why it doesn't matter is that neither you—right or wrong—nor I—wrong or right—are in the position to DO anything about most of the stuff *you* seem to be so frequently getting all het-up about.

The painful part is, I don't believe that those who *are* in a position *to do something about things* know any more than you or I do, and they may care less than either of us. Of course, if I thought they did know and do care, THAT would be a big problem, because then I'd wonder why they continually make such idiotic decisions.

So, let's forget those guys for now.

Let's go back to the good, honest, intelligent people who, by whatever means, have drawn an opinion completely opposite to mine. For me this has always been something of a problem until I opened up my eyes and saw how our friends who teach diversity, tolerance, and acceptance handle that. Yes, the realization that other good, honest, intelligent, thinking, caring people may hold reasoned opinions which are diametrically opposed to our own is an undeniable problem, *but* it is only a problem *if* we fail to demonize those good people. Bingo! Problem solved!

If we sneer at them, or laugh at them, or deride them, calling them: (for example) a puppet, an asshole, a moron, a stupid bastard, a mindless zombie for the Republican regime (all good choices for the neophyte) then the

problem vanishes. If we choose to think of these people, who see things differently than we do, as idiots or malcontents or losers, the problem goes away. If we look them in the eye, and trembling with indignation, say, ‘You just don’t get it, do you?’ the problem disappears. It simply no longer exists. From there on it’s clear sailing. We’re right, they’re wrong; it’s that simple.

Very recently, some of us have discovered that every wrong, every evil, every irritation, every inconvenience, every insult that any of us has ever faced in our lives is either the result of George Bush or racism. This discovery has simplified things greatly. When tying my shoe this afternoon the string broke and, since I knew it wasn’t racism, I cursed George Bush roundly.

If we insist upon diversity of everything but thought, things remain cool. I’m over here, on the right, basking under the golden light of God’s inspiration with my blessed opinion ... and then, out there, in the dark shadows of unbelievable ignorance and nearly stunning, jaw-dropping stupidity, is everybody else. Who knows the source of their idiocy? “No problem,” as the kids behind the counter always say. There’s no need for further discussion. We all know who’s right, we all know—whether *they* can admit it or not—who’s dreadfully, laughably wrong.

So then this is where we find ourselves. I have my opinion, you have your opinion, we all have our opinion on every matter on earth, and we all, each and every one of us, is completely and unwaveringly convinced, at every juncture, on every matter, that—of all the opinions out there—our

opinion is the correct one. Everyone who doesn't agree with that is either gullible, an idiot, or, maybe, just maybe, outright intentionally evil. We harbor no apprehension, have no qualms, consider no doubt. If I am reasonable, moral, rational and sane—are those who disagree with me unreasonable, immoral, irrational and insane? That's one possibility.

Another possibility is this:

The urge to foist your opinion upon the world is not a crime, to believe that it has universal value might be, but you're only robbing yourself.

At least you gotta admit I'm right about that.

THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN  
COMMUNISM AND DEMOCRACY  
An Overview

COMMUNISM

1. Launched and driven by an ideal which, nobly, includes everyone
2. Everyone struggles mightily to attain that ideal

DEMOCRACY

1. Launched and driven by an ideal which, nobly, includes everyone
2. Everyone struggles mightily to attain that ideal

COMMUNISM

3. Men are put in place to represent the people, and to implement, oversee and protect that glorious ideal

DEMOCRACY

3. Men are put in place to represent the people, and to implement, oversee and protect that glorious ideal

COMMUNISM

4. Mysteriously, these men all become fat and very VERY rich

DEMOCRACY

4. Mysteriously, these men all become fat and very VERY rich

## COMMUNISM

5. Everyone else works to keep them in power and support them in luxury

## DEMOCRACY

5. Everyone else works to keep them in power and support them in luxury

Admittedly, these are just the basics, but I think the differences are perfectly clear. I've skipped the part where malcontents begin to grumble, for now. But, it is somewhat telling that, whatever the nature of the government, after a while, people always seem to get a little antsy for change.

Some people think that what they do along those lines—protests, calls, letters, petitions, getting out the vote—will make that change happen. The rest of us, though seemingly unconcerned, *hope* that what they do will change things, but have our doubts. What we know that they seem to have forgotten is that there are also among us people who believe they can summon their guardian angels to find them a parking space, and dark old women with pointy chins and moles in the most distracting places who think they can ‘draw down the moon’ (whatever that might mean)...and they believe it as surely as kids believe in the Easter Bunny, and full-grown adults with skateboards and nose rings believe they have influence on politics.

This much we know, under every political system—by any name or structure—we all get our share of heat. The poor get theirs in the summer, the rich get theirs in the winter. And, in every state throughout the history of mankind those

in power have always done what they can to make life comfortable for themselves—and for some of their friends—and, whether that makes it miserable for the rest of us probably doesn't really enter into the matter. OUR representatives [insert raucous laughter here] like to have us believe that it does, because they have such a strong urge to remain in power. But under any form of government leaders, once ensconced, will, when necessary, viciously, defend their lofty, comfortable position. Once they're in place it's a matter of entitlement. That's what power does to anyone small minded enough to yearn for it.

Of the various factors that toppled the Soviet Union—great authority that I am on that matter—predominant among them seemed to be the clumsy, systemic, avarice-driven, almost laughable ineptitude of the sleazy-looking smalltime criminals who somehow (my guess is brute force) found themselves at the top of that system and wished nothing more than stay there, imposing their control over every goddamned thing in sight, while at the same time laying claim to every thing of value (either real or imagined) which they could get their greedy little mitts on. (I'd be interested, of course, in hearing what someone who actually knows something about that might say of course.)

Call it whatever you want, the nagging desire for change, which *some people* demand, can only, inevitably, lead to that. THAT, is, after all, above all, and underlying all, what politics, by any name, is about. People with an innate desire to rule over others try to get themselves in a position where they can satisfy that desire. If such desires don't drive you, you won't even consider going into politics. If such desires

do drive you, you would never consider doing anything else, for example, an honest day's work among people who are clearly not your equal. But then, if you're infested with the desire to rule, you're probably not much good for anything else. What's a poor aristocrat to do?

I always get this quote wrong and I apologize in advance but, Abe Lincoln said something along the lines of, "No man is good enough to govern another man without that man's consent." I feel like that quote should read "No good man *has any desire* WHATSOEVER to rule over any other man." So, in my tiny mind, the crime is not that people desire positions where they can tell us what to do; it is that they WANT such positions; they WANT to tell us what to do. They want our money to throw away thoughtlessly—or at least as much of our money as they can get to throw away before borrowing from other sources. The greater crime, of course, is that we go along with it. There's very little questioning—a lot of grumbling at times—but very little questioning. We know our place.

I have to think that politicians have really missed the point of what we're here for...you know, Life and all that. Or at least I truly hope they have. And, we've missed the point as well if we spend any time at all dealing with them unnecessarily.

Henry Edward Fool

## PLEASE “LIKE” MY NEW COUNTRY

Oh, so, did I tell you, I’ve, like, decided to start my own country! One day I realized that this country-thang is the biggest scam on earth, and, like, *anybody can do it*, man.

So, I gave it some thought, and, well, I’m starting my own country! Citizenship is free, of course.

### YES ! FREE CITIZENSHIP!

Everybody’s welcome. And since my country has no borders, there’s none of that *legal* or *illegal* crap. Live wherever you want and still maintain your citizenship in my country. There’s no pledge of allegiance, nothing to sign. We have no flag. Our motto is something like, “That’s fine with us, man. Do what you want.” I don’t really have it all worked out yet. I don’t even have a name for this country. Maybe you could make a suggestion. We could have a contest, or something. Anyway...

In *my* country there will be no rules, no laws, no government. So... no governmental interference ... and almost **no taxes!**

No IRS. No tax forms to fill out. Run your personal finances the way YOU want to run ‘em. My country’s taxes will be *the lowest in the world!* Just 1%. Better yet, you only pay taxes *for the first three years* of citizenship, and NEVER pay another penny of taxes again, EVER. That’s right, send me 1% of your income for three years and that’ll be it, good citizen. Just ONE PERCENT!

### NEVER PAY ANOTHER PENNY!

In return, I promise to pass no laws, and ask nothing more from you, EVER. We’ll stay completely out of your way. You won’t even know we exist.

So, **WELCOME** good citizen! Welcome.

**Join today!**



## An OVERLY SIMPLISTIC APOLITICAL VIEW of EL SALVADOR, sometime around 1982

I forget the details, as I always do—not *conveniently*, as some have suggested, because *I never knew* much about it—but, at some point I became interested in the war the United States government felt it was necessary to wage against subsistence farmers in El Salvador. I don't know if the fact that I was, at that time, carrying-on alternately with the church organist and one of her teenaged daughters adds much to the story, so I'll say no more about that. My involvement in the Salvadoran conflict was the then all-too-typical, *Sure-I'll-Carry-Medicines-Down-There-If-I-Have-UN-Credentials*. That was the extent of my involvement. I carried some basic medicines, every ounce of which mysteriously vanished en-route, and a few musical instruments, which, as I had supposed, carried a kind of immediately effective medicine of their own when taken up in the eager hands of people who had been driven out of their country by war.

The musical instruments were donated by a friend of mine who quite rightly said something to this effect: 'I don't know anything about that war. I don't want to know anything about that war. But, I am a dealer in musical instruments, and those poor people sound like they could use some musical instruments. He concluded that thought by saying, "What would you like?" I told him that there were kids in the camps, and he said, "Hey, I have these penny whistles; I bet the kids would like those. And guitar strings, I bet those guys are finding it tough to get a good set of strings..."

That was his view on the matter.  
I love clear thinking.

The war in El Salvador, as far as I could understand it, looked something like this:

The oligarchy had been living quite well for many many years by making good use of the poor farmers and poorer factory workers in that country—along with anyone else not of their immediate family. When someone inadvertently spilled the news to the coffee pickers that the beans they broke their backs picking, at 5 cents for 50 pounds, was making a lot of other people all over the world truly quite *comfortable* while they continued to live in poverty, they began to wonder if life couldn't be kinder. At some point they began to discuss the possibility quietly amongst themselves. The corporations these people worked for—thinking of their employees as the enemy rather than the source of their wealth—had their ears constantly open. They didn't want to hear any grumbling; they wanted quiet workers. They wanted to maintain the status quo. But, once the workers started thinking about the possibility of a humane existence for themselves, their families and their offspring, things only got worse.

Someone had actually suggested to the corporations that some small portion of the four god-zillion percent profits they were taking might be used in other ways, paying a decent wage for example. This was offensive of course. The corporations were deeply hurt. It was selfish and ungrateful and, well, (insert sobbing here) just so offensive.

(They couldn't even talk about it. It's just too upsetting...)

The United States government, hearing about this unrest, stepped in. They felt the need to represent the interests of US-owned corporations down there, which had business dealings with the oligarchy. Why? Who knows? It could only be one of those boardroom things.

“You know, Thom, we got a bunch of our workers down there in Bananaland making noises. They want this and they want that. It’s some kind of goddamned communist infestation. You think you can convince somebody over there at the Pentagon to put an end to it?”

So, a decision was made to insure tranquility in the region, using strafing helicopters and 500 pound bombs. These methods had been used successfully (well...you know... kinda successfully) in the war in Viet Nam, so they thought they would be truly persuasive tools to use in this instance. Their thinking went something like this:

When it comes to convincing the locals that Democracy is a glorious thing, nothing beats the utter destruction of their villages and fields, and the midnight disappearance of any young male who might have other ideas.

Still, somehow the relentless, vicious, arbitrary, bloody persecution by a massive foreign power, which many of these people had only heard spoken of in the most wondrous and glorious of fantasies, left the locals unconvinced that Democracy was truly right for them. Given the choice between Democracy—with its open support of their oppressors and the arbitrary destruction of their livelihood—OR, Socialism, whatever the hell that might be, they began to pick sides. The choice seemed a simple one, Democracy and bombs or any other alternative,

by whatever name you wish to give it, that might lead to life without terrorism and the perpetuation of oppression. Many sided with the current government, finding the fact that Juan next door had been dragged out of his house in the middle of the night and found dead in the street a few days later without his head or with his genitals in his mouth, a persuasive argument for loyally shrugging on the Salvadoran military's colors. Others, having been told that Socialism came with the slim hope that the nightmare might some day end, chose that slim hope—those that lived to choose at all.

Throughout all of this, most of these good people—like good people everywhere throughout the world and throughout human history—only wished to be left alone to live out their lives of quiet, unassuming drudgery, in simplistic happiness, and relative peace.  
(I'm just guessing.)

For the US government, the fear was, I think, that, left unbombed and un-strafted, these people might, at some point, rise up and overthrow the oligarchy and, maybe for a little while live the simple quiet lives they so longed for, unsuppressed by anyone of any known political stripe. Left to their own devices down there, things here at home were bound to get all out of whack. If US-based corporations with operations down there were forced to start paying a living wage to their workers, who knows where that might lead? They knew where that would lead of course: it would lead to the good people of the United States paying reasonable prices for products produced in that region, and that haunting possibility was just too much to bear.

So, that was the situation as I understood it.

Actually, I didn't even understand that much. That's the way it looked to some people however.

What I understood was that people were living in refugee camps—having been driven from their country by a bloody war—and that carrying some medicine and a few musical instruments down there to them would reinforce what they already understood: that the actions of the US government do not always represent the will of all of the people of the United States: a distinction made consistently to me by every Salvadoran refugee I came into contact with both down there and elsewhere.

My decision to go there was based solely on the idea that *if I were living in a refugee camp*, I'd probably like somebody to stop by once in a while with medicine and maybe a few musical instruments. And when they did, I'd be sure to take the time to say, "Hey, you know, I can see that, given the choice between dropping bombs on us or being nice, you've decided to be nice, and I think I speak for every here when I say, we really appreciate that; we've got enough trouble in our lives at the moment."

I'm guessing that's the level at which others who went down there at that time had made their decisions as well.

For most of the characters in this human drama, this seemingly endless series of gruesome events was *not* a political matter. It had *the appearance* of a political matter for the poor Salvadorans, but, if I had to guess, I'd guess

their stance was probably, “Look, give us any political system you want, CALL it anything you want, just let us have a little freedom, treat us with a modicum of respect and, in the Name of All That is Holy, STOP destroying our crops and killing us. Destroying our crops and killing us doesn’t produce the effect you think it does. Destroying our crops and killing us has a negative effect.” It had the appearance of a political matter for those people who brought aid to these people either inside El Salvador or in the refugee camps in Honduras as well. But caring for people devastated by war is not a political matter.

The only people who saw it as a straight-up, cold political matter (and you tell me if this might be merely a coincidence) were also the only people killing anybody. If you were in El Salvador at that time, on any side of the issue, and you were involved in killing people, you were more likely than not politically driven. If you were in El Salvador at that time and you were *not* killing people—let’s say you were there to comfort them in some way, or help them to survive in the midst of the onslaught—you probably didn’t see it as a political matter. More likely you saw it as a matter of human kindness (and may God bless each and every one of you for your good work).

I must humbly submit that more was done to promote the cause of Democracy down there with penny flutes, crayons and guitar strings than by the 360 million dollars per year the US government spent on war equipment for the oppressors.

So, after my little stint carrying medicine and guitar strings and pens (they loved pens), and the goodwill and prayers of clear thinking, kind hearted, caring American citizens, to homeless Salvadoran peasant farmers living unwanted, in squalor, in UN managed Honduran refugee camps, I returned home and faced the coffee dilemma.

The coffee dilemma was this: Did I buy coffee from Central America knowing that the workers got 5 cents for *fifty pounds* of beans, or did I refuse to buy Central American coffee—in a kind of lame and useless protest—knowing that, if enough of us didn't, the good people we cared for most in that conflict would be out of work and wouldn't even earn that one precious nickel? It was, of course, more complicated than that, but not by much. At any rate, that was as much as I could make of it.

Of course, my decision hardly matters because, whatever it was, most people will have no difficulty seeing the gaping flaws in it. My compassion-driven pseudo-logic has proven irritating, frustrating and laughable to many people, and more times than I can count. So, I know it's not enough to declare that my heart was with those poor people and if wishing could make it so I'd wish them the simple lives of peace they seemed to want so earnestly and certainly—if there is a God in heaven—deserved. Meanwhile, as to drinking coffee from Central America, frankly, after giving it much thought, I did not know which was the right thing for me to do. (note the words: for me)

Nobody I spoke to did either, though few would admit it. Some pretended to have the answer—and I listened to

arguments on both sides—but I always felt that, underlying each point of view, I could detect my lecturer's own doubts. They themselves were not entirely sure. As they spoke to me, the impression that each of them was looking at his own argument and trying to convince himself, grew stronger. So, that didn't help me much.

The REAL point however is this: Maybe we don't have enough of that un-sureness in our lives. Not enough dilemma. Not enough self-doubt. Not enough anguish. Perhaps we don't have all the facts. Maybe we don't know all the answers. Perhaps, if we did know all of the facts, it would make things more difficult. Maybe, we need more hesitancy and more thought. Perhaps, we should question ourselves more. Especially in vital matters.

That's my opinion.

I'm sure you can see the flaws in it.



## THE PROBLEM WITH GOOD AND HONEST PEOPLE

You could place everything I know about politics under either eyelid and wear it around for days without any discomfort whatsoever. The only political conclusions I've ever reached are drawn from my extremely limited experience with voting. It pretty much amounts to this: if I thought some issue was important enough, or some candidate inspiring enough, I registered to vote and then, (unlike many similarly inspired registrants) when the time came, I actually took that little additional step and went to the polls and voted. Eventually over the years, by that sporadic process, I learned that when I voted for anyone or any thing the outcome was guaranteed. In brief, I have *never* voted for *any* candidate at *any* level who was then elected. Never. Not one, and I've voted for people in both major, and more than one lesser, parties. If I voted for them, their destiny was sealed. But, that's just one reason my opinion means less than nothing.

As for propositions, I've experienced two variations on the outcome; the prop I voted for lost in dramatic, crushing defeat, or, if passed, it was immediately dragged into court where the passage was, sometimes instantly, sometimes only after a long, drawn-out heroic struggle, overturned, typically on a technicality. Either way, I always went into the polling place with hope and came away from the process, ultimately, inevitably, predictably, conclusively, disheartened. But, that doesn't mean that anything I am about to say isn't based upon the very coldest objectivity.

Believe me, if there is any topic to which I can bring coldness (not clarity per se, but coldness) it is politics. People who know much more about politics than I—which is anybody—admit that elections are a crapshoot. And, I’m sure that even those who understand politics are confused over how frequently the other bastard wins. From my experience *they* seem to win more than their fair share of elections. In those times when they don’t win, the candidate voted into office—the opposition guy—turns out to be just like the guy voted out. It’s strange, while he was running, he seemed so... different. When asked about this apparent about face he responds, “My constituents tell me...” My question is: What about those constituents who disagree with that?

As a kind of summation of my thinking on such matters let me tell you a story. One evening a very serious young man (distraught, nearly hysterical) collared me, looked me in the eye and, enraged by sudden realization, declared, “Congress has isolated itself from the electorate!” I forget during which particular congressional crisis this took place, there are so many of them, and I can’t tell you why the young man—a guest at this hotel—chose me—a mere desk clerk—to tell this to. I’m also sorry to have to report that I never laughed so hard in my life. My god, I could hardly breathe.

Congress has isolated itself from the electorate? Was that his way of saying that the utter disdain, and sneering contempt members of congress hold for the people who elect them is proudly on display and starkly illuminated through their actions almost every day in almost every

conceivable way? Flashing through my mind was all the presumption, greed, forsaken duty, felonious arrogance, bumbling incompetence, and just plain pie-in-the-face stupidity that defines this gathering of utterly shameless thieves. Replace them all with a thousand honest men, and let nothing but good come of it for the remainder of my stay here on earth, and I'll still go to my grave with the residue of cynicism laying like molten lead in the bottom of my embittered heart. Such is the corrupting nature of the institution itself. Oh the damage these self-serving scoundrels have done to this poor, once trusting, once hopeful, (I almost said *once gentle*, but didn't think you'd fall for it) soul. Yes, it's all their fault.

So, when that innocent declared, "Congress has isolated itself from the electorate!", the image of congress all quietly tip-toeing out the back door struck me as absolutely hilarious. There they go now. Meanwhile, the voting populace has gathered in writhing masses outside the hallowed halls, waiting, yearning, pleading. Look at the hope in their eyes! I couldn't help but laugh. This idea—that congress had *isolated itself from the electorate*—was shocking news to the kid however. I don't know if it was his own idea (a virtual impossibility these days) or he had heard it from someone else, but he felt he needed to inform me, warn me, put me on alert. It was truly touching...and very very very sad. The damned kid must have been 32 years old. The really sad part is that this *distancing* may be news to some people in my father's generation as well; though they are no longer still as innocent, many of them (now in their eighties) remain as trusting as that kid.

Those good, trusting people were all brought up believing that congress was just a bunch of good and honest men, like themselves, doing the very best they could for the people they represented. In those days I guess that was still one possibility. My father tells me that when he was a kid the liars, the thieves, the crooks were all known; everybody knew who they were, by name. They had this thing called community, and scoundrels stood out in the crowd. Gosh what a world that must have been. These days it's the good and honest ones who stand out, and they're all considered fools by an increasingly shallow, increasingly self-serving, increasingly vulgar, increasingly senseless, ever-expanding culture of what everybody insists is 'inclusiveness'.

Just a quick note:

You might think that anything I might say concerning the trusting nature of good and honest people would be, necessarily, purely hypothetical; maybe second hand or more likely guesswork on my part, but my source is rock solid. My father is a good and honest man, and his father before him carried that same dignity within himself. So, though I speak merely from observation, it is close observation and prolonged exposure. I've been around good people all of my life, and I know 'em when I see 'em.

The problem with such folk is that they expect others to be good and honest also. That doesn't mean they are gullible, it only means that they have a natural tendency to trust their fellow man, and to think well of them. Trusting others doesn't mean they'll put up with a lot of nonsense, it just means that, until they have reason to suspect otherwise, they assume any person they are dealing with is being

straight-forward with them. Unfortunately, and unreasonably, that courtesy is extended (stretched) to include automobile salesmen, contractors, financial advisers, and even politicians. In their eyes, their representatives in Congress are probably good and honest. Let's set aside for the moment the almost universal, historically proven, belief among reasonable people that all politicians are basically self-serving liars, and the generally accepted understanding, among anyone who knows anything at all about politics, that the system is riddled with hypocrites from stem to stern, and the somewhat childish hope, held by day-dreamers, ideologues, dopers, ne'er-do-wells, malcontents and drunks, that protests and petitions might mean something to these 'men in power', and assume that people in government are just a bunch of hard working, thoughtful men doing the best they can for the people they supposedly represent. Let's start with that assumption. Let's, for the sake of this argument, set experience and history and breaking news and reality aside for a moment, and, with a straight face if you can manage it, say that these men, these career politicians, our so-called representatives, are all good and honest and true, and they recognize what they are in office to do. In short, let's hold hands and wander together through dreamland.

I mean, for the sake of argument, let's assume we can find an example of such a congressional representative. The challenges that poor fool must face have to be monumental (and by that I mean insurmountable). It's not merely the long-standing, acceptable corrupting nature of the institution such a man must face, it's the ungainly structure

of the damned beast which no man has ever tamed, though many have exploited.

If you have ever worked on any committee, no matter what the cause, then you know that unless one very strong individual takes complete control it's almost impossible to get anything real accomplished in a herd. Imagine what it must be like to be the new kid trying to remain true to your principles in a den full of deeply entrenched, smugly self-convinced, sneering thieves in badly-fitting suits. God knows how many freshly elected—not yet jowly—well-meaning—not yet pig-eyed—champions for the Good have failed the test the first time unmarked cash landed upon their brand new, freshly polished congressional desk. The very best of these men—those who remain loyal to any ideal into their second term—can only find themselves hamstrung by the enormity and complexity of the situation they find themselves in. To remain focused on the humble/heroic/futile task they've been elected to undertake, while being crushed under the massive wheels of the juggernaut of never-ending, ongoing greed and self-aggrandizement of their colleagues, must be nearly impossible. Whatever their intentions going in, being surrounded with a multitude of others, each with *his* own intent, his own agenda, his own desire to have his own way, must be an insufferable if not impossible barrier.

If you've ever gone on a trip with more than one other person, you know what I mean. Actually, now that I think about it, if you have ever gone anywhere with more than one other person, you know what I mean.

My father—a far better man than I could ever hope to become (despite his excellent example)—was brought up to believe that men in government were (for the most part) doing the best they could for the benefit of those they represented. Laugh all you want, that was, I think the common view at some point in time. My father, who has been on this planet many more years than I, and who, just simply knows more than I do about every aspect of Life; who had been to war, and who dropped his three-pack-a-day cigarette habit cold; an engineer who could design a cement plant, rebuild a transmission, construct a stone retaining wall or fix a washing machine (occasionally even without cussing or throwing anything), trusted government (to some degree) for the better part of his life. He believed that government is (for the most part) a gathering of men pretty much like himself. Oh, were that only true!

He clung to those beliefs for most of his adult life, until the flagrant, undeniable (though repeatedly denied) almost endless idiocy of career politicians has now made it impossible for any thinking man to cling any longer to a more idealistic view. So, I've witnessed a transformation in my father's thinking over the years... or perhaps only in that part of his thinking he wished to reveal. Perhaps, as a caring father, he wanted to shield me during childhood, if he could. It's regrettable, but the never-ending antics of these scoundrels has justified every suspicion and generated instant distrust of anything they say or do and has destroyed the long held faith and beliefs of that entire generation. But, unfortunately, any attempt to separate political myth from political reality might also result in converting trusting people into cynics.

That same generation also believed that the man who held the Office of the President of the United States was especially honorable, or at least struggling to remain so. (I suppose some people still think that.) Maybe the President wasn't always an especially gifted man but, by the very nature of his office, he had to be especially respected and maintain the illusion of respectability. They knew that presidents were not perfect of course; they admitted that presidents all had flaws, they had their weaknesses; some were wayward, some were wanton, some were secret lushes, some less than brilliant, some outright idiots. But, from their view, the President of the United States would never intentionally deceive the American people. For example, they believed that if the President of the United States said, "We are NOT in Cambodia," that pretty much meant that US troops were NOT in Cambodia.

So it came as a bit of a surprise when one evening, sometime around 1969, I stood up in my parent's living room, pointed an accusatory finger at the President of the United States on television, and state unequivocally, "That bastard's a liar", then I strode out of the room in a kind of overly-theatrical, morally superior huff. (That's the way we did it in those days. It was all very dramatic.)

The President had just denied that U. S. troops had ever crossed over the border and entered Cambodia (or Laos—I forget which). Apparently crossing that particular border was forbidden for reasons which I didn't understand at the time...and probably would not be capable of understanding today (if I cared enough to investigate). I was, then, as I am today, basically apolitical, relatively uninformed and both



pleased and somewhat proud to be so. I was certainly saner than I might otherwise have been because of that stance.

My father—who had landed in Normandy and who had a hand in driving the Nazis back into Germany and who later would receive the French Legion of Honour—followed me out of the room, clapped a fairly meaningful hand upon my skinny shoulder, spun me around, looked me squarely in the eye, and demanded to know what could have possibly motivated any son raised by him to make such a statement about the President of the United States. Basically what he wanted to know was how an Art student—who divided his time in relatively equal parts between painting, sleeping, and fornicating—could claim to know anything at all about what was then going on in Vietnam. I have to admit that it did seem a little weird for me to imagine I might know as much as the President of the United States about a war I only wished to avoid. But, actually, despite my purposeful un-involvement in the matter, I did. Perhaps I didn't know more, but I knew the truth. My accusation was that the President did too...he just wasn't telling it.

In those days I really wanted nothing more than to be left alone to paint and to smoke a little dope and drink an occasional beer and sleep with whoever was willing to sleep with me (and it still kind of amazes me, and delights me too... well, forget that). Somehow, through that process, a few days before heading home, by chance, a small group of us artists-hopeful spent a couple weird evenings with a young soldier temporarily back from that war. He was telling anybody who would listen to him—and

that was us—that not only had US troops gone *into* Cambodia (or Laos...I forget which) but, that such incursions were regular and on-going. He knew this because he'd taken part in them. Apparently, from what this soldier told us, whenever our guys crossed that forbidden border they carried no picnic baskets. So, between accepting what the President of the United States said on TV, and the word of a soldier who had just come back from over there, I chose to believe the soldier.

After the fact it proved to be the correct choice. Years later, when what he'd told us proved to be perfectly true, everybody, whatever their previous stance on that matter, had to admit it. At the time though, when I told my father what the soldier had said to us, some of his ire was quelled. He too preferred the word of a man in uniform over the unblinking insistence of any politician, whatever his title.

Another turning point in my father's thinking (I'm guessing here) may have been when a nuclear power plant in Pennsylvania, where my parents lived at the time, failed in a near-catastrophic manner. In Pennsylvania the Governor went on television to assure the good trusting people of his state that there was no problem; it was an insignificant event, everything was under control. In California, we were hearing what proved in time to be the real story, that the situation was pretty damned serious, dangerous, and not yet entirely under control. I called home. "I'm surprised it's news out there," my father told me on the phone. "It's really nothing to worry about." I told him what we were hearing, and he responded, "No, no, no. The Governor, Dick Thornburgh, has been on TV saying it's really nothing

to worry about... a little steam got away from them that's all." "That's peculiar, Dad," I said, "they're telling *us* it's still an extremely dangerous situation and there's the possibility of a core meltdown. Either way, stay safe."

My father reassured me that everything was OK. The idea that Dick Thornburgh would ever lie to them didn't occur to either of my good parents. Someone was lying to someone though. As it turned out the Governor of Pennsylvania had been lying straight-faced to the good trusting citizens who had voted him into office and who had placed their trust in him. In return, he placed them in harm's way. He looked them in the eye and told them that everything was OK when it wasn't. It must have been a painful realization for my father when the truth came out.

For me, it hardly required any leap at all—I'd given up on government long ago—it was simply another disgraceful example of politicians doing what they did by natural inclination. The only part I didn't get was, why? By that I mean, where was the money in this? What could any politician gain from lying to his electorate about what danger they were in? The real heartbreak comes from the knowledge that, at that point, the idea that politicians are good and honest people doing the best they can had pretty much been driven from my father's thinking.

## THEY'RE JUST LIKE US

At some point we must each consider whether politicians are all liars and criminals (as I suppose) or whether they are, as previous generations supposed, just like the rest of us. Of course they, like us, sometimes make peculiar utterances and commit outlandish acts in public. And they share our all-too-human trait of struggling to keep our strange proclivities, fatal flaws, weird desires, embarrassing thoughts and feverish feelings hidden from others. They, just like us, are driven by insatiable greed and a relentless, unquenchable, ever-increasing craving for power. So, yes, at first glance they do appear to be just like the rest of us; just ordinary men with ordinary weaknesses. Once we get to know them however, we realize that they are less-than-ordinary men with extraordinary weaknesses which they surrender to readily, and overwhelming drives which they cannot control.

Additionally, they have an exponentially greater number of opportunities to act upon those drives and weaknesses. They are, from all indications, awash in opportunity. Basically, every one of these guys is driving his own ice cream truck, and, as we all know, everybody loves ice cream. Admittedly, I was at one time more like them than unlike them, AND, from that experience I can sympathize. I realize that their most despicable actions only reveal just how much they are like some of us—the worst of us. So, now a better person myself, I bristle. I shake my head in disgust when one of these fine gentlemen is caught and forced to squirm a bit and eventually (sometimes) forced to reveal what he actually is. I can afford to bristle because,

personally, I have no interest in whores, and I have no interest in little boys, and no one has ever offered me large quantities of unmarked cash to do anything.

But, maybe they represent some of us better than we think.

I assume that among the voting populace there are some who harbor such interests, and would, like me, accept the cash if offered. So, it's understandable that they would overlook what the more staid among us might consider unacceptable behavior, and feel no qualm whatsoever about voting for someone who harbors their same interests.

What I can't understand is why politicians, who pretend in public to have no weirdnesses whatsoever, cannot look forward far enough to see that when the truth comes to light it can become an embarrassment and maybe even a problem. Perhaps they can and, looking backward, they see that others have always gotten over it, and usually quite quickly. So, in that aspect these men are not like us. If we did any of the stuff they get away with, we'd go to jail. If we go to jail, we stay put for awhile.

So, if you tabulate things up you'll see that they are like us when it comes to our weaknesses and unlike us when it comes to character, honesty, respectability, self-control, and things like obeying the law and paying their taxes.

But, our 'society' is *evolving* (which is the new word for disintegrating) and we're teaching ourselves that we must embrace those we find loathsome, be they our somewhat surly self-declared enemies or our slightly goofy elected superiors. Some of us, no doubt whatsoever, are bound to continue to struggle with that.

Henry Edward Fool

For me, it remains difficult not to take a disliking to anyone whose sense of morality is nonexistent. I say that here, now, because it may soon be illegal to express such a thought. The tide drags us steadily out to sea.

## OUR REPRESENTATIVES

If you're like me—and we can all thank God I think that very few people are—you want your representatives to share your values, your beliefs, your views on life, society, culture, morality, at least in a vague, casual, occasional, noncommittal, general sorta way. You want a guy who pretends to understand you and your concerns, a man who while campaigning insists that he can relate to your needs, and can truly represent you through his actions, once he's in office. So, now, let's say there's a politician holding national office who has a live-in lover running a prostitution ring out of his home. Who does he represent? Well, since he's not just an elected official but an continually re-elected official, his constituents must feel that he represents them pretty well. They must feel that his views, if only in a general sense, match theirs, and that his thoughts mimic their way of thinking. Here's a man who by his actions shows that he understands their needs.

You might think he best represents people who themselves are running a little prostitution ring out of their homes, or, perhaps those who, at one time or another, found themselves mulling over the possibility. Naturally, all of those good people would think “Hey, this is the guy for me. Finally, here's a guy who really understands where I'm at.” But, he might also represent good citizens who have never considered running a prostitution ring out of their home, if, say, one of their friends is running a stable of whores out of his garage, or a neighbor has been tinkering with the idea. Perhaps a business associate was hoping to get something going on the side, and invited them to lunch in order to

pitch the idea, just to see how they'd react. Either way, if the idea of a live-in lover running a prostitution ring out of your representative's house makes a certain kind of sense to you, then we have a politician for you. Quite naturally you want someone in office that understands the needs of your community.

Of course, if you don't really have that prostitution ring thing going on quite yet, there are plenty of other good reasons that this guy might still get your vote. If, for example he thinks he's superior to you in every way; if you want a man who talks down to his constituents as though they might all be idiots; if you like a guy who takes no crap from the people who elected him, then this might be the man for you. If he consistently proves himself to be the most arrogant, close-minded, sputtering, bloated bastard you've ever heard open his fishlike maw, then you'll certainly want to consider him. If you like that sort of thing—and who doesn't?—he might be the perfect choice. Those are things all of us look for in our representatives. But, even if *that's* not a connection for you, if he's the kind of guy who can get a bridge built which you neither want nor need, he's worth considering for that alone.

And there's this:

You have to think about the effect your vote has on the politician. You really have to think about his career. What's the poor guy gonna do if he's not in office with his sleeves rolled up, shoveling your tax dollars out the window? As voters you must consider that this poor guy is a *career* politician; if he's not reelected, how's he going to make a living?



We both know that most of them are not cut out for flippin' burgers. The poor man's spent millions of his own personal wealth to land a job that pays one tenth of what he's spent. If you don't elect him, he'll be ruined. It goes beyond just him however, you have to consider all of his friends in the bridge-building business. What'll happen to them?

Whatever the connection—whether it's his live-in lover's prostitution ring, his own monumental, irrepressible arrogance, his ability to get things done that don't need doing, or concern about his personal financial well-being—it would be difficult not to vote for a guy like that. And, once you get a guy like that in place, you don't want to lose him; you want to keep him there. Otherwise, who knows what kind of a sleazy low-life you might end up with?

I'm just kidding of course. If there ever was such a despicable being in office I'm sure Congress would quickly go into action, debate the matter at length, and decide that they absolutely *must* reprimand him. It would have to pass resoundingly of course (just listen to the noble roar) 'And so what?'—though a clever question—is perhaps a bit too cynical, a tad too mean-spirited, for civilized discussion. It's not really a legitimate question; not worth considering. We can only imagine what an official reprimand must mean to a guy like that, poor man. Makes you think, doesn't it?

It sure does me.

I don't recall the movie, but I recall the phrase, "Pigs is pigs. Politicians is pigs too." But I've drifted.

Here's a question which has suddenly, unexplainably come to mind. Do you think someone who has *never* had anything *whatsoever* to do with running a prostitution ring out of his home might also be able to get a bridge built that nobody needs? Really. Think about it. Could a guy who is not a big bloated, arrogant, bastard accomplish that task? Do you think that someone who lives a simple, decent, respectable, (let me apologize in advance) *normal* life might be capable of running up the deficit with the same thoughtless alacrity as the guy who snorts cocaine, or the one who frequents whores, or the one who *monitors* child porn sites strictly for the sake of the children?

Criminals and thieves and slobbering, jowly, self-appointed aristocrats who call you idiots, trample upon your constitutional rights, deceive you repeatedly, and hold nothing but contempt for you at any time other than during the very last few remaining minutes before an election day, are, admittedly, much more suited to the task. But, if someone who once held a real job and has actually paid his taxes, comes along, maybe he'd know something about what you're going through. Of course his lack of experience running a prostitution ring out of his home does make it seem that he may not be, by nature, true congressional material, but once he's in office, I'm sure he'll get the hang of it.

## A THOUGHTFUL LITTLE NOTE TO MY SOCIALIST FRIENDS

An amazing number of intelligent, very well-meaning people like the idea of socialism. They like a system which has repeatedly driven intelligent, very well-meaning countries so far beyond the brink of bankruptcy that life there is reduced to despair and rabid social madness. The simple fact that socialism has never worked, does not work, and CANNOT work escapes them, while at the same time it somehow feeds their dreams. I really like many of these people and respect their idealism—they're good people—so I will not go into a brief and reasonable schpiel here about how a large percentage of people doing government-contrived *make-work* cannot be supported solely on the taxes extracted from a much smaller percentage of people doing *real* work, for very long. That's not to mention the dismal fact that government *make-work* is mostly about collecting fees. Admittedly there's much more to it than that. It's also about constantly creating new regulations designed to impose more fees, and the on-going battle, with *forms* their primary weapon, to harass, annoy and stand in the way of those remaining few trying to get some real work done. Nor will I get into tangential matters such as how the unions have turned us into a nation of whiners.

Honestly, there is almost no bigger whiner on this planet than me—if I break a shoelace, it can only be the gods conspiring against me (yet again)—but striking union members make me look like Buddha composed and adrift on the tranquil pond of perfect indifference. Compared to some ranting, sputtering, card-carrying union bull, my

entire life has been spent sitting under the Bodhi Tree. But that's because I understand stuff. I'm enlightened.

They don't seem to realize that if the State goes broke because of all of its short-sighted, unfulfillable promises to unions...wait, let me put it in terms any union member might understand. I say 'might understand', because we've all seen these people in action.

If the State has promised you seven teddy bears, but it goes bankrupt, and they say to you, "We're really sorry, but *in order for all of us to survive*, we need to ask you to accept only four teddy bears,"—stop pouting, pull up your diapers, and accept that offer. You're doing OK; despite your constant complaining, you've got nothing really to complain about, and you've made all the union bosses fat and rich along the way. So, just shut up for once in your life, and accept that offer.

Otherwise, it'll be NO teddy bears for anyone.

Margaret Thatcher—yes, that just how low I'm willing to stoop—among all politicians—seemed to realize that government has no money of its own, and that the money it gets is gotten from *us* (but why do I feel the importance of that message is being lost even as I state it?) At any rate, she is quoted as having said, "The problem with socialism is that they always run out of other people's money. It's quite a characteristic of them." At least under capitalism, there is always *the illusion* that some day, by some miracle, you too might make it. Need I add: Fat chance?

Fat chance or not, that very-slim-to-non-existent possibility is more appealing to those of us lacking the socialists' hive mentality. Sadly, if you yearn for socialism, I feel I must tell you this: If you think the yoke of capitalism is too demanding, wait until you shrug on the yoke of socialism.

But I understand, dear friends. When I dream, I often think myself awake; alone in the dark, I long for the company of others who can't see any more clearly than I can.

So...here we go.

Dear Socialist Friends,

What's with you people? You're gonna have to develop a little pride, a little self-esteem, a backbone, if you're gonna turn a reasonably feasible economic system into the kind of short-sighted, ideologically driven, arithmetically unsound, well-meaning but dependency-based, delusional daydream you'd like to see replace it. If you really want politicians overseeing, regulating, inspecting, auditing, taxing, taxing, taxing, prying, snooping, and scrutinizing *more* of your life in an institutionalized, massive juggernaut of cradle-to-grave bureaucracy, you're gonna have to stand up and be counted. If you are ever going to get anywhere in this political climate, you're gonna have to lay claim to your tendencies. I mean this: there must be millions of you socialists out there, but on actual count, so far only 17 people in this country have come forward to admit it. The label alone seems to send the most dedicated socialist into a frothing frenzy of denial. To shed the stigma that seems to come with the label, you're gonna have to first admit it.

As it is now, everyone on all sides of the issue treats that word as if there could be no greater shame. Socialists deny being socialists, and those who accuse them of being socialists apologize for the accusation as soon as the word leaves their mouths. That's no way to live. Stand up on your feet for god's sake, hold your head up and declare who you are. Until you do, things will remain as they are.

Ask yourself this: What would happen if, by chance, through the unwitting cooperation of an eagerly self-deceived major political party, and witless support of well-meaning, guilt-ridden, shame-filled members of the oppressor class—all calling themselves 'progressives'—a socialist were elected President of the United States? You'd want him to stand up and declare himself, wouldn't you? If, shortly after taking office, he sets out on a path designed almost perfectly to establish that thing you have so long desired, you'd want him to be open about it and announce boldly why he was doing what he was doing. But that'll never happen, the way things are now. The way things are now such a man'd have to do what socialist do now....deny it at every opportunity. And whenever he was interviewed, those interviews would all go like this:

“Uh, now Mr. President, some people—not me mind you, but some people—have said that every action you've taken since you took office seems to be designed almost perfectly for turning this country into a...uh...into a uh...socialist...uh...uh, that you yourself might be, uh...that you might have, uh, well, uh.. socialist tendencies.”

“HAHAHAHAHA. That's ridiculous, Trent. Just because everything a man does from the moment he sets foot in the

Oval Office appears to be of a socialist nature does not mean that man is a socialist. Hahah. Just plain ridiculous.”

“I’m sorry, Mr. President.”

“There’s no need to apologize Trent. I know what people are saying, and it’s ridiculous.”

“You do understand that *I* am not calling you a...uh, socialist Mr. President?”

“Yes. I understand. But, again, let me explain my position on this matter. Just because everything a man does from the moment he first sets foot in the Oval Office, until he loses his bid for a second term in an impressively resounding defeat, appears to be of a socialistic nature, does not mean that man is a socialist.”

“So, you’re not a socialist?”

“I think what I’ve said is perfectly clear.”

“Thank you, Mr. President, and allow me once again to apologize.”

“No apology necessary, Trent. I hope everybody finally understands my position on that matter.”

“Oh, I think everybody understands you perfectly, Mr. President.”

That’s just so sad.

You don’t want to ever see that happen, do you?

So, dear Socialist friends, prepare for the day. Declare yourselves. Prepare yourselves (I know how much you like slogans). Prepare yourselves, declare yourselves! Should, some day, by some weird quirk—say, through the unwitting support of one, or the other, of the major political parties and the eager support of well-meaning, guilt-ridden,

Henry Edward Fool

rich members of the oppressor class—a socialist *were* elected President of the United States, when asked, he'll stand up straight and tall and say, "HAHAHAHAHA. Socialist? That's ridiculous! Hahahahahaha. Just plain ridiculous."



## THE GOOD AND HONEST VOTER

The good and honest voter's lofty vision concerning government is continually put into question by government simply being itself. But, that is *not* their biggest problem. Their biggest problem is their own tendency to be trusting, and forgiving, and dedicated to whichever party they have somehow convinced themselves—many years earlier—cares more about them. In short, when it comes to government and how government treats them, good and honest people are the source of their own problem.

I'm not the first to notice that the people who believe most ardently in the United States, what it *should* stand for and what it *could* be, are like battered wives. Like battered wives, dutiful citizens are far too forgiving, far too willing to let the past remain in the past, far too dedicated, even stridently defensive of their so-called representatives. My good father may be an example of such dedication. His generation is dedicated in all things, their wives, their jobs, their lawn, their cars. My father has been married to the same woman for 67 years, worked for the same company until his retirement, and has driven Oldsmobiles since turnips wore overcoats. But, such dedication, good as it may be, can be costly to a trusting soul. In my father's case, only his very good wife has reciprocated with matching devotion. The company he worked for, giving them 40 years of dedicated service, tried to screw him out of his pension. Olds went out of business a couple years ago, leaving him at a complete loss. Needless to say, government at all levels has continually let him down.

The good and honest voter secretly wishes (hopes and prays) that after their man goes off to DC the first time, he'll return home the same man they elected. But, what can the voter do to make that happen? Ironically, nothing; and, far too much time will later be spent hoping that things will change for the better, while clinging to a career politician who—due to his beastly instincts—never will. The only solution is change, but the good and honest voter rarely abandons anything he's placed his faith in. It's the battered woman syndrome in action. They tell us that battered women who, against all odds, finally put some sane distance between themselves and the cowards who beat them, frequently seek out, somehow manage to find and, almost predictably, hook up with another low-life who turns out to be exactly like the jackass they just escaped. Then the cycle begins all over again. Only if it were a four-year cycle, could it describe politics more perfectly.

Dedication is a noble characteristic which these good people possess naturally. But, their dedication to a shattered ideal is both sad and serious. The sad part is the undying belief that the politicians they place in office are themselves good and honest. People who have lived their entire lives based on principles, values, character (a short list may include things like self-respect, discernment, directness...) have no trouble whatsoever accepting representatives who, somewhat necessarily, shrugged off all such principles early in their political career, and spend the rest of their tenure sneering at anyone foolish enough to hold them dear. That's serious because, with that in place, nothing will ever change.

Personally, I'm not entirely sure the structure will allow the kind of change that's really needed.

Nonetheless, voters continue to hope that politicians will correct their wayward tendencies, respect their vows, remain faithful, and resist the temptation to forsake them for wanton lust and greed. They are willing to dwell (forever apparently) in the shadow of that hope.

Like the good little battered wife, the good and honest voter is always willing (and by that I mean, desperately eager) to take them back, welcome them in, give them another chance, re-elect them.

And we all know where that leads.

## WHY THEY ALL HATE US

With the world shrinking with every passing moment, the question of *why they hate* us comes up more frequently, and, more frequently, the same answer pops to the surface. They hate us because we're all trim, tanned, nicely-muscled, young, blonde, multi-millionaires named Trent, who, after surfing all day, drive around smugly, with our perfect teeth on display, in our top-of-the-line silver Porsche convertibles, with three or four bouncy blondes in short skirts clinging to us with unquenchable desire aflame in their heaving, somewhat overblown breasts. This is ridiculous of course; only about half the people I know are multi-millionaires, and only 137 of 'em are named Trent.

Additionally, many of us prefer to drive a more discreet, understated vehicle, say one of our black Bentleys, for the daily scoot to the local poker tournament, leaving the silver one for special occasions, like picking up one of our babes at the clinic after her latest boob job. That's why they hate us though, and we all nod our heads in agreement. Yeah, that must be it... that, and their own peculiar commitment to living out their lives like savages in the dark ages.

But actually—and I think many of you are not going to like this—the reason they hate us is probably because of our somewhat awkward way of selling them on the idea of Democracy, or for you purists, the idea of “representative government”. What we usually do, while trying to sell other peoples on the grand idea that democracy and liberty go hand in hand, is to prop up some vicious, moronic, self-serving dictator, and pour billions (literally billions) of tax-

acquired US dollars into his private coffers on a regular basis to keep him and his family in place for years and years and endless goddamned vicious, self-serving, oppressive years, while the nation's people quietly struggle to survive, or alternatively starve to death in the streets surrounding his gold-trimmed royal palace. Meanwhile, the commies—the bad guys—are going around sneakily whispering vile lies to the struggling, starving masses, like, *It doesn't have to be this way, you know!* and, *Communism cares*, and, *Did you know that with the NEW IMPROVED Communism you no longer have to wear a beard?* (What they **don't** tell them of course, is that females are still expected to wear combat boots.)

El Salvador is just one example of how *our* approach doesn't always really work out all that well. (But throw a dart at a map if you don't like that one.) In El Salvador we thought 14 ruling families weren't enough proof that Democracy was the best choice for a country predominantly subsistence farmers, and corporate laborers of the lowest possible paid sort. So, for quite a few years *we* dumped a million dollars *each day* (EVERY single DAY) into military operations, blowing up medical clinics in the cities and dropping huge bombs on people working in self-imposed slavery in their own fields. These poor people—with no thought whatsoever about either politics or rebellion, except in those times when someone came around in uniform and purposefully rubbed their nose in it—began to wonder if indeed there might be a better way.

For reasons which our government never really understood, such subtle persuasion didn't drive Salvadorans in droves

into the warm embracing arms of Democracy. And, even if it did, they'd find the heavily reinforced tyrants we'd been supporting with cash and arms for years, dug in, and somewhat resistant to the change. Eventually these things all work themselves out however and when us foreigners finally do get elections in place, we're always shocked at how many votes go toward the other guys; guys who had no hand in propping up their dictator, and supplied no arms to the suppressive government, and who refrained from dropping bombs on them relentlessly for years and years and years while showering them with pamphlets touting freedom.

For the politically minded among you, the real mystery has to be *who authorizes these things?* and who do *they* represent? I would wager almost any amount of money on the fact that no man, woman, or child in the United States of America would nod and say, Yeah, keep pumping our hard earned tax dollars into the coffers of that dictator guy whose name I cannot pronounce in a country I never even heard of, where the only result is that they hate us all the more. Yeah, do that. I only wish I could pay more taxes in order to insure the continuation of that noble process.

The politically minded among us must, at some point realize that our guys ain't selling democracy so well over there, and over here, they ain't representing our wishes so well either. Still—not that I care, and not that I think any of us can do anything about it—but, I kind of wonder who *does* authorize these things, and who *are* they representing?

## PUTTING OUT THE GARBAGE

When I was working on a book about analog recording I met a hip-hop publishing pioneer, one of the Scotti Brothers (I forget which...Ben, I think...big good-looking guy that nobody with any brains would want to mess with—we've all heard the "broken legs" story.) He gave me the traditional \$50 handshake and then, with one foot on the world's neck, he gave me this invaluable music industry advice: "If you fly it, sail it, drive it, live in it or fuck it... rent it." Because it took the classic form, I recognized basic business wisdom when I heard it. And, at the time, I wanted to wrangle an interview with his chief recording engineer, so I nodded my head as if that meant something to me, but have since completely disregarded his advice. Now, these many years later, I'm thinking perhaps that may be good political advice. I wouldn't know, but I have the feeling there may be something in there for the voting public to think about. Truly. Maybe, if we applied music industry wisdom to our political candidates, ours would start to become a better world.

Unfortunately, most of us don't think of politicians as rentals.

Maybe we should.

At least it would be a change.

We never see our beloved career politicians as expendable, and rarely consider them replaceable—we forgive, we forget, we buy, we don't rent. We continue to think of them

as politicians, not as what they are: some guy who performs his job poorly, and now, regrettably, should probably be set free to find another way to make a living.

They don't think of themselves in those terms either, except for a few brief frightening moments around election time, when they consider the possibility. The rest of the time, they're kings.

At times, it really looks like they are in office to lord over us, and we remain in our little place down here, far far below, working to see that they remain in that lofty, lordly position. Our mutually-agreed-upon task is only to work hard and provide them with all the cash they might need in order to demand more from us. And we respond appropriately. Once some incompetent fool has been placed in office we don't ever ask him to leave, and, as it's been demonstrated many times, he will do almost anything to stay there. Apparently, we're kind enough to do almost anything to keep him there.

I wrote a little song about that:

Vote 'im in, an'

Vote 'im in again

Vote 'im in again, without fail

Vote 'im in again, when he gets bail

Vote 'im in again when he gets out of jail

And you will, won't you? You'll vote them in again and again and again.

I'll tell you how I know this.



The small hotel where I work has a front door that is locked after the restaurant closes, at 10 pm each evening. The guests of the hotel are given a key with which to open that door, should they find themselves locked out after that hour. Let me put this in the form of a question. If YOU found yourself locked out, would you, after trying to turn that key to the right and finding that ineffectual, try turning it to the right again, and, finding that ineffectual again, continue trying to turn that key to the right—and repeatedly finding it ineffectual—until, in well-earned frustration, you finally give up and ring the doorbell, so that someone might come and let you in? OR, would you, after trying to turn the key to the right a dozen times, and finding that just plain goddamned does not work, try turning it, just one time, for the hell of it, not that it could possibly do any good, just for curiosity's sake, to the left? I ask this because that door opens only when that key is turned to the left.

Having spent endless lost and irretrievable years working evenings at this hotel I can tell you that the vast majority of the people wandering around on this planet, will stick with that which they have repeatedly proven to themselves to be utterly useless rather than ever entertain the thought, no matter how briefly, of trying something else. They will. They'll go with what they *know* to be futile and bound for failure rather than consider the possibility of any alternative no matter how simple or obvious that alternative may be to a fully-conscious being. By this same torturous means I have, regrettably, come to realize the nature of man. More regrettable still, because I know *that*, I also know with a dead certainty that the much touted phrase, "Throw them all out!" is utter nonsense.

If a person's mind won't allow him to conceive of the possibility of turning a key to the left, once he's tried turning it to the right a thousand useless goddamned stupid times, he won't be throwing anybody out of office. Even if that politician has proven ineffective, even if he's an idiot, even if he's embarrassing or has offended the gods, that politician's place is almost guaranteed.

Perhaps I feel this way because I have never voted for any candidate for any office who has ever won election. Because of that, there has never been anyone in office that I felt represented me in any way. And, to be honest, I've never really felt that the guy I did vote for would have represented me so well either. So, I like the idea of political office being, not a sedentary career, but a revolving door. Of course, worse than the vague feeling that none of these idiots have ever represented me, is the dead-certain knowledge that none of them would even want to. That certainty haunts about half of us in every election, but no one I've ever talked to understands this, or agrees with me. Let's walk through it though. The guy you voted *against* is now in office, so the guy you voted against is now representing your best interest. How does that work?

Even if you don't share my unreasonable doubt, the idea that he can be thrown out must be refreshing. Yet, for most voters, it is an almost impossible lesson to learn. I know what that's like. My very dear wife tells me that there are all kinds of problems with my thinking on these matters, and I have no reason to doubt her. Still, I can't seem to convince myself that the guy I voted *against* is just as good as the guy I voted *for*, when it comes to represen...

Oh. Wait.  
Actually, I can.

## YOUR CONGRESSMAN'S EAR

I think that if you were upset about some political matter you might write a letter to your representatives. And, you might then gather a few of your friends around with similar views, and they would all write letters (well, 10% of them would anyway.) But I think that if you gathered ten thousand of your friends together and they each gathered ten thousand of their own, and you marched en masse on Washington and stationed yourselves outside Congress, coverage of that march would take up 3 minutes on the evening news. And while they chattered about it—"And today in Washington a HUGE group of malcontents staged a protest of some sort outside the Congressional Office Building..."—a 4 second loop of one angry guy raising his fist, shouting something unheard directly into the camera and smashing his sign down upon the windshield of a large black car as it slowly tries to nudge its way through the crowd, would play endlessly behind the chatter. Wow, wouldn't that be great?

Later, if someone felt it was warranted, there'd be an interview with a Representative from some state you didn't even know existed.

"Representative Spineless, what do you think of the crowd outside?"

"There's a crowd outside?"

"There is a considerable crowd outside."

"Are any of them from my district?"

"Some may be."

"Some... Well, do you have any idea what it is they want?"

“They want things.”

“Well, you know I’m disinclined to give in to such demands at the moment, my run for re-election doesn’t really begin for another year or so, but tell them... tell them I’m always glad to hear the concerns of my constituents and I will do what I can on this matter.”

“But, you don’t know what the matter is...”

“Well, you know I’m uh, deeply concerned, of course, and they know that I understand their concerns and uh...tell them I’m always glad to hear everything my constituents might have to say.”

“Don’t you feel that you had better tell them that yourself?”

“Yes, I see your point. Tell them that I’m busy; that they haven’t sent me here to seduce congressional aids and cheat on my wife with the cheap whores who fly down here every Wednesday afternoon from New York to service some of the others with lesser moral fiber. I’m here to work and I’m very busy; the other day I must have spent almost three hours in my office and almost 40 minutes sitting in Congress waiting for a vote that never materialized.”

“But you have nothing to say to these protestors, Sir?”

“Yes, yes I do...now, if you’ll excuse me I’m expected in my....uh...”

“So, there you have it; the senseless gathering outside with their demands and one of our nation’s most obscure representatives with his response. What’s this I hear about Lady Gaga launching a new perfume, Bill?”

The People United  
Will Never Be Defeated

They’ll simply be ignored.

## RE-ELECTION

Voters'll re-elect anyone, and I do mean anyone. In the United States we've re-elected men under criminal investigation, we've re-elected proven criminals who somehow keep their seats and go untried, we've re-elected men who have resigned in humiliation and those who left office in order to serve time behind bars and then decided to get back into the game again, as soon as they get out. How is it that so many of them are discovered ignoring the very laws they write? Not that laws mean a damned thing.

As far as I can tell laws have no effect on anyone. The law has no effect on those of us who, by nature, agree with it, and it doesn't stop those who don't; it simply has no effect on them. It's amazing how few people seem to have noticed that fact, but that's why our prisons are all overflowing. Make all the laws you want, the law-abiding will obey them—the criminals and the politicians will continue to do whatever they want.

The head of the tax writing whatever hasn't paid his taxes, the head of the committee investigating child pornography is a pedophile; the guy who stands proud and strong against gay marriage is making considerable effort to seduce his male assistant. Every goddamned last one of them is cheating on his wife or evading taxes or taking bribes, when he's not selling drugs. Here's a question: How is it that so few of them ever pay the penalty that we would pay for committing the same crime? Here's another: How is it that so many of them pay no penalty at all?

Better yet, why do we continually re-elect these opportunistic Machiavellian elitists?

We've kept people in office who have contributed to the delinquency and appalling perversion of minors. We've elected and re-elected people whose best friends are known felons, we've re-elected people in the very act of snorting cocaine; we've elected people who have beaten up whores and men who have, more likely than not, killed people—some by first, foremost and solely saving their own selfish drunken fat aristocratic asses [though, find me the American male who has never driven drunk and you'll be looking at a man who has never driven at all] ...others by having a hand in the 'disappearance' of an overly-clingy underling. We re-elect them all. And we will continue to re-elect them until they either die or retire in (fleeting) disgrace, each very very, abnormally, surprisingly, unexplainably wealthy. Allow me to drift just a bit here.

I like the slogan: Don't vote, it only encourages them, but, apparently they need very little encouragement.

Representatives make a mere \$174,000/ year, but would rather sacrifice an eye than resign from office. These public servants do so startlingly well on that salary. How, no one knows. If they saved every penny of that salary for every year they sat in office and invested so wisely that they managed to double it, that wouldn't account for the massive wealth they each have when they leave office. How does that work? However it works, it certainly explains why someone would spend \$500,000 dollars of their own money to obtain and retain that position.

Who wouldn't? Besides that though, there's the love of the people, which showers continually down upon them.

We love them like we do our dogs. Like dogs, politicians are greedy. They want what is theirs, they want what is yours—they'd take the food right out of your mouth if you let them, and whine if they don't get it, and pee in a corner somewhere just as if that were normal. We, of course, clean up after them and wag our finger and shake our heads and love them all the more. They are just so cute.

We appreciate and enjoy our elected soft-spoken down-home liars, our quietly skimming thieves, our slightly befuddled, absent-minded tax dodgers with off-shore accounts, our secretive perverts, our blatantly self-serving, posturing, pontificating egocentric megalomaniacs. We call these scoundrels feisty or unpredictable or colorful or Senator, or Sir, all terms that indicate our cowering acceptance of their completely unacceptable, many times illegal, typically immoral behavior. We laugh along with them when their antics come to light—Oh, my goodness here's another one who forgot to pay his taxes! We accept their little indiscretions. Well, I'll be danged, I had NO idea that so many congressmen were so very interested in little boys! And, when they leave office—by whatever mean—they are honored like fallen heroes. When the most despicable man who ever held office dies, he's mourned as one of our greatest and most beloved statesmen.

How does that work?

There must be more to it than money.



Here's one of our big bulbous-nosed buffoons now. He's feverishly exploring the limits to which he might drive a fawning, young, impressionable, star-struck, semi-attractive idiot-woman, WITHIN THE OVAL OFFICE. When it comes out, we find the tale mesmerizing. Jokes are made. We watch as he denies it, denies it again, and like Peter, denies it a third time. Then—here's the good part—he looks us in the eye, and like some clever high school smartass punk, says, “It depends on what the meaning of the word ‘IS’ is.” The definition of IS is that what you did IS, and will forever remain, a disgrace. After all there IS a difference between being a second rate strung out rock star and being President of the United States, there IS a difference between the Oval Office and the back seat of a car in a strip club parking lot of at 3 am (...or so I've heard). Nobody believes that politics is a pristine pastime, but why are we all acting as though this is acceptable? Is what we might expect from any drunken 14-year-old the best we can expect from a President of the United States? I wish I felt more strongly about this.

As someone who has no investment in politics whatsoever; who doesn't glorify the Presidency, and does not think the President of the United States is necessarily any better or any more honorable, or even more well-intentioned than the rest of us, I have to confess that it sickens me. I can only imagine what decent, respectable people must have felt. With that in place, let me say something because I must: I cannot believe that in this entire country there was no one big enough (either morally, or in the position of power) to wipe the sneer off of that man's face. No, we'll sit by and let time do that for us. Where were all the people

with flags on their lapels, who claim to really care about what this country stands for?

The disgrace is not simply that some idiot shames himself by defiling some poor stupid slovenly young admirer, and makes a mockery of the Presidency in the process; it's that so many good Americans allowed themselves to look the other way...or, because we are these days so proudly erudite in vulgar matters, laughed about it. And, I mean no disrespect to any of you indecent, immoral folk, but where are all the decent, moral citizens? I mean, where's the outrage? Why such silence from those who ARE invested in the political process? Why such acceptance from those who DO glorify the Presidency and DO think the man who holds that office should be both good and honorable and, if not decent, at least maintaining the illusion? What 'Bill' Clinton did was beyond thoughtless, and childish and disrespectful—it was unacceptable. Is it any wonder some cultures believe we are a shameless nation?

We are.

Now, apparently Bill Clinton is a great statesman. It's always like that. When our representatives leave office, their departure is a baptism of some weird sort; suddenly the guy who was photographed in his closet forcing himself upon bound puppies is transformed into a noble dignitary

Get what humor you can out of this statement Bill Clinton made recently to Piers Morgan. It's out of context, but in any context it's entertaining and revealing. "You have to let people say and do things that you find appalling."

I think that's been his philosophy all along.

## I'VE GIVEN SOME THOUGHT TO THE PRESIDENCY

...and I'm not entirely unsympathetic, I think I actually may know something about his situation.

The President, who is blamed, many times years after the fact, for everything from imminent nuclear annihilation to the untimely breaking of your shoelace as you're on your way out the door, is merely some poor guy foolish enough to think that he can take a seat behind the wheel of one of the most monstrous, extraordinarily complex, long established, ungainly machines in the world, and control it. The simple truth is, he can't. Simpler still, no man can. Those who have been dumb enough to proclaim they can usually only end up embarrassing themselves.

Unfortunately for him, only *after* taking his seat does the man discover, from within, that the machine can hardly be understood let alone controlled. He's like the proverbial dog chasing the car, now that he's caught it, he suddenly realizes that he doesn't know what to do with it. No matter how grand his entry into office, after the cheering dies down and all the rah-rah is nothing more than a fading memory, the Oval Office becomes a pretty lonely place. From that point on the only people who drop in for a visit want something. Whatever their request may be, when it isn't urgent, it's overwhelming. In the White House, Reality wears steel-toe boots and doesn't care whose feet it steps on. This, of course, is all guesswork on my part. I'd guessed it by watching the color of several of these men's hair change quickly to grey soon after taking their position behind that desk.

The levers and valves and push rods and chains and cables and fuses and relief valves and stops and joints and hinges and belts and triggering devices which determine the capabilities (and the impossibilities) of the machine that is federal government have each been placed there for short-term, generally self-serving, reasons—though they may last forever. Each of those add-ons has nothing to do with anything that preceded it, but cannot help but have its effect on almost everything that follows. This machine has been constructed piece by piece by so many people and over such a long time—with new pieces being tacked on continually and old pieces tampered with (continually), and rarely (rarely) anything ever removed—that it would be almost impossible to diagram it in any comprehensible manner let alone get it under control. To make it do everything you might wish it to do: impossible.

Whatever promises you may have foolishly made while running, whatever your desire or good intentions going in, once you're in that seat the enormity of the task has to be crushing. But, you're not alone; the people who already have their hands on the levers, have control of each valve, have their eye on compression and oversee replacement parts, will neither surrender their position nor be ignored.

Virtually every President that has ever taken office has had to learn that unavoidable truth. Whether that lesson is sudden or prolonged, dampening, chilling, immobilizing or fatal, depends on the man. It's always interesting to see how long it takes each one to get it, though. Sometimes it takes him a while, but you can gauge his progress in that direction by the ever-dimming glint in his eye, the

accumulation of wrinkles on his brow, and the stoop of his shoulders. When he finally does get it, when it finally hits him, it shows in his face. Look closely. There is a ghostly quality in his eyes, a hollowness, and emptiness behind those once bright orbs, when he finally recognizes the somewhat awkward (embarrassing), almost powerless position he's put himself in, it's undeniable to even the most casual observer. He realizes it. Those he works with in Congress have known it all along. The only ones who don't seem to realize his powerlessness are the people.

As said, we the People hold the President responsible for everything that goes wrong from the moment he raises his right hand until the moment some other well-meaning visionary holds up his own to replace him. Few of us seem to see the position the poor man is in, or care. And though there is no easier way out of most political binds than to nobly declare, "I accept full responsibility!"—it's the easiest thing in the world because it means absolutely goddamned nothing—for the President this is rarely an option, because it goes unsaid. He knows we're going to hold him accountable whatever may happen. We will, of course, also give him credit for anything that happens to go well during his bumbling occupancy of the White House, but usually only after he's buried. Then, no matter what kind of a buffoon or bastard or embarrassment he was in office and in life, he'll be transformed, by forgiving hindsight, into one of our nation's greatest statesmen. (It comes with the casket.) But in the meantime, we expect great things from the man, and, up to a certain point, he expects great things of himself. But, how do you play a violin in a hornet's nest?

I don't know why the candidates for this office—typically products of Washington politics themselves and knowledgeable about the way things are really done there—don't seem to ever see what's coming. Blinded by the primitive (somewhat childish and apparently voracious) urge for power, they strategize to charm and seduce and win over the electorate; they jockey for every advantage during the race, and, toward the end, slam and slander each other like barroom brawlers, making every effort to attain the highly honored front position. Why do they not see what lies ahead? They neither hear the roar of 18 tires on the pavement nor detect the blast of the air horn.

I suppose anyone focused tightly enough on something ahead might be distracted and step out into oncoming traffic, but, why do they never look back and see the carnage bestrewn past? In their eagerness to seize authority, they forget about all those who have wandered onto that freeway before them. You would think they would view their predecessors with greater sympathy. They never do.

I have to think that the mere fact that a man chooses to run for that office reveals a fatal flaw in his ability to think things through.

INTERLUDE:

Once in a while, as Election Day draws nigh, there is a murmuring in the masses. It grows steadily as a crowd gathers. The electorate has had enough. From that crowd emerges a single unwavering voice. Upon the shoulders of others a hero is lifted up above the crowd. From his position there he demands justice. “WE GOTTA DO SOMETHING!” he shouts.

“What’ll we do?” comes the plaintive question. It is echoed by others. (What’ll we do...What’ll we dooooo?)

“Throw them out!” shouts the hero.

“THROW THEM OUT!” echoes the crowd.

“Throw them ALL out!” shouts the hero.

“THROW THEM ALL OUT!” they yell.

“Throw every damned one of them out of office!” he cries.

The agitated mob takes up the cry. “THROW THEM ALL OUT! THROW THEM ALL OUT!”

The chant rings throughout the canyon of revolt.

What nonsense.

Here’s some news, dear voter—you ain’t throwing any of ‘em out.

One very fine Spring day in 1968 I came around the corner at Richmond Professional Institute (in Richmond, Virginia) to discover a large crowd of loudly chanting students carrying placards and picketing in front of the administration building. They all looked pretty serious. There were also smaller crowds gathered in front of the library and the cafeteria.



Somebody standing upon a stone wall had a bullhorn. From time to time he'd bellow something inspiring but (for me) completely unintelligible, and the throng would all raise their fists in the air and shout something completely equally unintelligible in response. It was puppet show. I've always enjoyed a puppet show, so I hung around a bit.

When I asked someone what was going on, it was explained that they wanted things.

"What do they want?" I asked abstractly.

Well, they wanted a lot of things. They wanted Afro-American Studies; they wanted *more* women's studies; they wanted something called ethno-cultural studies; they wanted the college to take a public stand against the unjust war in Vietnam. They wanted breakfast in bed and someone to sing them lullabies at night. It was kind of interesting, but, at once, really very boring...bunch of red-faced kids making demands while inside—so we imagine—some old folks in suits cowering under their desks with their hands over their ears, tears in their eyes. My take on it was...well, I had no take. In those days I just wanted to be left alone to paint. (Hey, that's weird; these days I just want to be left alone to play the cello.)

So, now here comes that loner, Steve Podlewski. He's got an apron rolled up in one fist and he's wearing that funny little paper hat they make you wear when you're slaving away in utter disgrace in the school cafeteria.

"Where are you headed all dressed up?" I ask.

"Goin' to work," he says matter-of-factly.

"Well, you're gonna have to fight your way in." I said pointing at the defiant throng. Steve just shrugged and said

something which I will never forget. He said, “When these people are finished *playing revolution* they’re gonna be hungry. It’s my job to feed them.”

I watched as Steve Podlewski walked through the screaming protestors, up to the cafeteria doors, turned, found me, smiled, saluted, and went on inside. I was indifferent to the cause—incapable of seeing either side—and, later on, I’d go through that picket line myself, just as Steve predicted, not because I was taking any side in the matter, but because I was hungry.

There was food in there. I wanted some. It was pretty much that simple. It was somewhat interesting to see how, ‘round dinner time, the throng found itself inside, seated at their usual tables, and shoveling food into their demanding mouths. Revolution over.

So, you know, let’s face it, you good people, you voters, are never going to *throw ‘em all out*. The ones you do toss out, will be replaced with someone who looks and talks and acts exactly like the scoundrel you just got rid of.

My advice to you: Forget politics.  
Think about what you’re havin’ for dinner.

## PROTEST and EFFECT

Let's talk about protests, since these days they are almost universally popular. I feel I must first draw a line here between those protests in which the mob is only play-acting, as in the United States, and protests in which the mob is quite serious, because those who are only play-acting don't seem to recognize the difference: this will be helpful to them. But, then additional lines must be drawn, between those who are serious and those who are deadly serious, and between those who are deadly serious and those who are outright insane (usually justifiably so).

By serious I mean welling with the desire, and surging with *the intent* to yank their oppressor off of his golden throne, drag him out into the street and beat him to death. By deadly serious I mean actually doing that. By outright insane, I mean struggling your way through the mob in order to get to the very heart of the mess, and take part in the actual beating death of your oppressor. Note: Since people in these situations have a tendency to get carried away, this may also involve mutilation and ghastly display of the despot's members followed by a raucous parade. Recent events have proven repeatedly that anything short of deadly serious protests generally proves to be, ultimately, strangely, regrettably but undeniably largely ineffectual and, pretty much, a waste of everybody's time. Additionally, the past has already proven, and the future I'm guessing will prove again, that being deadly serious is not enough in most instances, and that even outright insanity yields only baby steps in the desired direction the mob would like to take.

Surely, there must be a better way.

You would think so. I mean, you would *like to* think so. I mean, I would like to think so too. I would like to think that if you got enough people together and they were all screaming and demanding something, at some point a representative of the people they were trying to impress might stroll out on the polished marble balcony and, while gazing coolly down upon the throng, say, OK, OK I hear you. What is it you want?

But, that never happens, and if there is a better way than protest to try to get your point across, what is it?

A dear friend, and one of the finest, most hard-working and caring people in this world, had come into town to take part in a protest to end a war in Iraq. When we met up after the event she told me that there had been a lot of people there and that the march had lasted for hours.

“Yeah, so, how’s that going?” I asked.

It was a cruel question, not because I knew the answer, but because she did.

The Whole World’s Watching!

The Whole World’s Watching!

Except the guys in power.

Except the guys in power.

We both understand that the way you live your life speaks louder than standing in front of a tank. What’s disturbing is that when I look at my dear friend—a woman of tremendous compassion, who has dedicated her life to

certain worthy causes—I see her surrounded with people who share her position on the same matters she cares about, and they are all idiots. She is not an idiot, yet when you listen to the stuff that comes out of the mouths of those around her, you cannot help but realize that they are. The difference is (I believe) that she is moved by her heart and they are moved by mindless, meandering ideologically-driven bullshit. Another difference is that she wants to help people—that’s her motive—they want to accuse someone. Most of them want to accuse the U. S. So, they want out. To them I say this: You cannot act and speak like a separatist, whining about the unfairness of it all and willfully rejecting everything that is in place to protect your right to put such thinking on public display, without considering the alternative. Furthermore, the most commonly touted alternatives would not put up with such behavior for long. So, the alternative you offer must not be any of the same old ideological constructs that have proven themselves a failure a dozen times over but a new construct, based on something other than ideology, that might actually work. Otherwise, stomping around with signs and banners is nothing more than throwing a temper tantrum. It’s childish, and doesn’t accomplish anything. And I feel I must also say this. For anyone who believes that *there’s no government like no government*—consider Somalia.

As I write this, much to my delight and confusion, a new kind of protest has emerged which may lend addition credence to what I’ve just said.

We now have people protesting against people they agree with. This is a completely new phenomenon as far as I can tell. In the strange land of the past, from which I come, people only protested, strictly and exclusively, against people they DISAGREED with. But we live in a more open minded society these days. Still, I don't know if this—protesting against people who share your views—is any kind of real improvement. It really makes me long for the good old days though. Things were so much simpler then.

They—whoever they are—are having a conference over in Copenhagen—wherever that is—trying to reach some kind of agreement amongst nations *that will stem the tide of global warming*. The kids outside—the one throwing bricks and setting things on fire and battling foolishly with cops (who have all the protective gear and weapons)—*also* want the nations to get together and reach some kind of agreement amongst themselves *that will stem the tide of global warming*. The fact that the kids outside and the people inside share the same view hasn't stopped the protests though.

I honestly do not know what to make of that.

## CLOSE ASSOCIATION

Unfortunately, occasionally (and by that I mean frequently, but just won't admit it) I find myself in the somewhat awkward position of listening to some distasteful, somewhat smarmy, egregiously embarrassing sort of guy on TV as he pontificates about politics, and frequently (and by that I mean almost always) I find myself in agreement with much, if not most, of what that guy says. This is someone I would never openly, willingly declare any alliance with, or consider referencing in argument, or admit to ever having even heard of, let alone agreeing with. I find him distasteful and stupid and disgusting, and absolutely right. But, I am very careful to keep it to myself. What's weird is, I don't think that guy would ever agree with anything that I might say. But then, my own wife seldom agrees with anything I might say. That's because she's intelligent and informed and has the ability to think in a straight line. I'm not saying the same about that guy.

The guy's a quack, and I can see how those who rise up against him, bristling from head to toe, sputtering in speechless rage, deride everything he says and everything he stands for. I understand the way they see him, and I share their vision of the man. However, I still find myself agreeing with a lot of what he says. This is the sort of predicament only I might find myself in. Those who will not allow themselves to even ponder the possibility of listening to anyone 'on the other side' do themselves a favor. They probably live happier lives. And though I agree with the man, I still find myself standing on the edge of a divide which cannot be bridged.

I agree with his opinion on some matter, I do not agree that I can do anything about it.

My shoestring breaks, I can do something about that. My car won't start, I can do something about that. My wife slips and hurts herself, I can do something about that. But there is nothing I can do to stop those idiots in DC from shoveling the taxpayers' money into a big hole. Nothing.

Argue with that if you wish, Ben Gleck. If I knew George Washington's shoe size, and whether his horse's tail was finished with a left-handed braid or a right-handed braid, I still wouldn't have the power necessary to get anything sensible accomplished in world of American politics. You continually speak to your audience as if the Fed, the deficit, the idiotic unnecessary and spendthrift actions of our so-called representatives, are all somehow within their power. Here's news, Ben, they're not. They're just not.

One more thing, Ben. We all know that some people agree with your thinking, others think you're stark raving mad. What's weird, Mr. Gleck, is that the people who agree most with your thinking also have enough experience in this world to maintain a reasonable cynicism; the ones who think you're absolutely crazy, share your passionate belief that they can affect the people in power.

Maybe you're talking to the wrong people.



## TELLING RIGHT FROM WRONG

I can read an article, admire the clear thinking, the construct of the argument, the reasonable way in which the case is presented, and disagree with every point. I try not to let that happen too often of course, but I enjoy structure. I've always admired composure in a man, perhaps because it's an element of character I do not possess—no one who has known me for forty seconds would ever use the word 'composed' to describe me. But, I like it a great deal, when I see it in others. Nonetheless, throughout my entire life I've been nagged by the inequality of the situation. Time after time my POV is rejected and my thinking ignored, while some soft-spoken villain receives the accolade of massive puppet-like approval from the crowd. After pacing around in front of them espousing my view with (apparently) an unnecessary and somewhat-threatening passion, I look out in the audience to see that my fiery delivery has shocked and embarrassed and frightened them. Because he's cool and winks knowingly at the audience, the other guy is applauded warmly. I may be right, but my presentation is found wanting. He's wrong, but he's slick and nicely dressed and smiles a lot. No contest.

So, it's probably better for everybody if I just keep my mouth shut. Even if I'm right I can't win—too passionate. And I say this merely to irritate those of you who I know will be irritated by it—people who choose to stay out of the political mess completely, for whatever reason, are probably leading better, saner, and more fulfilling lives. I could be wrong. I'm wrong about many things. Maybe they just have greater, unhindered opportunity to lead better,

saner and more fulfilling lives. I've never been able to see how the imposition of something which is as irritating, as frustrating, as historically and predictably indifferent to our wants, our needs and our thinking as politics, brings much to the very short time we have here on this planet.

I'd like to live out the remainder of my short life with as little contact with politics as possible. Until it becomes impossible to do otherwise, I want as little to do with government as possible.

I am not saying there is no point at which I would not stand on my own front porch with a loaded shotgun and, with unmistakable intent, warn some governmental official off my property. And I'm not saying that I'd play my cello while my fellow human beings were being carried off in endless lines of cattle cars to be exterminated in the name of the super race, though I might take my wife, her cat, our dog, and flee instead. But I am kinda looking at the current situation and questioning what I can do to change it—if anything—and thinking that my few remaining days here are better spent telling my very dear wife how much I enjoy hanging around with her, instead of making futile attempts to get through to people in positions of power, who will not be persuaded by anything I might say or do, assuming I manage to get to them at all...

So, I'll work on trying to get a little more warmth out of this A string and let those, on both sides of the fence, who believe that their opinion counts, try to change things that they, like it or not, accept it or not, admit it or not, cannot.

## POLITICS and LOLLIPOPS

You're looking around one day and can't help but notice that some of the kids have lollipops. And you think, "I want a lollipop", or, maybe if you've been brought up a certain way, you think, "Everybody should have a lollipop!" And you watch as others enjoy their lollipops for a while and eventually you say, "Hey, I want a lollipop!" And you blubber a bit while they all ignore you. It doesn't seem fair, does it?

A nice guy in an expensive but poorly-fitted suit suddenly appears before you and says, "I hear your cry and it has touched my heart; it truly has. If you allow me the honor I'll represent you, and I will do everything in my power to see that *you* get a lollipop." He gives you a great big smile. Then he returns to what he was doing; and what he was doing was handing out lollipops to all of his friends, and to friends of his friends. You watch this for awhile before you whine, "Hey! I want a lollipop." Then the nice guy in the badly-fitted suit turns to you and, with a little bit of exasperation in his voice, he says, "I am doing the best I can to represent your RIGHT to have a lollipop. It's hard work. Just be patient; these things take time." He smiles, and returns to handing out lollipops to others.

So, you say to yourself, "But, I want a lollipop too." You pout a little bit, and maybe you kick an empty tin can down the sidewalk. (It makes such a lonely sound.) Then, one of the guys who already has a lollipop turns to you and says, "You want a lollipop? Just go out and get one." It's a simple matter," he tells you. "Just go out and get one."

That sounds great. And you say, “OK, how do I get one?” “Well, do it like I did,” he says, “inherit it. Or, if you’re too lazy or stupid to do that, you can always do what others have done, become the head of some huge corporation with thousands of employees under you, all working diligently to see that you have plenty of lollipops.” He makes it sound so simple.

You actually think about that for a bit, before shouting, “I want a LOLLIPOP! I want a LOLLIPOP!” And there’s a certain rhythm to it. So, you continue shouting, “I WANT A LOLLIPOP! I WANT A LOLLIPOP! I WANT A LOLLIPOP! I WANT A LOLLIPOP! I WANT A LOLLIPOP!” During this rant, you realize, of course, that there are people out there who *need* a lollipop a lot more than you do, and maybe even some who *deserve* a lollipop more than you do. You feel bad about that, and you think about that for a while, before returning to your rant. After all, there are people out there WITH lollipops who deserve them less than you do.

Soon others, who share your perfectly reasonable discontent, begin to gather, and they join in, and now together you’re all shouting: “WE WANT A LOLLIPOP! WE WANT A LOLLIPOP! WE WANT A LOLLIPOP!”

And he—the guy in the badly-fitted suit who is doing everything he can to see that *you* get *your* lollipop—says, “Hey, calm down. Just calm down. You’re not making any of this easier with all your chanting. Try to retain some level of dignity. Remain civil, and work within the system.” Naturally, you wonder if there might be a hidden message

in that statement somewhere. Meanwhile, someone in the crowd behind you whispers, “You know, that might be very good advice. Think about it. They not only have all the lollipops, they’ve got all the power, and most of the guns.” And you think about that for a bit. Then, you begin to pout, “I WANT A LOLLIPOP!” And you think about it for a bit more. And then you whine, “I WANT A LOLLIPOP!” It just seems so unfair.

And your friend—the one in the badly-fitted suit, who is struggling so mightily on your behalf to see that *you* get *your* lollipop—says once again, “Don’t be so demanding. These things take time. Try not to be so impatient.”

And then, a guy sitting in the backseat of a big limo, with a great big lollipop, stops and rolls down the window and motions to you to come over. He smiles and says, “Hey, all you need is *one good idea*... ONE GOOD IDEA and you can get your own lollipop.”

And you fall for that one for two clicks, until you finally admit to yourself that you’re not really cut out to be a salesman. You’re not, by nature, a scam artist or a manipulator of any sort and, dream as you might, you can’t force yourself to go down the slippery, shameful, shameless, overly-befouled path that may or may not lead to lollipops, but most certainly leads to degradation.

One day, you see your friend, the man in the badly-fitted suit, on the TV, and he’s got his lollipop and he’s looking very pleased with the world he lives in. People are gathered around this guy and they’re all bowing and grinning at him,

and shaking his hand vigorously. They're giving him a medal of some sort. And he's saying, "I have dedicated my entire life to seeing that others get their lollipops." While they go wild with applause, you take a moment to look down at your empty hands. "Wow," you say, and you begin to look back at all that he's done for you. You're thinking about that and trying to determine if all the communication you've had with this man in the past might have been one way. Who are all these people he's gotten lollipops for? You think about that for a while.

So, then time passes, you know how that is.

And, so then, upon your death bed, surrounded with the few remaining people who for whatever reason still pretend they can stand to be in your surly presence, you think about what you've actually accomplished through your demands. You're gnawing on that one, when someone interrupts your thoughts to quietly ask, "Didn't you once tell me, you know, a long time ago, that you wanted to learn to play the cello?"

And you think back...

So, here's a little something to help all you youngsters avoid that situation. If you learn nothing else here, remember this, kids: Someone else decides who gets the lollipops, and your demands will not endear you to them.

Forget them.

Forget their lollipops.

Get yourself a cello.

## MISS MANNERS *by Judith Martin*

Monday, May 9, 2011

**Dear Miss Manners:** I am a member of the local YMCA, which has a small steam room in the men's locker room. Often, when I enter, it isn't hot enough, so I pour cold water on the sensor to generate more steam.

The other day, when I started to do this the second time, an older man asked me not to because he thought it was hot enough. I tried to explain to him that steam rooms are supposed to be really hot, but he just responded that I should ask the men who were already there when I came in what they wanted. They both just said they didn't want to get involved in the argument.

In case I run into this rude old guy again, is there some polite but forceful way to tell him that he doesn't own the place?

**Gentle Reader:** Do you?

## YOU AIN' GONNA THROW ANYBODY OUT

When I was going on and on and endlessly on earlier about what an excellent example I am of people and their opinions, I forgot to add—amongst my other faults—I don't learn very easily. I feel comfortable making the same mistakes. So, in that way, I'm like all voters—except for the fact that I don't vote (of course) and the fact that I don't believe for one second that politicians are anything more than what they clearly are. Other than that, I am like any other voter. A foolish consistency is the hob-goblin of little minds. That's me. To continue doing the same thing and expecting different results is idiotic. Me again. When nothing changes, nothing changes. And - we're not going to throw anybody out, are we?

I'll make you this offer: You throw 20 percent of 'em out and I'll eat this goddamned book.

Good people have elected and re-elected perverts and morons and idiots and criminals—let's face it, they're gonna re-elect this current crop of self-serving career bastards too, and there is nothing the rest of us can do about it. They're not going to throw anybody out -- let alone throw all of them out. Though that would be the best thing that has happened in this nation in a couple hundred years and the results would last for generations...it ain't going to happen.

One final note:

People continually talk about voting them out; they get all their friends riled up, but when they step into that voting



booth they'll revert back to their old trusting ways. Once they find themselves behind that curtain each ballot they cast will prove counterproductive. They will set aside their own best interest in the interest of a politician. As this is being written the opportunity to vote these guys out is just around the corner. This time, it will arrive in a very big way. There has never before been so much noise about throwing them all out. Never before have so many quiet and unassuming voters risen up and demanded to be heard.

But, they're not throwing anybody out, and the rest of us—those of us who try—are helpless to do anything about it. There's always a lot of rah-rah out there before every election, but that'll first dwindle and then disappear entirely before the polls open. Some say that when you have no power it's because you choose to have no power, but that's not true. You have no power because whatever your belief, anything you do to change things will be ineffectual, because others will continue to vote with a strange kind of enduring forgiveness. You're welcome to wave a flag around though, or burn one, whichever you believe will do the most good.

The question now is: Is there any hope of ever getting anyone in place that actually does represent you? And – I'm pretty sure there isn't.

## DO WE HAVE THE RIGHT MEN FOR THE JOB?

Here's a mystery revealed. The reason voters drag themselves to the voting booth with something less than the joy and eager anticipation one might expect is that sickening feeling that they are, yet again, about to choose between the lesser of two evils. The unshakable knowledge that that is exactly what they are about to do only adds further weight upon their already flattened elation.

Thankfully only two evils are typically offered, in some countries you have to choose between dozens. And we can also be thankful that only men of a certain sort would ever consider running for office, because then we know, going in, what we're dealing with... thus the sadness, as we sigh and pull the lever.

No one I know or have any respect for would ever consider running for political office. And no one who would ever want to run for political office is anyone I'd want to know. Also - their desire to do so is enough to cost them any respect I might have had for them previously. It goes deeper than that though. Any honest man—if forced to run and then did by chance win—would be an utter failure. He'd be blocked at every turn as he tried to maneuver within and against a system that he could not either understand or allow himself to accept. Only those who understand it—whether they take to it naturally or debase themselves—can accomplish anything within that foul system. What they accomplish is a pain in the ass for the rest of us...and a strangely expensive pain in the ass at that...AND, it's *our money* they are using in the game they play with such alacrity and without restraint.

Despite our innate human tendency to lean consistently in the direction of hope, we must wonder from time to time if we have the right men for the job. Beyond their criminal inclinations, their complete incompetence, their obvious idiocy, their childlike eagerness to surrender to the slightest temptation no matter how distasteful, their indifference to shame, and their inability or refusal to either face or do anything about the imminent, unavoidable, catastrophic financial disaster their stupid behavior has dragged to our nation's doorstep, there is a very real question as to whether those we put in Federal office are even capable of doing what's necessary. I'm not talking about willingness—we all know they're unwilling—I'm talking about having the basic skills. They don't seem to be able to stay focused for any length of time, and yet, when focused—always on some matter of minutia involving the other party and some event long past—they are unwilling to ever turn loose.

Of course if I were talking about any group other than politicians that might all sound like nothing more than vitriolic name calling, and I realize that some people might think I've gone too far. And they'd be right.

I've gone way too far.

To sit here listing the weaknesses, flaws and the disturbing lack of moral, ethical or even logical tendencies of politicians is going far beyond what's necessary. For example, there's really no need for me to bring up their divisive and duplicitous nature in order for me to make my point. In my mind, the very fact that a man wants to run for office is enough to tell you what kind of a man he is.

From that alone you can see that he does not and in fact can not represent you. And – again, I’m not talking about willingness.

All that side, we STILL have to wonder if we have the right men for the job. I don’t want to step on my own tail, but see no way cleverly around it, so: I’m talking about caring.

In the small privately owned hotel where I work there are always fresh cut flowers in the restaurant and living potted plants both outside and in the lobby. The fresh cut flowers come from the owners’ garden; they are trimmed and arranged with great care in unsteady little vases by the owner’s wife, and they sit somewhat precariously upon the crisp white linen tablecloths of each table in one of the best French restaurants in San Francisco. The potted plants are selected, and placed with considerable aesthetic judgment at various spots throughout the lobby area, a cheery, sincere, silent welcome of sorts to our guests. In the morning it falls to the maids to trim the flowers in the restaurant anew, to replace the water in the little wobbly vases and to sort out any dead and dying flowers from those that might still represent the establishment with some dignity. The maids are terrible at this particular task. They do a lousy job of it.

They leave drooping and dying flowers; they throw out the good with the bad; they almost never change the water, and no one has ever witnessed one of them trimming the stems (which really is necessary if you want the flowers to continue to do their silent, unassuming but joyous best). As for the potted plants, they either die for lack of water or die

of root-rot, from over-watering. When someone suggests to the maids that the potted plants may need watering, they should also suggest that the poor plants should be issued life jackets. It hardly matters, one way or another, in time, all of these flowers and every one of those plants die, are thrown out, and replaced. But far too soon. That is what I'm getting at. For years I've been suggesting, quietly, that the owner appoint somebody to the task of caring for plants who actually CARES about plants. That suggestion has been ignored for as long as I've been making it and the dreadful floral carnage continues.

(Grieve with me now. Flowers would be appropriate.)

As anyone who has ever driven in this town knows, the only people who bear greater disgrace in this life than Bill Clinton are those who work for the City of San Francisco doing street repair. San Francisco has some of the worst streets in the known world. The streets of Somalia are better maintained. I often caution tourists that, before crawling in behind the wheel of a rental car and taking to the streets of San Francisco, they should get themselves a good mouth guard, lest they shatter their own teeth or bite off their tongue while being tossed around on our disgracefully unmaintained streets.

My delightful wife predicts that when it finally comes out that the street repair people also own all of the front-end alignment shops in town, it will all become clear.

In North Carolina, a much MUCH poorer place, which suffers far greater extremes in weather, the roads and highways are beautifully smooth wherever you may gently,

comfortably go. The very worst road in the most remote part of North Carolina is a thousand times better than the best 30 feet of the most recently finished San Francisco pavement. (And I feel much better having said so.)

Here's a thought: If you want smooth roads, put bicyclists in charge of road maintenance. If you want your plants to thrive, put someone in charge who cares about plants. So then, the question is this: DO our representatives care about us? Do they care about the things that we care about? Do they want to take care of the things that we want taken care of? In short, does a guy who never mows his own lawn, for example, or does his own laundry or cooks his own dinner or polishes his own shoes, care about those of us who do? Is he even capable of caring? Does a guy who flies in his own private jet care about those of us who must stand in line and eat airline food? Does a guy who never pays his own taxes—and seems to have no trepidation whatsoever about admitting it—care about those of us who pay ours and still harbor nagging fears? On the other end of that vacuum, does the guy who is playing large stakes poker with other people's money play wildly and freely, thoughtlessly and crazily, or does he play as if he might care?

If you want the best chance at having someone in office who genuinely cares about you, and will listen eagerly to your thoughts and opinions, run your dog as a write-in candidate. Otherwise, you're gonna get someone in there who—as every fiber of common sense tells you—mainly thinks about himself. It's the nature of the job, and the nature of the man who wants such a job.

## SCREAM ALL YOU WANT

In the horror movies the evil guy always drags some poor young, leggy blonde into a darkened room somewhere and, after removing her gag, declares: "Scream all you want, nobody can hear you!" From all indications, these days, THIS may be our greatest societal fear. So, we each pretend that somebody hears us, somebody is listening, and somebody cares. Playing upon that fear, the most uncaring people on earth (banks, airlines, insurance companies, pharmaceutical manufacturers, and health care professionals) all assure us that they care. They say it directly in their ads so that there is no mistake about it. "We care," they say, and just to be sure the point gets across, they add, "about YOU." For a generation that is capable of believing that banks and airlines and insurance companies and drug manufacturers care, it's probably easy to believe that congress (our representatives who oversee our nation's welfare) and doctors (who oversee our bodily health) and priests (who oversee our spiritual health) must surely care as well. Pardon me while I snort derisively. (I'll need about seven minutes.)

Let's but talk about one of these. Let's talk about govt.

I have some bad news to report. Caring is not built into the governmental system. It is not part of any government job description at any level. But - resentment at having to even pretend to care may as well be written into each government employee's contract; it's certainly written in their hearts. The treatment you can expect from the lowest level government employee tells you that they are all

overburdened, and frustrated, and bitter, and the source of their discontent is—not the job, the job would be just fine if they didn't have to deal with—you. That feeling is systemic. That lower level government employee's burden and the burden any congressman must bear, have the same source. A reasonable question then might be, does that guy want to hear from you? I mean, if he has the time to listen to you—because all government employees are overburdened—does he actually want to hear from you?

That can be answered fairly simply by observing the manner in which they treat their own kind. Freshmen congressmen are quick to admit that they don't have the...power? authority? temerity? ability? secret word... necessary to approach another representative in anything less than a formal setting, and—because they are treated with such disdain—don't often care to. And rarely do gentlemen from opposing sides of the aisle treat each other with anything that may be mistaken for courtesy. At the top, it is very difficult to get in to see the president, and those who disagree with him are seldom invited. So, here's the question: If these people aren't listening to each other, what are your odds? If the opinion of members of their own elite club—men of equal status who they recognize and supposedly respect—means so little to them, if they treat each other with derision (and they do), you might guess what they think of the concerns of us lesser beings.

Can your opinion, although quite nice no doubt, possibly mean anything at all to these guys?

Answer: Yes, just before Election Day.



You may have heard this before somewhere. If you're not a teacher, get out of the teachers' lounge. If you're not in show business, what are you doing backstage? Members only...unescorted ladies, of course, are always welcome, and young male pages. Remember the hubbub some idiotic congresswoman made when she was asked to show her ID when entering a Federal Building? How *dare* those guards treat *her* like a lowly citizen!

One evening there was some political matter being discussed on TV and I said, "I don't care about this" and started to change the channel. My very dear wife said, "*I* care about this." I responded, somewhat heavy-handed perhaps, "Care or not, it doesn't change a thing." She responded, "That's no reason to be unpleasant." Actually, that was the very reason I was unpleasant. If I thought that my caring meant something, I would care joyfully. If I truly felt my caring accomplished anything, maybe caring wouldn't hurt so much.

The always combative, self-assured, self-absorbed and thoroughly irritating Barney Frank once responded to an out-of-whack young woman at a town hall meeting (she compared Obama to Hitler, as I recall), by saying (as almost everyone recalls), "Trying to hold a conversation with you would be like trying to argue with a dining room table." Whatever that might mean, if anyone on earth could screw themselves around to getting into an argument with a dining room table, it's Barney Frank. But I wonder why he elevated the woman's opinion. He could have ignored it, or he could have said it was like talking to one of those cheap plastic tables that children hold their phony-baloney, make-

believe tea parties on. That would have given him the opportunity to lambast the ‘Tea Party’ in the same shot. Just an aside: Like many people, I don’t mind knowing that my opinion means nothing, but I don’t like being told to shut up. Fair warning to you politicians, even less do the kids these days like it... they’re all gods.

In fairness, Frank is also known to have said (something along these lines) “In a free society a lot of what people do is simply none of government’s business. If it hurts other people, it’s a criminal matter, otherwise it should be left to each person to make their own choices.” I not only agree with this man’s statement, I applaud it. To my mind, it is absolutely, undeniably, irrefutably correct. So, difficult as it may be to accept, just because you find a person utterly repulsive in every aspect of their being, does not mean that you can’t agree with his thinking on some things. But, agree or disagree, what Frank was really saying was, ‘Government should stay out of MY business, and the voters should stay out of OUR business.’ And - much as I hesitate, I have to admit that I agree with that as well. Hate the idiot, love his idiocy.

It all gets down to this: Are you a politician?

Nope? Me neither. I’m a desk clerk in a small, privately-owned hotel. Politicians don’t spend a lot of time thinking about my decisions—my decisions don’t affect them. And though their decisions DO affect me, there is little I can do about it. They seem to sense that and, from their actions, draw both tremendous freedom and a great deal of license from the fact.

So, two drunks emerge from a bar very late at night. As they stumble along together in a general sorta-homeward direction, one of ‘em notices a dog bend practically in half, licking his own balls. The drunk turns to his friend and casually states, “Gees, I wish I could do that.” In response his friend offers this good advice: “You should probably introduce yourself first.”

I tell you this tale for a reason. The reason is that in every business there is an inside and there is an outside. And in every business the people on the inside really don’t want or need or solicit or generally welcome advice from people on the outside. That’s just the way it is. It’s that way especially with government. (Please don’t pretend you don’t know this!) They may *act as though* they want your input, but they don’t. They are keenly aware that ‘service to the public’ does not require government to respond to every squeak out of the populace, and it’s beyond anyone to satisfy every demand. They’re busy with other things. They’re busy creating their own work, and there’s enough make-work to keep them busy for centuries—especially at the pace they are going. Pressure from the populace, on any given issue, only seems to irritate them. The more immense and popular the pressure, the more they seem to want to head the other way, if only to maintain superiority.

In a little North Beach beatnik tavern called Spec’s, the barkeep used to, when necessary, come out from around the bar to slap a business card down in front of some leering drunk. As I recall it the card said something like, “Sir, clearly the lady is not interested.” Short of congress handing out such a card to each of us, I don’t know how the

message they send us could be clearer. Forbearance for lesser beings has its demands (noblesse oblige), so they might be subtler. They might be more direct. They might tell us, “Shout all you want, but around here, we make the decisions.”

So, here’s the point, if there is a point. You may be in that basement, and the bad guys may be telling you, ‘Scream all you want, nobody can hear you,’ but, you’re not bound! There’s no reason for you to stay there. There’s no reason for you to stay in that miserable, dismal basement.

You are not captive to the political system.

Just exactly what is your investment in political matters anyway? What kind of return are you getting on that investment? Step out of your self-imposed political confinement, into the light of a world filled with many thousands of delightful things.

## SOMETHING ABOUT EVIL

‘The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing.’ *Edmund Burke*.

In response I say this: Syria.

Beyond that however, considering things like—well just for one example—REALITY, the only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is thousands and thousands of good people protesting in the streets and hundreds of them being slaughtered on a daily basis, while the king smiles and flies around the world in luxury with this truly lovely-looking but fairytale-evil wife who, to my personal surprise, turns out to be a thousand times more vicious than the king himself. So, evil can triumph if good men remain silent or it can triumph if thousands protest and wage a prolonged popular revolt in the dusty streets and are slaughtered in droves, while the world looks on hamstrung and helpless.

Silent or not, evil does pretty good in this world, and good people shouting in the streets has never stopped it. Far as I can tell, it has never even slowed it down.

Witness October 1967, when 3000 people attempted to shut down the Oakland Armed Services Induction Center. They wanted to do more than simply protest the war in Vietnam; they wanted to put an end to it. They reasoned that if they could shut down the induction center that would cut off the supply of young soldiers (foolish patriotic sheep) and that would be the first step in bringing an end to the war.

The idea was to reach the inductees before they entered the building, and, by quickly talking a little good sense into them, get them to think, re-think, and turn away from any commitment they may have previously made to the US military. It was a good plan—reasonable, well-thought-out—everyone knew what they wanted to say that would make their brothers not-yet in-arms turn around and walk away from that dreadful place.

It turned out to be a three-day event with some ‘protestors’ injured on the first day and 120 arrested on the second, some fairly respectable big-named people among them. On day three a coalition of 10,000 radicals, casually observing dopers, Catholic-worker types and pacifists, none with any real taste for either nightsticks or jail cells, blocked the streets for several hours. There was probably a lot of chanting involved in this *counter-recruitment* protest. These good people were sincere. Their cause was just; their motives selfless and maybe even heroic. Most of them were thoroughly convinced (otherwise they wouldn’t have been there) that if they could just say the right words to the inductees they could convince them to stop, balk and run. As they marched through the streets, from Berkeley to Oakland—gaining greater assurance with every step—the growing crowd was feeling strong, they were feeling good, they had the taste of success in their mouths; some of them may have even felt glorified: it was certainly a righteous cause. They were actually going to shut down the war!

Unfortunately, doubt started to set in when they arrived at the induction center and faced reality for the first time. All of the circular back-patting and planning was about to be

crushed by a rude awakening: there were cops in riot gear everywhere. The cops had helmets and nightsticks and tear gas and dogs and walkie-talkies, and helicopters over head. It seems that they too had planned; they too were steeped in their beliefs; they too were dedicated to their task. Minor skirmishes erupted between these two armies, even before the buses filled with inductees arrived. As the buses pulled up the crowd was shouting, “DON’T GO. DON’T GO. DON’T GO!”, and when the kids started piling off the buses and heading into the induction center their saviors wriggled through the crowd, approached them one to one, offering them hope and common sense.

“You don’t have to do this,” they said. “You can still save yourself.” There was compassion in their words. These were 19-year-old kids talking desperately to other 19-year-old kids; pleading with them to think about what they were about to do.

So, here’s the question:

How many of these inductees were convinced by their peers not to walk into that building? Remember, this was a three-day event. How many of their fellow youth were convinced not to sign up over those three days? How many stopped, listened, thought for the brief time it takes for the most common of common human sense to sink in, and then refused to go inside and sign the paperwork necessary to have themselves shipped off to some foreign land as canon fodder for a cause that no one in those days really understood? How many?

None.

Henry Edward Fool

Not one.

The induction center was not shut down. The supply of shock troops was not cut off. The war did not end. The war did not end for a very long bloody time after that event.

Just yesterday I was watching a woman on TV as she looked back at that brief moment in her past. She was about my age. She had been a part of that counter-recruitment demonstration in Oakland. Now, more than 40 years after the fact, you could still see the look of bewilderment in her otherwise clear blue eyes, as she told this tale. Not one young man heard what she or anyone else had to say. Not one stepped out of line. Not one. Just a few hours earlier they'd convinced themselves that maybe, just maybe every single one of those young men and women would stop, reconsider their position, and join their movement on the spot. They'd actually spent days debating what they should do with all of them when they did.

So, here's a question for you: If sandal-wearing kids can't convince combat-boot-wearing kids of the same age group to at least consider what they have to say, *at the risk of their own lives*, what hope do you have of convincing those guys in Washington of anything at all?

But, you know, give 'em a try.

Let me know how that works out.



## OF MICE AND LAUNDRO-MATS

There are these mice, and they live in a Laundro-Mat. And their lives are pretty good. And they feel that in order for their lives to continue on this path somebody has got to control all the clothes dryers, and especially the BIG clothes dryer. So they gather round and some of the mice start making promises—Put ME in that BIG clothes dryer, and I'll .... Surprisingly quite a few mice think they can control the BIG clothes dryer, they've been inside the small clothes dryers before; or they've been around and have inspected the works of other clothes dryers, in other laundry facilities. So, they have experience. Some of the hopefuls think that the clothes dryer is best left to run along in its own course and some think that, once they get in there, they'll need to tinker with it in one way or another.

So, by whatever means someone is selected and with great ceremony he is thrown into the BIG clothes dryer and maybe for a time nothing much happens. But then the thing starts up, and poor mouse discovers what he's up against. He tries to deliver what he's promised going in, of course, and while he's tossed around in there the others stand around watching and, depending upon their position, they judge how he's doing.

After a certain time the door opens and he comes spilling out and they gather around and someone asks him—"Do you want to go again?" And he says, "Yes, I really think, at times, I had a handle on it, and I think this time around I'll be able to really get some stuff done."

Meanwhile, in the back of the crowd others are mumbling. They're raising their squeaky little voices saying, "Hey, give me a shot at it! He's done nothing! Give me a shot at it!" And they begin making promises, detailing all the things they can do for all the mice in that Laundro-Mat, if they were selected to go into that BIG clothes dryer. In the crowd one lonely, solitary mouse mumbles, "They won't deliver, though. None of them ever do." Overhearing this, others mice in the crowd give that mouse a critical look and begin to back away from him.

Others stand around observing, taking notes, and criticizing how each mouse does during his turn in the BIG dryer. Later they'll write books on how well or how badly they did while flopping around inside that BIG machine. "I thought he was doing OK until they tossed in a pair of high-top sneakers... but, all-in-all, when we yanked him out of there, there were still some socks missing."

Because of the mechanism's cycles, some will seem to have done a good job, and some, because of a mechanical failure or a power outage in the Laundro-Mat, will appear to have done, for a while anyway, an excellent job of taming the BIG clothes dryer. Naturally, all the mice gathered around in the Laundro-Mat will believe that they have had a hand in a grand experiment. Very few, of course, either inside the BIG machine or outside watching, will see the larger picture.

Some, of course, will turn their backs on these ridiculous events entirely, and live peculiar little senseless lives.

## NEITHER REAL NOR IMPORTANT

Recall now the kid in our lobby who was shocked at the news (to him) that Congress had isolated itself from the electorate. I wanted very badly to tell the kid that I thought politics was neither real nor important, even though, at first glance it might brand me as an idiot, and, I might not get the opportunity to explain things further. In order to make my point I'd probably be forced to wander off into the realm of philosophy and let's all just go to Disneyland instead. As an alternative, I've saved what I might have said to him, so that I can embarrass myself here, in a stickier, more permanent form. In that process I believe I've also at once made it as easy as possible for anyone to think that I am either fooling myself or, nobler still, attempting to fool them. When I say that I don't think politics is either real or important, I'm probably doing a little of both, and neither inadvertently. Time being what it is, if you're spending any time at all thinking about politics, you're probably doing the same. I'm not alone in this thinking.

Bill Shakespeare says the entire goddamned ball of wax—all of it (I would guess that includes politics)—is *a tale told by an idiot full of sound and fury, signifying nothing*.

Closer to the point Eugene McCarthy said: *Being in politics is like being a football coach. You have to be smart enough to understand the game, and dumb enough to think it's important.*

Ronald Reagan said: *Politics is supposed to be the world's second oldest profession. I have come to realize that it bears a very close resemblance to the first.* Both of these men were considered pretty smart and they both had long careers and considerable experience deep inside the American political quagmire. Do you think they might know more about it than some of the rest of us?

While walking the dog-in-law one day, we passed a former mayor of this town washing his car outside his Victorian mansion. I stopped to tell him that I thought his idea—that we should have more trash cans on more corners in this town—had been a good idea. He said thank you. I asked him if he had any further political aspirations, and he shook his head. “It was almost impossible to get the trash cans passed.” Then he went back to washing his car and I went back to walking the dog-in-law. I found myself smiling as I walked away, and I noticed that he was whistling as he went back to washing his car.

Freedom is a lovely thing.

This should be enough to irritate some readers, and though I wish I could do more, it's enough to demonstrate how quickly our visceral response is to things we don't agree with. Lest we forget, I said that I don't think that politics is either real or important. I don't know if I have a much longer view or a much shorter view that allows me to see it that way. I don't know if it's my proximity to the problem or my contrary nature. Many people seem to think that politics is beyond real—urgently real—and extremely important. Some even seem to think it's necessary.

The question is not “How do we determine which of us is correct?” That doesn’t matter. Could we both be correct? Could we both be completely wrong? Does the truth lie somewhere in between? The unanswerable question is: Why is it so easy to dismiss any opposing political view?

For me, politics isn’t any more real than the lottery, and what we think and say and do has about the same influence on both. With the lottery, of course, if you don’t enter you can’t win. With politics, whether you participate or not, you’ll have about the same chances of getting what you’d like out of it.

If everything you’ve ever voted for in the past has passed, you might contend what I’ve just said. But, have you given much thought to the people who voted *against* those very same things? Yes, you hit the jackpot, but how many numbers did they match?

What does it say about our influence when a tremendously popular bill fails or a tremendously unpopular bill passes?

The president of one of the largest labor unions in the United States—reportedly representing half a million people—was asked if, when he spoke, politicians listened. He replied casually, “I think they do.” Asked if he could pick up the phone and be put through to any congressman he wished, he demurred... “Well...”

This is going to pinch just a bit, as they say, but the very real fact is: we’re insignificant. If that labor union jackass doesn’t have their ear, what are your chances?

Henry Edward Fool

What am I suggesting? Am I suggesting that you surrender? Am I suggesting that you give up? Nope. Do what ever you want, and I'll do the same. Just because politics is neither real nor important to me doesn't mean you can't wear that albatross proudly.

Keep up the struggle—whatever the odds—and may God bless your efforts, because Congress, I assure you, remains oblivious.

## WHAT ARE WE PAYING THESE GUYS FOR?

You, dear mere citizen, have the right to speak up, you have the right to protest and so you do; you speak up, you protest. You make your placards and your sloppy hand-painted signs with pithy slogans, you sew your large unwieldy banners, and you go out there and you march around and you chant and once in a while you raise your fist in the air and shout something indecipherable but inspiring. And while you do that you're forgetting the rights of the politicians you're screaming at. They reserve the right to ignore your protest entirely. But don't let that fact get too much in the way. If you prefer instead to see what my dear wife calls the illusion of reality rather than the reality behind the illusion, that's OK too. It's one option. Many very good people have trodden that path, and somebody needs to keep an eye on these guys.

Politicians are like dogs—unless you admonish them in some memorable manner, and repeatedly, they will assume that everything they do is OK. They'll try to get away with whatever they can while your back is turned. It's funny of course how I talk out of both sides of my mouth on this matter, saying one minute, ignore them, and the next minute, keep a close eye on 'em. But that's really the situation. I didn't create it, I merely observed it. It's the same situation we face when a washing machine repairman appears at our door; do we keep a close eye on him, or do we leave him alone to do what we've hired him to do?

We did hire these guys to do something. So we need to decide if we're going to let them do their job and whether

they can do that job better with everybody trying to influence them, or left entirely alone to face their own conscience in the accusatory silence of a completely indifferent electorate.

Wouldn't that be something?

Looking at it from the most compassionate view (and at once the most ridiculous), these poor representatives are like the idiot who subscribes to a service which allows him to watch six tennis matches on TV all at once. The poor congressman however is watching a thousand screens at once, and trying to make some sense of it. "Scream all you want, nobody has the time or the inclination to hear you!" This is our political reality. His is like that of any wealthy man—everybody he meets wants something from him. His desk is covered in telephones, stem to stern, and they're all ringing at once. (Which one would you pick up?) Really, whatever our vision of representative government, our thoughts on who these men might be or what we might mean to them, they're just men. They have enough to think about and, though everything they do only makes things worse (as far as I can see), they have plenty to keep 'em busy. They have their own concerns. So, anything we do to waylay them in their course, must feel like an unwelcome if not completely unnecessary distraction.

So, I'm guessing, if a politician wishes to remain in control of his senses, two things necessarily come into play. The first is that he limits the number of people who have access to him. The second is, from among those select few, he limits the number of people he actually listens to.



So, however bright our stars may be in the galaxy before him, he can not pick out and name any single one because of the demanding glare that is the sun of his existence in DC politics. But that doesn't mean that unless you're outside in the street banging on garbage can lids and blowing whistles, he's unaware of your point of view. I mean, they may all be idiots, but they're conscious...supposedly. If you listen to them tell it, each of these guys is nearly crushed under the enormous responsibility they bear as they consider every option on every issue before them. It would be impossible to convey either the seriousness with which they face these things, or the time spent in unfathomable anguish over every decision. It would be kinder by far if each day we bound him and dragged him face-first over 17 miles of glass-strewn tarmac than to ask any more of the man. But, that's his job. That's what we hired him to do.

So, what about it?

Shall we shut up for one lousy second and see how these clowns perform without us trying to yank them around? Let's bow out and see what choices they make when they make decisions on their own. It might be interesting to see if they're any different than the decisions they've made while we were riding them. We might then answer the question: Are these guys really just a bunch of honest men doing the best they can for the people they represent, or do they, as some say, work for others? Finding out what these men are really made of might prove interesting. As it stands, we're all just guessing.

What about you? Would it be better or worse for you, if you backed off the political involvement a little? Would it be better or worse for you to admit that the alcoholics have taken over the liquor warehouse? Would it be better or worse for you to recognize openly, once and for all, how strangely unresponsive they are to your nagging pleas for sobriety, to throw up your hands in well-earned surrender, turn your back on a problem that is not, after all, yours, and simply walk away?

Do you think they'll really miss you?

We have to stop babysitting these fools. We have to stop screaming at them; we need to stop demanding that they listen to our good advice; we need to let them crash the car, if that's what they'll do, so that, while they're in the hospital recovering, they might rethink their position, or, better still, while they're in the hospital recovering, we might rethink ours.

Almost every day my very dear wife and I take a dog or two and we walk along the beach for 40 minutes. In those brief lovely moments politics does not exist. I'm trying to convince myself that it may not exist at other times as well, because I'm guessing that if I can make that leap, I'll find myself in a better world.

## MY MOST WELCOME VIEW ON FRANCE

Having the great good fortune to have found, flimflammed, and then married an intelligent, well-traveled, extremely well-educated and charming young French woman, I have an expanded perspective on international politics that might be enlightening to those of you not quick enough or clever enough to find and flimflam an intelligent, well-traveled, extremely well-educated and charming young foreign-born wife of your own and thus reap the benefits of such an unearned, completely undeserved, and immeasurable blessing.

I've discovered that if you watch the French from a good distance, with a limited grasp of their language, no understanding whatsoever of their history and even less of their politics, you can see clearly that they have no real idea of what a mess they are in. France seems to be consciously, systematically, constructing a state designed almost perfectly to dismantle the very essence of its own culture. I can hear the French argument now: "It would be really very small-minded of us not to invite those who hate us to come and to take full advantage of all that our country has to offer, while urinating in our streets and setting our cars on fire!" This is French thinking. Of course, inviting those who clearly despise everything good and worthy about your country to come, settle in, and lead dark, surly, snappish, vicious lives of seething discontent, is a mistake many European countries make. In that, France is not unique.

Neither is France unique in its enthusiasm for crushing the life out of businesses, both small and large, with exorbitant

taxes and the endless, tedious, nit-by-tiny-nit regulation of every aspect of commerce. It's a common mistake among well-meaning nations. Of course, the money required to harbor and care for malcontents has to come from somewhere, and France, like most free states, has decided it must come from the ambitious, the hard-working, the dedicated, the builders, the innovators, the prosperous, the job providers.

In France, he who flatly refuses to work is king; the worker is the much-beloved ward of the state; the employer, little more than a criminal of some shameless (and shameful) sort. So, while the state struggles to understand what motivates the writhing masses of bitter ingrate leeches—and comforts them with promises—it simultaneously suppresses the achievers. France holds no leniency whatsoever for any man who might have the effrontery to conduct himself in a civilized manner and is willing to work in order to get somewhere. They've gone beyond socialism and have taken the Maoist approach, limiting the amount of expensive junk any man may accumulate.

Personally, I believe that a person needs only so much junk in his life. This is what my dear wife calls my monk-like detachment from material things. And, I believe that life is better, richer, deeper, purer, fuller in almost every way, if you spend a little more time appreciating the junk you already have cluttering up your life and less time longing for more of the damned stuff. I have always wondered, for example, why a rich man should continue to shrug on the old armor and throw himself into the daily fray only to gain greater riches, buy more stuff, and add greater disorder to

his muddled mess, when he could instead, say, place himself in a very nice, very comfortable, nicely lit and delicately ventilated room and begin reading all the books that he's been pretending for years to have such a deep yearning to read, without interruption. But I do not think choosing between these options should be dictated by the state. In that battle I have to side with open-ended, self-regulated or unregulated, avarice rather than state-imposed austerity. If I cared, I would still like to ask the rich guy just exactly what the heck is going on in his mind.

For the ever-migrating influx of malcontents into France, I have this question: "If so much of France sickens you, and you suffer so under the weight of mistreatment and unbearable injustice there, why not return to the veritable dreamland from which you came?" To ask that simple question reveals me for what I am.

At any rate I tell you all this because my opinion has as much impact on the politics of France as it does here at home.

Yours too.

## LIBERALS and Others

The practitioners of “Liberal” political philosophies define ‘Liberal’ as one thing—seeking universal liberty and social justice, open-minded, accepting—while their actions define it as something entirely different—narrow-minded, thoughtlessly dogmatic, intolerant, vicious, and strangely exclusive. It is a clique-like community with a somewhat fragmented vision which welcomes anyone, whatever their cause, who despises what they perceive to be their mutual enemy. It is a rare liberal indeed who might stand up and declare: I defend your right to be wrong! No, they feel they must correct us.

Liberals are largely motivated by large abstract concepts, slogans, bumper stickers, the simplest of simple not-quite-perfectly-rhyming rhymes, all-encompassing humanistic generalizations, mottos; anything that can’t be boxed or nailed down or held up to the light long enough to study. It’s difficult to admire the details of anything that doesn’t grow much beyond concept. By the nature of their vagueness, these quixotic themes—for that is all they are—are impossible to argue with, and who would be cruel enough to criticize an Idealized thought? Unfortunately, political ideals can only be held aloft, for any length of time, by those who do not see the true enormity and genuine complexity of the foul thing that is politics. Of course they would deny their own naiveté, but that marks them all the more clearly.

What’s peculiar is that anyone with such an august outlook would ever consider anything as vile as politics to be the

proper tool for attaining the pure utopian ends that Liberals so smugly claim to seek.

Of course those of us with greater experience, and the dispassionate insight that age and objectivity provide, have all scrapped our ideals long long ago and now stew in eternal bitterness, casting a cold, uncompromising eye upon anything that might look like either Empathy or Hope. Our greatest joy is to extinguish even the glimmer of such silliness wherever we might detect it.

## DEEP IN TOLERANCE

People who preach tolerance are the least tolerant people on earth—though they don't detect that in themselves—and they seem to harbor a desperate urgency to correct the thinking of others on this matter. They scream for diversity but demand conformity. For them, diversity includes themselves and others who, like themselves, feel they are oppressed by those whom they, for whatever reasons, cannot accept. It's only natural that diversity would exclude the oppressor, which is anyone who finds himself outcast by the preachers of tolerance. Strange world in which the oppressor is the victim of diversity.

People who preach tolerance rarely accept those they demand accept them. And, these days, they are not just intolerant but loudly intolerant. We applaud your spirit, loudly intolerant oppressed diversified fellow traveler!

One day I was waiting for the walking green on the corner of Sutter and Kearny streets in San Francisco, when a trim young man, surrounded with a gaggle of gushing friends (he must be *somebody*) stepped up to the curb behind me. He was in the midst of a rant declaring his hatred for the French. “aaaaa-and, ever since that very moment I have DESPISED the French. I just hate them all.” His entourage all accepted this highly enlightened view without so much as a quibble, and I imagined them later passing on this highly enlightened view to others, as their own. (That's the way it works.) Put aside for the moment the fact that despising the French is like despising a nice warm bed in a quiet room with the music of your choice playing softly,



while a blizzard blows savagely outside your window, and someone knocks gently upon your door, trilling, “Would you care for a little hot chocolate?” I do not know how anyone mincing around in San Francisco, theatrically proclaiming his hatred for the French, can justify his own behavior. I do know this however, the French, whom he despises, would be the first to apologize if they thought *anything* they had done, real or imagined, might have offended this stupid little twerp.  
(And, if you’re making a list, I’d be the last.)  
More peculiar still, for this world, they’d mean it.

My assumption, that this young man is not a registered Republican, might be questioned by some, but my conclusion that he is what a thoroughly drunken Irish bloke once called me, “soom kind oov a fookin’ idjut”, can not be challenged. Hate the French; what goddamned nonsense! The only people who have any real right to hate the French are the unending hordes of foreign invaders who are, immediately upon arrival, given food and clothing and a nice place to live and a monthly check for doing nothing more than standing around on the corner smoking cigarettes all day, glowering at more reasonable people with much larger burdens to bear, and complaining that their Christmas bonus is not large enough to cover the seasonal up-tick in the cost of drugs.

That shameful injustice is being corrected though, even as we speak. France, though broke a thousand times over from decades of such *gentil* but sadly myopic behavior, has now put a guy in place who thinks that all they need is more of that in order to pull themselves out. But...I’ve drifted.

## I JUST DON'T GET IT (Do I?)

When the kid in the lobby turned to me and said, “You just don’t get it, do you?” it was not the first time that accusation had been leveled at me. It seems to be a popular phrase these days; it’s used like a club against those of us who just don’t get it. By that I mean those of us who don’t see every matter as clearly, as perfectly, as correctly, and exactly in the same way, as others, who do get it. Beyond the implication that the accuser KNOWS the truth, is the implication that we are either too stupid to recognize the truth when we see it, or maybe we’re just pretending not to recognize the truth to irritate those who do; or, maybe we’re just plain evil.

Let me admit right here and now that I do not recognize the truth. Possibly it is because I’m evil, I don’t know. That would be my first guess however. So, when I rub someone who *does* know the truth the wrong way, it is not because I recognize the truth but cannot or will not admit it. I don’t recognize it at all. When I rub someone the wrong way, who happens to know the truth, it is not because I’m stupid either. I’m clever enough to recognize a superior being when I stand cowering before one, but for some reason, during such opportunity, I usually have other things on my mind. When I rub someone the wrong way who knows the truth and finds himself suffering under the additional burden of now having to take the time to explain things to me, it is usually because I don’t give a damn. They usually somehow detect that in my posture, the rolling of my eyes, the sighs, my continual shifting from one foot to the other,

while they deliver their scalding reprimand.

They read me correctly if, from all of that, they feel that I might be saying: You know the truth, I don't. Of the two of us, I'm the only one who seems to be able to live with that.

Whether I know the truth or not, whether you know the truth or not and whether I get it or don't get it or get it and refuse to admit it because I'm evil, or don't get it because I'm stupid, doesn't change anything. It changes nothing. You're wasting your time on me; you should be trying to persuade somebody who is in the position to do something about the things you care so passionately about. I ain't that guy. I have no power. And I'm not convinced you do either. Worse still, if we team up, I'll only dilute the cause. IF every human being on earth who just doesn't get it, were to switch sides all in an instant, not one single goddamned thing would change. Now, suddenly, we all get it, and now, suddenly, nothing has changed. Why? Because...

The WHOLE WORLD IS WATCHING

The WHOLE WORLD IS WATCHING

Except the guys in suits and ties

Who really have the power

That's not even mentioning the fragmentation on the Left.

I mean this: If you're not quibbling over the cow, you're quibbling over the way the cow should be butchered and distributed. Believe me, fragmentation is a reason the largest threat to the Left is the Left itself. And then there's this. Even if I were on your side—and I am on NO side—

I could never feel that you were on mine. I love you dearly, brother, but your weird take on a mutually-shared enemy makes yours an unsympathetic uprising.

The Left is strung together not so much from a shared vision as from a common enemy. It is their opposing view of *the Right* which brings them together. That's how you get organic bread bakers and black militant separatists, and people who are frantic to destroy all established financial institutions, and people who don't speak a word of English, and folks who earnestly wish to understand the role of the Burka in Islam, and women's rights advocates, and lovers of pit bulls, and The Mauled Babies Project, all throwing in together. Basically, none of 'em like whitey. What's weird and irritating and somewhat ridiculous is that the most vehement and boisterous people in any such gathering (sometimes not actually but only wishing to be) are typically white themselves, usually quite white, and usually quite well-off. That's only the necessary atonement for the crime of being born that completely selfish color, of course.

The problem comes when one of the swarm, struck from above by the sudden ability to think either clearly or for himself, has an independent thought and abruptly realizes that he likes organic bread but doesn't really agree with blowing up the first national bank, OR he thinks he might detect some slight conflict in an all-encompassing brotherhood which includes both those who enshroud women head to toe in social and cultural obscurity, treating them like cattle, and picketing members of the sex workers' union.

For those of us who are actually FOR something, rather than simply against everything the enemy might be for, things are simpler. We have tremendous freedom. We cling to an archaic process called discernment. It's largely an individual matter.

For example, we might feel that we can like baseball but not really like football all that much, and that's OK. With discernment, each of us can draw a clear distinction between those things we find acceptable and reasonable and those things which we don't. Discernment is, of course, a dangerous stumbling block to becoming a serious human being, like those who have freed themselves of it, because it prevents us from hearing, accepting, and taking to heart what others have determined for us to be the truth.

But we try. We want to evolve, to become better people, but we just can't do it. That's why our children are left to fend for themselves while we're out there on the street looking for drugs...oh, wait...

It hardly matters though, we will soon no longer be allowed to determine for ourselves what we like and don't like, what we find good and what we find reprehensible; those decisions will be left to the conclave.

The point is that we're *evolving* and we continue to evolve.

Although I am myself a white, hetero-sexual, happily married, taxpaying, American male, I'm also getting nowhere, working my life away in a thankless job, for a man who clearly despises me. I'd like some credit for that. So, count me in, or don't count me out.

Henry Edward Fool

Though I cannot yet say that I truly look forward to that time in the future when, ten years after the first man has married the first donkey, we can all look back in shame at how close-minded we had once been, I have stopped kicking the dog. I'd like some credit for that too. I'm still evolving. I'm opening my heart to you.

Meanwhile though, as kind of a practice run, maybe you could try opening your hearts to me.

## ECONOMICAL FUTILITY

Economy and politics are inextricably intertwined. They are inseparable. Ours is not so much a political system as it is an economic one. That's such an obvious statement that it sounds silly to even say so. Still, it must be said. And it must be said that many, most, perhaps all, political matters are fought out on the economic field. And (merely my opinion), that would not be so bad if everyone would simply admit it, and accept it. AND, if the people who have the power to make important decisions—decisions that effect the country and the economy in which we all struggle to stay afloat—were not completely incompetent when it comes to economic matters, that wouldn't be so bad. It wouldn't be so bad if they *cared* either.

My father thinks that politicians should all be required to read the Constitution of the United States before being sworn in. My mother thinks they should all be required to balance a household budget for three years before taking office. I think she has an important point. The U.S. Postal Service is broke. Social Security is broke, though, for reasons which make no sense, they simply will not admit it. Fannie Mae and that other one are both broke, having been run into the ground by men who are paid handsomely for their continuing good work. Medicare is broke. The US Government is so far beyond broke that it is boggling to the most thoughtful mind—and though they don't deny it, they feel no compunction to do anything more than talk about it.

“Yeah, we're in debt. We're in serious debt. Some day we should probably think about doing something about that.”

Government is not the solution to most of the problems we face—because they are the creators of most of the problems we face—and the political process that we have in place cannot produce the government that is the solution.

As I write this, the US federal government has decided to stay the course and continues to throw large trash bags stuffed full with money into the dark and uncharted who-knows-where. It hardly matters to them, it's not their money and, with any luck at all, they'll all be dead dead dead when that debt comes due. That is the only reasonable explanation for what they are up to. This, of course, drives those of us who still think a billion dollars is worth notice, absolutely CRAZY. What possible explanation could these people—whom we've elected and re-elected and will re-elect again—have for such wild, drunken, stupid, thoughtless, short-sighted, costly and dangerous behavior? Are they all idiots?

Actually, that would explain a lot.

Nobody minds a dog and pony show but there should at least be a dog involved, and maybe even a pony. We're getting nothing. They offer no explanation for perpetuating their malfeasance. Instead they want to manipulate our minds by ignoring it, acting as though the problem doesn't exist, and pretend that everything is OK. By rote they try to convince us that 30 million dollars is nothing. Alternately, they switch the message around and *the debt ceiling* becomes a matter of extreme national urgency, because, if they are to be paid for their incompetence, they'll need to put their hands in our pockets just one more time.



It's just a little pinch.

I'll tell you what I think is happening.  
(Finally, some humor!)

Let's say you owe someone 10 bucks. The best thing you can do...short of paying him back what you owe him, of course...is to borrow another 10 from him. Keep that up, and eventually there comes a point at which you've borrowed so much from him that his interest in your success blossoms. Owe him enough and his deepest desire is to see that you prosper, in order to pay him back. If you owe someone enough money—as they say in organized crime—congratulations, you've bought yourself a partner. Somewhere in the reptilian part of our brains we all know this, and politicians, with a very large part of their brains reptilian, know it almost instinctually.

So, these fools owe, let's say for example, our very good friends, China (formerly known as Communist China, but now our trading partner), fifty bucks. It's a set figure: fifty bucks. Fifty bucks is a lot of money! What's the best thing we can do? Put off payment. That's right. If we put off payment, down the road, when fifty bucks doesn't mean a damned thing, when you wouldn't consider bending down to pick up fifty bucks laying on the sidewalk, THEN we pay off our debt. When fifty bucks has become virtually worthless, that's when we re-pay our good and loyal friend, China. Problem solved. Suddenly we see the genius in their idiocy. My god, it's like a magic trick!

Henry Edward Fool

That's what I think those screwballs in Washington are up to. It's unfair to poor old China though; they sell us trillions of dollars worth of useless, cheaply made, sometimes dangerous, plastic crap and this is the way we treat them... Talk about predatory lending!

Meanwhile, during all of this, your \$47,000/year job continues to pay the same \$47,000 and, though you could pull your mortgage out of your pocket, you can't feed or clothe yourself on a mere 50 grand...a loaf of bread costs \$2400. Anyway, that's what I think is going on. I'm sure it's not a unique thought. Those boys in DC are probably thinking it too, assuming they're thinking at all. They're not thinking about you at any rate, or your children, or anybody else. If they were they'd want a strong dollar.

Remember that when you step into that voting booth.

## The POLITICIAN, the SURPLUS and the PAGE

So, there's a good and honest voter, and he's on one side of a river with

a politician

a not-particularly-ugly congressional page, and

a budget surplus.

He wants to get all of that to the other side of the river, safely. The problem is that his boat can only accommodate himself at the oars, and one other item.

He can't leave the politician alone with the surplus for any length of time or he'll turn it into a massive deficit, and the boat will sink.

He can't leave the politician alone with the not-particularly-ugly congressional page for ANY length of time or... well, let's just say that it wouldn't be fair to the kid.

So, how does our voter do it?

It's the classic conundrum.

Here's what the voter does. He takes the politician across the river, leaving the not-particularly-ugly page behind with the surplus. He drops the politician off and returns to pick up the surplus. He then rows across with the surplus, leaves it upon the bank and, with some wheedling and the threat of physical force, gets the politician back into the boat.

They then cross the river together, with the politician alternately looking back longingly at the budget surplus and looking forward like a fox with his eye on an injured hen.

Henry Edward Fool

The voter then brings the not-particularly-ugly page on board, and, at gunpoint, drives the politician off onto shore.

He then takes the not particularly ugly page across the river. After dropping the page off to wait with the now-growing surplus, and returns for the politician.

On the way across, the politician asks the voter, “Why did you have to go through all of that?” and the voter snorts loudly.

“Seriously,” says the politician. “Why did you have to go through all of that?”

“You honestly don’t know?” asks the voter.

“No.”

“Honestly... you have no idea?”

“No,” says the politician.

The voter looks the man in the eye for quite a while. Then, suddenly, something becomes clear. This may be the first time any politician has ever been candid with a voter.

## @ Completely IDIOTIC SUGGESTION

There's not a thing on earth, either process or product, that couldn't have been made better (improved upon) had they only come to me first. I'm sure you must feel the same. For example if SAAB had come to me, I would have told them: "The driver already has the volume control at his fingertips, on the steering wheel, the dash-mounted volume control should be *on the passenger's side*." In general, when it comes to design, my thinking is this: Those people who ultimately use a device should have final approval on what it looks like and how it operates. Alternatively, all designers should be condemned to use their own stupidly-designed gadgets throughout eternity, in Hell. Hold on to that thought for a moment.

We now find ourselves in a world in which things are changing all of the time and at a frightening (for some) exhilarating (for others) pace. Continual technological expansion leads continually to more choices...more interconnectedness...more confusion...more detachment from what some of us still recognize as reality. And whether we welcome that or fear that or hope to remain indifferent to it (and good luck by the way); whether we have a sense of imminent or inevitable impending doom or whatever the alternative may be (because I can't see it from here), we're stuck with the same old politics, the same old politicians and the same old system. Why, one might reasonably ask, is that? Do we, or do we not, live out our wonderful fairytale lives in I T's golden realm? And so, with that we come, unavoidably, to this: TAXES.

No matter the amount, whether it is taken from us, given freely or rendered begrudgingly, the aspect that is most concerning about taxes is how that money is spent. When someone complains about tax dollars spent Charting the Cyclical Nature of the Ugandan Banana Slug's Mating Life, they are actually saying, "I don't want MY money wasted on that." But, they're helpless to prevent it. When someone complains about the percentage of their income taken by taxes, they are not merely complaining about the percentage taken—though that certainly seems reason enough to complain—they are saying, "I want some say in how that money, which I earned, is spent." When someone cheats on their tax form, or avoids taxes, or pays no taxes at all by either tedious or clever manipulation of the figures, it is their way of saying, "I don't want to contribute any more than I must to government's mindless wastefulness."

These are all reasonable complaints.

The question is, What can we do about it?

The answer is:

*The* TAXPAYERS' RECOMMENDED BUDGET

**Let *each* taxpayer allocate, *dollar for dollar*, what their taxes are to be used for.**

As it is now:

How our tax money is spent is determined by our *representatives* in Washington DC. These so-called representatives are like dogs; unless strictly instructed otherwise they assume that everything they do meets our approval. Unfortunately, the only instruction these people

ever get is from lobbyists and special interests, and their decisions are therefore guided by self-interest. As it is now, we cannot force these people to recognize, let alone accept, a higher responsibility. And, as it is now, it doesn't matter if we agree or disagree with what they do, they will do what they will, and we are helpless to do anything about it.

As it should be:

The people in Washington DC would listen carefully to the will of the People and attempt to represent that will when dispersing our hard-earned tax money, rather than simply broadcasting it in the casual manner of someone feeding chickens.

How do we make that happen?

Admittedly, we are not in the position to *tell* Congress what they can or should do. Constitutionally speaking, it is their job to make those decisions, and they seem well aware of it. Besides, they've purposefully placed themselves out of reach because they are too big and too important to either listen or take the time, or maybe they are overwhelmed with other concerns, or they don't yet recognize who they work for. BUT, we can TRY to tell them how we feel; there's no law against that. In fact, as I understand it, it is our patriotic duty to do so.

So, how do we do that?

*The Taxpayers' Recommended Budget*

*The Taxpayers' Recommended Budget* is a form that each taxpaying citizen includes with his taxes, upon which he allocates every single dollar of his taxes to the budgetary items and matters that concern him most.

By this form we tell Congress, “See, *this* is what we want. This is how much we are willing to pay for it.”

Again, of course, sadly or shamefully, Congress will do whatever it wishes. But, IF Congress were to honor taxpayers by considering the information found in *The Taxpayers’ Recommended Budget*, it would be...well, there really are no words for such a miracle. Each taxpayer’s taxes would TRULY represent that person’s wishes.

By this process we will have accomplished many things; we will have established a purer form of representative democracy; we will have composed a prototype Federal Budget; we will have eliminated special interests, lobbying, bribery, greed and stupidity from the budgetary process. By expressing each our own various political concerns, in all likelihood we *also* will have created a tax system under which more people might more willingly cooperate, and, at once, (this is my guess) present a more humane visage of the United States of America at home and throughout the world. Those people who otherwise might cheat or avoid taxes might be encouraged to take a greater part in the process and, since those people who pay no taxes will have very little say about how the money provided government by those who do is spent, there’s an incentive for them as well. But, mainly, Congress will no longer be guessing what the People want. Data provided by *The Taxpayers’ Recommended Budget* will tell them precisely and unquestionably what we want.



## THE VALUE OF POLITICS IN LIFE

Politics is not pleasing to any of the five senses. For those poor people with a sixth sense, it must be an ever-present ominous drone. It is, for anyone with any degree of sensitivity, a complete pain in the ass. And government—the result of political activity—is worse; it is nothing more, and never will be anything less than, a massive delivery system, designed to deliver bad news.

At what point in your life have you ever had contact with government on any level when it wasn't dissatisfying, frustrating, infuriating, threatening, frightening or completely idiotic? Have you ever had any contact with government on any level when it wasn't an enormous, tedious, and completely unnecessary waste of time and effort? Even when the encounter goes well, and works out swimmingly and to your advantage, looking back upon it you have to wonder if it was even necessary. When an envelope appears in your mailbox with a government return address, have you ever felt anything other than a sinking feeling in the pit of your stomach?

The French have a gesture which involves a shrug of the shoulders, upturned palms, a tilt of the head, a slight rolling of the eyes, an exaggerated frown, and puffed out cheeks followed by blowing out a sharp breath through tightened lips. Depending upon the circumstance, that gesture can mean, 'Who knows?', 'Who cares?', 'Why would I know?' 'I've forgotten' or 'This doesn't involve me', or 'Why are you burdening me with this?' That's my response to politics. It means all of those things—'Who knows?', 'Who

cares?', 'Why would I know?', 'This doesn't involve me', and 'Why are you burdening me with this?' Unfortunately, that gesture doesn't mean 'I've forgotten', politics won't let you forget. When it comes to politics I don't know, I don't care, I don't know why I should, if I ever did, I can't remember why I did, pretty much says it all for me. I'm not going to burst any blood vessels over anything which is entirely out of my hands.

I once asked my dear wife—who knows me better than anyone else on earth—which she thinks I find more irritating, injustice of any sort, or something I can't do anything about. She wisely replied, "For you, they are often the same thing." So, I've got enough of that in my life right now, I don't need to add politics into the mix.

At 64 years old I'm just beginning to learn that I can't do anything about anything I can't do anything about. And I've decided to make no apology for that. I'm OK with doing nothing about things I can do nothing about. It's OK with me. I will, however, continue to try to do something about those things I actually might be able to do something about. And I will not apologize for that either. I mean, I will make no apology for focusing upon those things about which I can actually do something, while ignoring those I can't. And I make no apology for refusing to waste my limited time here on this planet and my energy and my breath and my hope on a bunch of self-serving career politicians who are purposefully and stubbornly deaf to my plea. I have tried to reach them, but with no success, and so far, none of them have turned to me for the kind of help that a slightly wacky, uncluttered mind might provide.

I'm sure others, with sounder advice, have had the same experience. So, I've come to recognize that too often those who care don't have the power to do anything about a situation, and those who have the power don't care. I have NO idea what anyone can do about that.

At any rate, I now recognize that I need to put those things that I can't do anything about in the hands of those idiots, whom I cannot reach but who, by damnable ridiculous nature, apparently WANT to deal with that stuff. If they put in five minutes a day thinking about political matters, they're ahead of me, and if they read a single sentence in one report on such matters, they're a thousand times more informed. They are, after all, in the position to do something about all that. That's the situation. There is no crime in me recognizing it. Or do I protest too much?

## BOOK FOUR

### PROXIMITY

#### THE POWER OF PROXIMITY

One time I was cast out of an Irish bar in San Francisco for stating my *apolitical* views concerning proximity.

There was an Irish band playing raucous revolutionary songs on stage in the Plough and Stars one night (1978 or so), and, during the break between sets, while the rest of the band headed for the bar, I slunk up to the apron of the stage and drunkenly addressed the drummer. “I guess it must be pretty easy playing the part of the *big bad revolutionary* 6000 miles away from the action,” I slurred. He was shocked, of course. He saw me as I made my approach and had expected me to gush about what a great show it was in a warm, neighborly brogue. He got reality instead.

FACT: When simple truth steps on the bloated self-assurance of mindless ideology, it sometimes hurts. For some of us, ever being asked to think is an insult.

“What did you say?” he demanded sharply.

“I SAID,” I shouted, “it must be pretty goddamned *easy* for you *big tough* revolutionaries singing about the glories of violent revolution 6000 miles away from all the action.”

As fate would have it, the hum of the dying tube amps collapsed into empty silence at that very moment, and my shouting made me the center of attention. Even through the foggy haze it became almost immediately clear to me that I

would very soon no longer be welcome in that lovely Irish bar. I deduced that from the fact that the rest of the band had put down their drinks, regrouped, and were knocking over chairs and people in their effort to get back to where I stood. Behind them, the barkeep was coming around to our side of things with a baseball bat in one hand. Though no blood was shed—further proof of my theorem—no lessons were learned either. At least I can say that my POV hasn't changed. To sing about revolution is one thing; to find yourself in the bloody midst of it, quite another. Had anyone in that bar been open to it, I might have set them free. Hell, had they taken the time to hear me out, instead of giving me the bum's rush, I could have set them all free.

Whatever you may think of the relentless self-inflicted idiocy in Ireland in those days, even the most empty-headed young ideologically-driven political puppet would have to agree with me that after you've heard three Irish revolutionary songs, you've heard them all twice.

I tell you this story because *proximity* is such an important part of getting any point across, and especially a political thought. I'm not saying proximity helps anyone to formulate correct thinking or make the right decision—distance allows us to fool ourselves, and mislead others—I'm merely saying it has a hand in formulating our opinion and our influence on others. Close proximity sometimes blinds us as well.

Your car is in the garage twenty feet away; by chance you have an open ticket on an airline good for any destination any time. Somewhere in a country far far away a starving

child cries; closer to home Congress is about to decide a matter about which you have the strongest of feelings; 30 miles from where you live a massive flood is threatening the homes of the local residents, some you've met, some are actually friends; suddenly a fire truck is screaming down your street, now, someone you love comes running down the steps in fear; a raccoon has gotten into the house. What's your next move? Wait, you've just cut your finger.

As for political action, very few people ever get close enough to where the real action is to change things—and those that are in the midst of it only want to change things in ways that will benefit themselves. Still, those young hooligans in that Irish bar were closer to making something happen in Ireland than any of us are to making something happen in this country. Proximity.

If you genuinely believe that you can influence political matters, then please explain to me why the guys standing around in the halls of Congress can't. Much of the time, these men, who are in the right place, with the power, with the contacts, with the influence, surrounded with a team of professionals in the field, who know their opposition personally, who are part of the system and know how the process works, can't make things happen in the way that they would like. They're there, they get to speak to their fellow elected representatives about how they feel and what they think their constituents would like to see happen, and they get to vote on the matter, and they still can't make it happen. On every bill before them, a respectable percentage of those guys are destined to walk away defeated.

At the risk of sounding even more idiotic than I have already, I want to posit (if indeed that is the word) that proximity *should be* the primary regulator in our daily decision making process. To take the final step off that cliff I want to also suggest that it is natural and reasonable and anything-but-selfish to tend to those things around you which are closest and most immediate. To do something about that which you can actually do something about, is acceptable behavior. The idea that unless you're involved in big things, political things, global things, you're a laggard in life, is simply not true, and I hesitate to say it, but Art for Art's sake is a welcome balm in this contentious world.

Try this:

Stomp your foot and feel the floor beneath you. Get up and go over and place your hand upon the wall. Run your hand along the wall and feel its texture. Look out the window and see what's out there. Open the window and stick your head out and hail the next passing pedophile or seething malcontent or future YouTube sensation. Back inside, look up and see the ceiling. Take a broom and poke the ceiling with the end of the handle. Touch and feel and smell everything in that room.

The next person to enter that room will likely be someone you know, they will know something about you and your opinions and, in turn, you will know something about them. You can see them and speak to them and they will respond. If you get up and go to them and touch them, they will respond. They will call you by name. They will understand some things about you—that you don't like beets, that no

matter how much you exercise you can't seem to get rid of that gut. They will laugh with you at times, and sometimes at you. They will know what kinds of food you eat and where you buy such stuff and probably have a pretty good idea of what things cost. They'll know what kind of a car you drive and your dog's name. Even if they don't agree with you they will know what your opinions are.

So, let's call that—where you are, and who you deal with in this world—your reality.

Meanwhile, somewhere far far away there is another person. He's in another room. He has other walls around him. He can't poke the ceiling with the end of a broom handle; the ceiling is much too high. And he never looks out his window, but, if he did, he would have a different view than you. When he hails the next passing person, it is likely to be a subordinate or a colleague or bodyguard or a servant of some personal sort. When someone enters the room he is in they call him Senator or Congressman and they simper or cajole the man. You can see by the way they bow and bob and bend and blush that they think themselves in the presence of a great man. You can see by his response that he cannot deny it.

That person, entering into the congressman's presence, knows something about him; his opinions are well know. In turn he might know something about them, maybe not, probably not; he doesn't have the time and it doesn't really matter. He can see them and speak to them and they will respond in an obsequious manner. If he gets up and goes to them and touches them, they will respond (cringing or



yielding at first, but later with a lawsuit). They will call him by name only in private; calling him Senator in public and what he really is behind his back. In his presence they'll maintain an appropriate distance.

They will understand that the Senator doesn't like beets, that, no matter how much he exercises he can't get rid of that really quite statesman-like gut. They will laugh with him at times, and remain poised to laugh at themselves while in his presence, when he derides them (good-naturedly of course). When he criticizes them, they will hang their heads in shame. They will know what kinds of food he eats and how to prepare his coffee. HE will have NO idea where they buy the things he eats and wears and drives and probably could not even guess what things like food and clothing and gas and cars and houses cost. He might know what kind of a car he's being driven around in and, but probably sees no reason to involve himself in that sort of thing. If his kids have a dog, he might know that dog's name. His kids' names are whispered in his ear should he be required to address them in that overly-personal manner. If this man agrees with you it will be by chance; he will not know what your opinions are, or care. He WILL however pretend to.

So, here's the challenge. From your reality, reach that politician in his.

Bear in mind that proximity operates on the *out of sight, out of mind* principle.

Lest it get lost in the scrap heap of my thought, let me remind you that proximity carries the same weight in our good congressman's thinking and decisions as it does in ours. So, as he flies across the country, away from those people whose hopes he carries (those who voted for him and those who voted against him and those who did not vote at all) his thoughts turn to DC, where his reality resides and his true loyalty lies, and a gathering of obsequious toadies await his arrival with big bright phony smiles and prepared sweet nothings.

Later, when your representative arrives in-house, he finds himself looking across the aisle at some puffy-faced, old jowly guy in an ill-fitting suit and thinking what a bastard he is. It's that guy he sees, and that guy he finds himself thinking about. It's that guy's opinion he is really most concerned about. He looks around and he sees that he is surrounded with others like himself. He doesn't see anyone who looks like anybody back home. In fact, there is nothing in this enclosed world that reminds him of back home.

## A GRANDER VISION

For the sensitive among us proximity is overridden by a grander vision. The sensitive among us can overlook the kid coming down the steps with the skinned knee and tears in her eyes and see, far beyond the horizon, the starving child in a distant land, where they take our financial aid and burn our flag, and dream of the day when they will kill us all. The grand vision also allows us to see a better world at home; a world in which, for example, I work away steadily in a senseless and thankless job until the end of time, and pay my taxes, while worrying about what's going to become of my dear wife and me in old age, so that others might, in fairness to them, be given the opportunity to sit around on a couch eating Doritos all day, watching daytime talk shows and, as is just and right, only have to get up in order to waddle on down to the government office to pick up their monthly check. This I do gladly of course, not just because it's fair and just and right and good, but for the sake of the grand illusi...vision.

One day I dream that, despite previous setbacks, *everybody* will have a nice big house—nicer and bigger than mine—but won't have to pay for it, because, as is only fair, my taxes will be paying for mine and theirs as well. Oh what a world that will be!

Just an aside: When my wife and I re-financed our tiny little cabin in the mountains, the lenders put us through about 6 months of fiery hoops and the most thorough and torturous nit-picking financial investigation so that we might prove to them that we were capable of paying *less*

each month than we were already paying. I wanted very much to hate the lenders for putting us through that, but could see beyond them the bigger picture. This was unmistakably the work of idiotic governmental oversight.

Few of us have the ability to see things both at close proximity, as well as the much larger picture that is the grand vision. Usually, it's kind of a one-or-the-other deal. So, while we myopics stay put, bellyaching about the trials of re-financing, those who remain focused upon the grand vision often travel to distant lands. Their hearts, their minds, their compassion, everything that is good about them is transported to that distant land. There they find that everything which is real and good and honest and human resides in that distant land. So their loyalty, their thoughts, their hopes, their fears, reside in that distant land, and their compassion pours down like honeyed rain upon the parched and thirsting souls of the people there. In that distant land their suspicion, that this country is the source of all other people's pain, is confirmed, so their humble service is riddled with shame.

When they return home and impose themselves upon you in your own home and lean in toward you earnestly, with their palms up and their eyes aglow and a little vein popping out nicely on their now-knowing brow, talking about our oppression of that wonderful distant land, they are surprised, and maybe just a bit offended when you excuse yourself, and get up and, turning your back upon them, go into the kitchen to prepare a meal for your own children, so that they might not starve.

Can you do both? Can you make things better here, by doing things humbly and selflessly there? I cannot say.

I can tell you this much however. If there are rats in our basement (as many a distant traveler seems to believe), we should not be spending our time worrying about rats in a basement across town.

Oh, and to be about as cold and cruel and insensitive as any man could possibly be, let me ask this: Why don't those people across town take care of *their* rats themselves?

## THE IDEAL STATE

The ideal State would be that state in which everything *you* want would be done. You think that all people under 5 foot 2 should wear a top hat, and it becomes law. You think that alternate Wednesdays should be national holidays, and it becomes writ. You think only housewives with three or more kids should have seats in the Senate Foreign Relations Committee (whatever that is), so be it. This would work, because you know in your heart of hearts—just being honest now—that you are right on each and every one of these vital issues; you have an opinion and your opinion just happens to be the correct one.

Unfortunately, unless you wrest power for yourself by force and dictate your pure thought on every matter political, or in the brilliant light of perfect realization the entire country wakes up some day and suddenly recognizes its need to have you in place, and the joyous masses physically carry you on their shoulders to install you (yes, there will be trumpets!) in the seat of power...you'll have to take a somewhat less direct route to getting the perfect government for which you so yearn.

There has never been any question whatsoever that things done your way would be better, the question has always been, *how* do we make that happen? And, in our somewhat flawed, not-quite-perfect, but better-than-most situation, we make that happen by voting.

So, let see how that works.

Let's vote on breakfast, shall we?

For our purposes here, let's say your opinion is that a good breakfast would consist of eggs, a slice of ham, grits, toast, a glass of fresh-squeezed orange juice and a cup of good coffee. Now, let's see what's on the menu. The menu reads: GOOD MORNING! What a wonderful world we're living in! Today we're going to VOTE for breakfast.

You may choose ONE of the following items:

1. Corn flakes.
2. A stale old muffin of indeterminate nature.

So, what'll YOU have?

Remember, EVERY VOTE COUNTS!

You realize (of course) that this is not a perfect world. You realize that you're not going to have your way in every aspect of every issue involving breakfast. But, breakfast is an important meal and you feel strongly about it and you know a lot of others would agree with you, so, you want to do what you can in order to persuade the kitchen that eggs, a slice of ham, grits, toast, a glass of fresh-squeezed orange juice and a cup of good coffee is the way to go. So, when the waitress grins at you and chirps, "What'll y' have?", you say: "I'll have eggs, a slice of ham, grits, toast, a glass of fresh-squeezed orange juice and a cup of good coffee." You smile.

She throws her entire weight onto one hip, sighs loudly, rolls her weary eyes toward heaven, stares at you as if exhausted by the endless stupidity of the situation she finds herself in, and says, "We've got corn flakes or an old muffin."

You say, "Wouldn't it be a better world if we could all have eggs, a slice of ham, grits, a glass of fresh-squeezed

orange juice and a cup of good coffee?”

She sighs, taps her foot a bit while staring at the ceiling, and says, “We’ve got *corn flakes* or an old muffin. Those are your choices.” She places her pencil upon a pad. She waits. “Which is it?” she asks.

That’s the situation.

Later, when she drops a stale old muffin of indeterminate nature on a plate before you, she says, “Have fun and enjoy your breakfast.” Her tone is as stale as the muffin, but far from indeterminate. So, you can either make a big deal about this, or you can eat what’s set down before you and be glad you don’t live under some other system in which there is no choice.

While you’re thinking about that, let’s play...  
LET’S PAY FOR STUFF!

“WELCOME...welcome. Welcome to the new fun game: LET’S PAY FOR STUFF! Our contestants are an unnamed citizen whose name is not all that important anyway, and his opponent, who, by chance, just happens also to be his highly esteemed representative... Congressman Smugg. Welcome, Congressman. Are you both ready to play, LET’S PAY FOR STUFF!? Well, I can see you’ve got that eager-to-spend look in your eye, Congressman; are you ready to play, LET’S PAY FOR STUFF!?”

“Always.”

“Ha-ha, Congressman. I should probably warn the good citizen here that he’s facing some pretty stiff competition.



Isn't your main task creating taxes and spending the revenue generated by those taxes, Congressman?"

"Precisely. But there's much more to it than that."

"OK! So, why don't we start with you then, Congressman. Our first item is this wonderful set of matching rubber gloves. They come in various colors—either yellow or blue—and are suitable for doing almost any task around the house—or around the Senate (wink)—and one size fits all. So, what would YOU pay for these rubber gloves, Congressman? Oh, and one other thing: these gloves retail for \$1.39 at any drug store. So, now... LET'S PAY FOR STUFF! Congressman, What would YOU pay for these fine rubber gloves?"

"Oh, I don't know...something insignificant... million, maybe million-five, maybe two mill."

"Well, Congressman, that's a pretty impressive bid, but I don't think you understand how this game is played."

"I don't think YOU understand how this game is played."

"Ha ha-ha. Yes, I'm sure it's more complicated than..."

"No, actually it's simpler."

"Simpler?"

"It's not my money."

Here's a question for you.

If a guy who runs a Ponzi scheme on a couple hundred greedy investors—paying dividends to previous investors with the money coming in from new investors—is a criminal, what is an entire organization that conspires to do that to millions of loyal, patriotic, trusting people while going more deeply in debt with every tick of the clock and assuring them all along that everything is just swell?

## EVERY VOTE COUNTS

My very dear wife and I have an on-going disagreement. And, from her point of view I guess I have an on-going disagreement with every rational person on earth when it comes to this. (Many others matters as well, but let's talk about this one for now.) The thing came up again, most recently, when the Iowa caucuses came very close to a tie. By the original official count the two leaders were separated by only 8 votes (I think), but by a *revised* official count the candidates were separated *by a single vote*. On TV that day Piers Morgan and some idiot actor he was interviewing—who on that occasion was playing the part of someone with deep political insight—both agreed that *that situation in Iowa proves, once again, that every vote counts. THIS*, they agreed, is the perfect response to *anyone* who has *ever* thought that their vote doesn't count. They could hardly gush enough. Even with their chiseled jaws (well, Morgan not so much any more) on the ground and their eyes bugging out, and their hair standing on end, they could not gush enough. One vote separated these two guys, they kept saying with escalating astonishment. ONE VOTE! And it just proves—once again—how every vote counts. They must have repeated it a thousand times. (Not that it bothered me.) But does it? Does this event prove that every vote counts? Is that what it proves?

Here's my idiotic take.

What it actually proves is that you can have an impressive number of people who agree with you and who vote the same way you do, and *none of your votes will count*.

IF what you mean by your vote ‘counting’ is that you get something akin to what you were hoping for, in a *one-vote* election, if 200,001 votes were cast, 100,000 of those votes didn’t count. In that case, 100,000 people didn’t get the results they’d hoped for; their votes meant nothing, carried no weight whatsoever. I mean, your guy either wins or he loses. So, you *could* say that proves—once again—that every vote counts, or you could say that, in the end, once again, many people’s commitment to fulfilling their patriotic duty was wasted effort accomplishing nothing; their voices not only went unheard, they were stifled.

When is the last time you heard any newly-elected official say, “It’s important to me that I represent those who voted against me.”? I mean, yes, of course every goddamned one of ‘em may say that, but which one of them means it? Either way you look at it though, every vote doesn’t count.

## PROXIMITY and the Blue Shoe Amendment

Imagine that you are a child sitting at a large dining room table. In the middle of the table is a hot dog dressed in chili with fresh chopped onions. So, this is a thing you want. This is something that you know you might enjoy immensely if you could only get your hands on it, but your arms are just too short. It's close and you want it. You can see it, you can smell it, you can almost taste it, with that hot dog you would find fulfillment, but you can't reach it. It's simply beyond your reach. There's a lesson in proximity here, but, let's set that lesson aside for the moment.

Many years later, in junior high school, you're in the hallway, standing around between classes and MaryAnn Falkowski (the most beautiful girl in school) happens to be standing around, down the hall, just 23 feet away. Gosh, wouldn't it be nice if MaryAnn Falkowski (the most beautiful girl in school) would look up and glance your way? You'd drop dead immediately of course, but it'd be worth it. So you aim your beams at MaryAnn Falkowski and you ogle her shamelessly for as long as you think you might get away with it. Then, as if she perceives your eyes upon her, she looks directly at you, and smiles. Naturally you look away immediately, but you're thrilled. Part of that thrill is the fact that you are now convinced that you made that happen; by looking at her you created a force of some sort that made her look up and find the source of her admiration. You don't know what to call this force, but you know that it's probably the flip-side of the force you employ in class to keep the teacher from calling on you. Whatever you might call such a thing, they're both prayer

of some sort—calling on a greater power to help you—and both of the deepest, most sincere sort of prayer. So, now you know that there is power in line-of-sight. Soon you'll also discover—when you make a snide remark under your breath in class—that those who hear you and agree with you, respond to your cleverness and like you.

So, then, a thousand years later when you're all grown up, you recognize the importance of passing the Blue Shoe Amendment. It means everything to you. And, thank God you live in a country where you have the right to vote and you can reach your representatives and tell them what you think..

So, now let's assume that you are one of the 50% or so of people eligible to register who actually registered, and that you are one of the 50% or so of registered voters who actually went to the bother of voting, and that you are one of the 50% or so who voted for the guy who won the office that represents your interests. Think for just a moment about how rare and lucky you are. And, now let's assume that this guy that you voted for saw the importance of the Blue Shoe Amendment and promised to do everything he could to promote it if and when he got into that office.

Let us now assume that this guy—for it is likely to be a guy—who swore his support of the Blue Shoe Amendment while campaigning, has not, on his very first day in office, reversed his stance on the Blue Shoe Amendment, or forgotten it entirely as some have been known to do, but has made it a priority, third in line only after establishing and cranking up the fund-raising team of his re-election

committee and getting some kind of sexual deviance under way. While being tossed about in and by the maelstrom of newly acquired power and all the opportunity, temptation and burdened by the unfair necessity of occasional thought that it seems to require of some upstarts, let's say our guy somehow manages to keep his eye on the Blue Shoe Amendment. So, put all swindlers, manipulators, whores, want-to-be-whores, power brokers, pretend friends, comrades and drinking buddies aside. Let's assume that, once some other things are in place, there is nothing more important on this planet for this man than to see that the Blue Shoe Amendment is passed. He hasn't found anything better to do with his time, and his team has told him that it will make him look good if he makes a lot of noise on this particular issue. He still has to convince 500 other guys that it is worth consideration. And those 500 other guys all have their own things to consider, important things, vital decisions, but IF, after all their own stuff is under reasonable control, they still have some time left over for pretending real involvement in the political process, they might consider this Blue Shoe Amendment. Bear in mind, they all have their own opportunity, temptations and occasional thought to deal with as well, but your guy's in there pitchin'.

You realize ALL OF THIS of course.

You realize the enormity of the headwind your guy must row against, and so you write and you email and you make phone calls and you get up petitions and hang around downtown harassing people who might actually selfishly be thinking about something other than the Blue Shoe

Amendment, getting them to sign, just so you'll go away. And you do what's most reasonable with all that stuff: you mail it and email it and call and leave messages and encourage others to do the same. So now, let's pretend that he gets all of your messages and let's pretend they mean something to him and let's pretend that he's still on board with the Blue Shoes Amendment. Let's pretend he's actually approached some of his colleagues considering the matter. Here's a question for you: Isn't there some other way you might spend your time?

Don't you have a leaky faucet somewhere that needs repair? Could the woman you married use a little hug? That nicely bound set of Shakespeare's histories is collecting a lot of dust. When's the last time you actually picked up and played that old hollow-body Gibson?

They'll tell you that you still have to pay taxes, even if you don't vote. I'd like to remind you that you still have to pay taxes, even if you DO vote and *everything those guys do* infuriates you. They'll tell you that elected officials will make decisions about street repair, and school closures, without regard to your opinion, if you don't make your voice heard. I regret to have to tell you that those elected officials will make those decisions, even if you go down to city hall and rant like a maniac in front of a microphone until they drag you away, red-faced, in handcuffs.

They'll tell you that you cannot avoid politics, so you may as well participate. I tell you, you cannot avoid death, so you might as well kill yourself now and just get it over with. It makes the same sense.

## LET ME MAKE THIS EASY FOR YOU

Babysitting politicians and trying to get them to do the right thing is an enormous burden. I'd like to help you with that, by asking a few questions. We'll start out broadly and narrow it down as we go.

Concerning Congress:

1. Did Congress pass any laws before you were born?  
I mean, did they manage to operate somehow prior to any possibility of your influence?
2. Do you think Congress might pass any laws after you are gone? Once your input has become an impossibility again, will Congress muddle on through somehow without you?

If you've answered honestly, we've determined that Congress got along without you before your arrival and that they will (we're guessing) probably get along OK without you after you're gone. Now let's see if we can determine whether or not they can get along without you while you're still here.

As an aside let me tell you that my wife—certainly the most intelligent, informed and well educated person I have the great good pleasure to know, and one of the nicest—sees a flaw in these questions which either she cannot convey or I cannot understand (and probably the latter).

3. Since you have been in the position to take political action (of age, properly inspired...) has Congress passed any legislation which you took action to prevent?



If ‘Yes’, did *your* representative vote as you had urged him to?

4. Has Congress *ever* passed any legislation which absolutely every single person you know or had even heard about, was staunchly against?

5. Since you’ve been in a position to take political action, has any candidate you voted for ever won election?

So, now I guess I’m forced to say (again) that no candidate that I have ever voted for has ever been elected, and that every proposition I’ve ever voted for either failed or was dragged into court, where it was legally hung up by the heels and gutted, and that every candidate I ever voted *against*, was taken up upon the shoulders of the joyous throng and carried off to be immediately sworn into office under lovely blues skies and the slightest pleasant little breeze, only disrupted by the continual chirping of tiny joyful little celebratory birdies. So, I cannot honestly say how much influence my opinion/efforts/vote had in any of those matters, but I cannot deny that the outcome of any election in which I took part was predictable. Clearly I had some effect, just not the effect I’d hoped for.

It’s peculiar because, after 37 years of following the San Francisco Giants, I’d determined that my presence in the stands was enough to cause them to lose any game...a step down from my former ability to cause their downfall merely by listening to a game on the radio. And, the year I quit following them, they won the World Series. So, again, I’d had some effect, just not the effect I’d hoped for.

Oh wait, a funny thing has just occurred. I have somehow managed, by this process, to convince myself that my opinion DOES COUNT; it just seems to count for the other guy. Boy, I didn't see that coming.

As for you, though:

6. Did you ever notice that when you go away on vacation (I've heard that people who don't work for their father-in-law are allowed to do that sort of thing), that the world seems to get along just fine without you?

While away you don't pick up a newspaper and don't watch the news and never turn on a television and don't hook up to the internet, you arrive back home a complete wreck, more tired than when you left, deliriously uninformed, and a new person. You turn on the TV to discover that either nothing has happened while you were tuned out, or something shocking has happened but, by the time you hear about it, it's all over. You didn't even know about it, and it has somehow played itself out completely. Looking at the news you realize that the world of politics seems to have gotten along without you as well. Somehow all that rolled on without your opinion or your petitions or your phone calls or your ranting and whining, and, as you look around, you might notice that things are pretty much the same as they were, sky above, pot-holes untouched, an occasional gust of wind, birds and trees and someone somewhere is cooking an apple pie. So, even the good stuff remained in place, unaffected by your absence.

The grumpy among us are bound to say, "Yes, and war goes on, and the starving children and dread disease and the

impending darkening doom has sneakily snuck in a little closer threatening our very existence!”, or something of the sort. And that’s all true. If that’s your opinion, you’re certainly entitled to it.

It’s mine, and I am.

Now back to the browbeating.

7. Have you ever walked away from any dealings with any government agency with the feeling, “Gosh, that sure was an entirely satisfying, completely fulfilling experience!”?

8. In the race to demonstrate how little they care for their ‘customers’ would you say Congress operates more like an airline, a bank, a used car dealership, or a health care facility?

9. Do you think that people who neither write the bills they pass, nor read them before they vote on them, are taking their job as seriously as they might?

10. If you had your choice between trying to single-handedly move three tons of gravel, in the blistering sun, without a hat, using only your bare hands, while a gathering of fat men sit around under umbrellas, smoking cigars, drinking whiskey, and committing lewd acts with compliant servants, while casually discussing yachting in the vulgar raucous vernacular of drunken sailors—OR—sitting in a nice chair reading a book that you’ve been meaning to get to for years, which would you choose?

I guess that’s the real question.

## FAIR WARNING

Although it would have been the easiest thing to do, I did not take everything I said in the first half of this book and replace the word ‘politics’ with the word ‘religion’. It was tempting, but I tried it and discovered that it didn’t really work. Still, there’s not much difference between politics and religion. In both, we each have our own ideas, we all know we’re right and, if we’re looking for backup, there are authorities everywhere. In fact, for every authority you find on one side of any issue there are as many with an opposing view. Stick two authorities in a room and you’ll have two different expert opinions. Stick six authorities in a room and you’ll have six different expert opinions. Put thirty-two authorities in a room and you’ll have thirty-two different expert opinions. Obviously one of ‘em must be right. It can only be the guy who agrees with you. Certainly he seems the most reasonable of the lot.

In the matter of religion, a thing about which I openly admit confusion—but only in the privacy of my own mind—I am (nonetheless) full to overflowing with spiky (perhaps I mean bristling) opinions on every single aspect of every religion and sect on earth, and most especially those about which I know nothing. Like most good people, whenever I detect fraud in this realm I generate thick dark clouds of umbrage. I disdain utter bullshit whenever *that* claims to be religion, and harbor a particular distaste for anything which is obviously nothing more than a money-making scheme. It is with great pride that I tell you I have no pity whatsoever for the surprising multitude of mindless puppets who, checkbook in hand, fall for such scams.

However, mention any long-established viable, even slightly believable, non-monetary based, religious sect by name and, still, I will laugh knowingly, or maybe frown disapprovingly (depending upon my mood). I'll shake my head of course, and snort derisively. I'll look over the top of my glasses while chuckling and ask, 'How could anyone believe in such drivel?' If there is a twinkle in my eye, it'll be the twinkle of benevolent, all-knowing wisdom.

Like most self-proclaimed religious people I have a bit of an edge knowing, going in, that everyone who doesn't share my personal beliefs, point by nebulous point, is not only wrong but has cast themselves, poor lost souls, far beyond the reach of God Himself. Deprived as they are and without my insight into God's plan, His thinking, His wishes, His hopes for us, His needs, there is little hope for them and maybe little real need for their kind. So, with that in place, I can quite comfortably pass judgment.

And I have.

And I do.

And I will.

So be it.

## **BOOK FIVE**

### **RELIGION**

The message I deliver in this section is, ultimately, one of great sadness. The sadness is due to the fact that Religion, from our perspective, is typically little more than the politics of a higher realm. I mean, we treat it that way. By whatever means, we each put some ‘rules’, some ‘rites’, some ‘wisdom’, some ‘righteousness’, some ‘grace’, some ‘good’, some ‘god’ in place, which we believe represents us, and accepts us for what we are. We call that religion. We then dedicate ourselves to that religion in a way that accommodates our convenience. Those of us who cannot find such accommodation, believing, reasonably enough that no god could possibly accept us, conveniently declare that there is no god. And though you would think such a conviction would free them of any further thought on the matter, it apparently has the exact opposite affect.

The people who seem to think least about religion are those who publicly cling most closely to it. I mean, their actions rarely seem the actions of what one might expect from a person with such devotion. On the other hand, people who think too much on the subject, for too long, ultimately develop serious doubts. Voltaire—perhaps the most lucid mind in Western thought—had his doubts, but remained clear-thinking enough to admit that he didn’t know. His idea, that God had indeed built this magnificent ship, and still has a hand on the tiller but, maybe, just maybe, we’re like rats living out our lives in the bilge, makes a certain sense to anyone taking a serious look around at events.

Devout (and by that I mean rabid) atheists declare their view—that they have intellectually over-ridden lame-brained romanticism or emotional weakness or a childish belief in fairytales—as if there could be no nobler cause than crushing hope in others and, by that stance, reveal to us what a godless life must be like and at once place the strength of their own intellect in serious doubt. In complete opposition to what I’ve just said, my truly wonderful wife, the most intelligent, clear thinking, even-handed person I know (a remarkably lovely human being in every aspect), does not believe in God, but feels no superiority whatsoever due to position. In fact, she regrets it. If I understand her correctly, that God would allow the cruelty of this world is impossible for her to fathom. This is a truly profound, genuinely religious thought if ever there was one, and it reveals a *yearning* that is the very foundation of religion. So, she feels no need to crush the dreams of others, or even to jostle them awake with her opinion. This, I think, must be God’s view of us.

When it comes to *our* ideas about Him, His undertakings, His work, His motives, His plans, He’s content to let us dream our silly dreams and keeps His own counsel.

With the exception of myself, very few people I’ve ever met honestly believe that the ultimate destination for the train they ride is Hell. Most of us believe we’ll get off somewhere else along the line—somewhere nice—and everyone we dislike for one tiny reason or another, will remain onboard, with me, ‘til the final destination. We hold to this conviction because we think we know what God is about. Let’s be honest though (if only briefly), God is the

only one who really knows what God is about; for us down here it's all no more than, and probably less than, guesswork. We're all just guessing. And we know it. What is peculiar is how easily, readily, eagerly, testily, viciously, frequently and unforgivingly we criticize our fellow guessers.

Let's say there are a certain number of peas under an overturned cup, sitting on a table, in another room which we have never entered. I have a very strong feeling that there are three peas under that cup (because that's what I've been told), and I'm not alone (because others have been told this as well). There are a lot of us who feel that there are three peas under that cup and we've come to believe that. So, anyone who thinks there are either fewer or more peas under there, or no peas at all, are what? Yes, idiots. Anyone who doesn't see clearly that there are three peas under that cup sitting on a table in another room which we have never entered, are idiots...or, at very least, dangerously self-deceived.

That's my opinion. Admittedly, I don't know if those peas are fresh or dried or frozen; I don't know if they're crushed or split or whole; I don't know if they're green or yellow, or even if they are peas. They could be beans. If I thought about it for a single second, I would have to admit that I don't know if there is a cup, or a table or another room. There is a door however, and I'm sure of this much: it must open onto something. My guess is that it's another room, with a table and an overturned cup which hides three peas. That's my best guess. Now it's your turn.



In political matters I am often criticized for not trying hard enough to see the other side of things. Other times, I'm criticized for contradicting myself because, mid-argument, I'll begin to see the other side, and build a little upon that. In religious matters there is no wavering. When it comes to religion, the only time we contradict ourselves is when we make the mistake of looking in the mirror—though that is, I believe, the most fundamental requirement of religion. Our vision is too often strictly outward, and too often focused on others. I judge my own thinking to be more perfect by recognizing the laughably flawed thinking of others. I know how correct I am because I can see how wrong you've got it. Me 'n' my pal God, we go way back together, and we understand each other. How well do you know him? (Let's all sigh deeply here, together.)

We don't know any more about the heavenly scheme of things than we do about our earthly government; certainly we know less. Our insight goes this far: Religion is recognition of the fact that there is an authority over us, which may or may not respond to our wishes, and which we like to believe hears our personal plaintive cries, and either ignores or quickly forgives what we ourselves admit are moral failures.

And we respond to that authority in kind.  
If and when we choose.  
Such is our benevolent nature.

## AN OVERWHELMING BENEVOLENT GOOD

*P. D. Ouspensky, in his efforts to first discover, then disentangle, and ultimately define the fundamental metaphysical nature of man, cast about briefly before suggesting that we must begin by first admitting that we know nothing. Unfortunately however, that's not true. We do know something. What we know is that some people are, as my very dear wife puts it, absolutely unbearable.*

When we speak of God however we really must accept Mr. Ouspensky's suggestion, and begin by first admitting that we know nothing. There are things which we are incapable of understanding of course, but there are also some things we feel we have a shot at understanding, yet never will. We will never understand other people for example—even well-meaning people of our own intelligence. We can, of course, understand people of lesser intelligence—and look to them for our entertainment—but people of greater intelligence, we will never understand. Unfortunately, they don't seem to care to understand us. This we can understand, because, only on rare occasions can we understand ourselves.

Yet we all feel that we understand God.

(I can only hope God understands us)

Here's something I don't understand. Why, if you were God, would you want your creations to think themselves more compassionate than yourself? I mean, look around at the cruelty in this world. If you had the power to either stop it or prevent it, you would. Me too. But, God, where is he?

Maybe we don't all that we think we know about God. If that's so, the question isn't 'Why does God allow such violence and misery?' the question is, 'How do we witness such violence and misery and extrapolate from that a caring God?' If you were God would you want your creations to ask such questions? Would you want your creations to be guessing at your presence, your caring, your motive, your goal, and what you want from them? Let's just put them out there and turn 'em loose and see if they can give us the results we're after.

One day I was out in a large garden with two dogs. I was throwing a tennis ball down a steep hill into the untended scrub below, and the dogs were throwing themselves off the top of a stone wall, charging recklessly down the hill in pursuit of that ball. What's nice about dogs—beyond their remarkable ability to approach life for the most part in silence—is the pure joy they get from diving off the top of a stone wall and racing downhill like mindless fools in search of a slimy old smelly tennis ball. Nicer still is the fact that I—having been in the hotel business for more than twenty years and having had pretty much my fill of people—get such enjoyment from watching a couple dogs enjoying themselves. It may be vicarious but it's every bit as real as my distaste for being interrupted by some stranger with expectations of false courtesy and a question I've answered forty-seven thousand times before. (Yes, I know the false courtesy is part of the job. And I know the question is new to him. Nonetheless...) All that aside...I was out there with the dogs, throwing the ball and watching them and laughing and having a great time, completely involved in that for the better part of an hour.

Talk about your good clean fun.

When I returned to the house my good and very dear wife told me that she had been calling me, because she'd needed my help with something (I forget what). I apologized profusely of course, because there is not a thing on earth more important to me than offering my wife help if she needs it. I explained where I'd been, described the tennis ball/slope/dogs/delight equation, and apologized again saying, "I would have gladly come, and would have gladly helped you, but I couldn't hear you. I had my back to the house and I was, you know, out there..." If I'd been facing the right direction, or was closer to the house, or stopped once in a while to listen, I might have heard her call.

I tell you this because I think that is pretty much, for me, as far as I can figure it, my relationship with God. I don't mean I'm in the kitchen calling God and he can't hear me because he's out there with the dogs having fun. I mean just the opposite. Maybe God's calling me and I can't hear him because I'm out there with my back turned. I'm too busy, and too far away. I'm not facing the right direction. If I'd stop once in a while to listen, I might hear the call.

Of course none of this explains all the violence and misery in this world, or how we somehow manage to turn that around to mean that we have a caring God. The closest we can come to it is the idea of an Overwhelming Benevolent Good, and that only leaves us wanting. There is no doubt whatsoever that we cannot see the big picture, and maybe in the end it does all work out for the good. Surely there is a lot we don't understand.

In fact, it's absurd for any of us to pretend that we know anything at all. I readily admit I don't know a damned thing about anything.

But, I know this much: if a small child comes to me, afraid of the dark, even though I know there is nothing to be fearful of, I comfort that child.

In my pitiful attempt to understand, this is where one path continually leads.

### **THREE STAGES of FAITH**

Historically speaking, there have been, as far as I can see, three stages in the development of religion—

Fear the gods.

Thank the gods.

Claim devotion to a faith while disallowing the teachings of that faith to have any influence whatsoever on the way you conduct your personal daily life.

It is in this latter stage that we now find ourselves.

Oh how I long for a return to that first stage. I think God too would prefer that...oh wait, I think I see it coming now!

As tragic as it may seem, and reprehensible as it may sound, this last stage—pretending to have faith—is as close as most of us might come to having any real contact with any real religion. It's merely a matter of convenience, because if religion is not convenient, we push it aside, making room for other things which are. Religious commitment is a complete pain-in-the-ass anyway. It's not merely impractical, it's demanding, and confusing, and can be at times, somewhat embarrassing. More than one intelligent person has pointed out to me—this is where I get such thoughts—that those who are fully committed to the precepts of their faith—whatever the nature of that faith—are likely to find themselves outsiders. Their commitment continually impinges upon their lives, alienating them. For example, they are drawn between remaining quietly, secretly, outside the norm and the foolish urge to bring others into the light. In short, true commitment is costly.

It's not just very, but extremely, even extraordinarily, costly. And few of us are willing to pay that price.

More than one intelligent person has pointed out to me—and I'm glad they did—that those who are fully committed to the precepts of their faith—whatever the nature of that faith—are likely to be fanatics, I would guess by definition alone. And so, it's actually a better world in which people strive to attain some aspect of religiosity, while falling short, than it would be if they could attain those goals.

I believe this to be true.

I hope it's so.

I hope that, in my failure to be all that God would have me be, I have become, peculiar as it may seem, a better person. I'm glad to make that contribution; it's the least, the most, and probably the best, I can do...and I'm sorry.

## SURRENDERING TO THE GREAT WHATEVER

I'm very sorry, and a bit embarrassed, to have to admit that much of my belief in God has to do with my very good luck in life. I know that this is, most certainly, undeniably, a small-minded way to look at God, and probably just plain wrong, reprehensible and whatever else you might wish to add; but I'd be lying if I told you otherwise. (Yes, it's embarrassing to have to admit it.)

I've always thought the Book of Job had it wrong. If you really want to drive a wedge between any man and God, instead of stripping him of his earthly riches—an act which could only driving him closer to God and make his prayers more heartfelt—*give him* everything his greedy little heart desires. You want to put some distance between man and God, make him comfortable. I can tell you firsthand that this works. Why the Devil didn't see it, I will never know.

The small-minded of us always see God's Blessing in our own personal comfort; we recognize God's Grace in those things that work out in our favor. Those people who are most likely to cheerfully proclaim their giddy, somewhat irritating faith, all seem to think that every parking space that opens up before them is the act of their personally assigned, ever-devoted, guardian angel. Fundamental—and fundamentally wrong—as that may be, it's such a natural/innocent/hopeful response that it's hard to think God would allow it to go on for very long unless there was actually something in it.



We shallow thinkers sometimes see the hand of God at work in our good luck, and, much as I criticize others for that very same way of thinking, I cannot deny that I am a lucky man, and that I think God kinda likes me, though bound for Hell I undoubtedly be.

I recognize that my very good luck is not my doing, thus the idea that it is being orchestrated elsewhere makes a kind of sense. I never had any intentions of marrying (for example), and certainly had no hopes of marrying such a fine and remarkable woman as my very dear and wonderful wife. When she asks, I tell her that I had always thought my most likely match would be a large woman (slightly on the heavy side) maybe with a few missing teeth, a drinker and a smoker, and just generally less than ideal when it comes to both cleanliness and the outward features, who works, part time, in a gas station. BUT, I still held out hope for finding a slightly better-looking woman who I could get along with for the most part, with only occasional completely unexpected disagreements—based upon some infraction of a thousand years ago, but not forgotten—coming between us like glacial collapse. I thought that was the best I could probably expect. But, one day I walked into the lobby of a small hotel and saw my dear wife sitting on the floor looking like an angel, quietly decorating a Christmas tree, and my very good luck in life kicked in. Prior to that—driven by the surging, iron-fisted chemical tyranny of male biology I struggled and lost, many times and repeatedly, in the battle to elevate myself beyond brute desire.

Because I am a simple man, no rational explanation accounts for the very best events in my life as well as the

term Fate. And, because I am a simple man, the kindness that Fate has shown me seems to me to be the kindness of God. (Quibble quibble quibble quibble.) In my very small mind I can't manage to disentangle the two.

But, I need to tell you this too; though I am a simple man, when I find a good parking place, I don't believe it is the work of 'angels'. So, I suppose I'm somewhere in between one idiotic idea and another idiotic idea, but both of them *idiotic hopeful*.

Things which I've struggled for and labored over and tried and tried and tried to make happen, have all ended up failures. The best things in my life—the very best—seem to simply happen to me; orchestrated elsewhere as I suppose, and simply fall out of the sky, into my lap. I'm going along aimlessly (happily, thoughtlessly, sometimes dizzily) and the next thing I know I'm up on a rooftop somewhere proposing marriage to the most wonderful woman I've ever had the truly remarkable good fortune to meet in this world. I've learned to recognize such blessings when they happen and I've come to believe that giving thanks to God—whether that's the source or not—is a good beginning on a proper response. In general, I've surrendered to the great whatever, telling myself that if it was meant to happen it would, and it has, quite a few times too, mostly without my assistance. That's the part that's peculiar.

If I have proven anything here, it's this: if God requires us to be deep thinkers we're all in trouble. If, in order to know something about Life, to desire Truth, to take comfort in Grace, we must first have great minds, then very few of us

will qualify. I'm sure my wife's dog doesn't have a thought in his head when he jumps up on the couch beside me and, placing his snout on my thigh, sighs deeply and drifts off, perfectly content, into a deep sleep. I think it's his way of saying he feels secure and takes comfort in being near me. He feels my protection, and I am delighted by that thought. It fills my old heart with wonder.

When I look down at him and realize what a magnificent little creature he is I cannot help but hope that God looks down upon us and is flooded with those same feelings.

(That's as close as I can come to it.)

## **THE MILIEU and FAITH**

We are given this somewhat confusing gift without having asked for it, or we find ourselves in the midst of it, without knowing why, or we have been dragged into this mess, with no way out other than death—whichever way you look at it, we have nothing to do with our being here, no idea what we're supposed to be doing here, and life is either a grand mystery, full of delight, bearable for the most part, or a complete and relentless nightmare. Let's start with that.

There is little or nothing we can do about the milieu in which we find ourselves, but let's all agree that it is not really conducive to living a 'religious life', whatever our concept of that may be. If we truly wish to fulfill our personal religious vision we must step outside the norm, probably alienating ourselves, and taking on the readily recognizable persona of weirdo. If we take it a step further, extracting ourselves entirely, we have a good shot at becoming an extremist. The deeper we immerse ourselves in true devotion to anything beyond this immediate terrestrial realm the less we will recognize the rest of the world's view and the more we will be convinced that we are right. The less doubt we have, the less open we will be to the opinion of those who simply don't get it. Religion, in this way, is much like politics. You cannot live a simple, normal, quiet life in this world and also devotedly serve either politics or religion. Protest that undeniable fact all you want; you're only hoping to fool yourself.

Life is a wonderful gift and, with luck, we can get ourselves into a position where we might stay in touch with

that stunning fact. I say ‘with luck’ but I’m not really sure it’s possible. I am sure of the first part: that Life is a gift; I’m not sure we can stay in touch with that fact for any length of time—the ability to see the crushing beauty of Life flickers in and out. We look around in wonder and we feel things deeply, experience events with awe, admire beauty and find ourselves stunned by nature... some of the time. I don’t personally know anyone that gets much beyond that. I’ve met a few people who, due to a quirk of biology, seem to be always in a good mood, and others go through each day with a forced, unconvincing smile upon their faces, but I’m not sure that’s the *worship* God would like to see us offer. Too many of us seem to be dead to any joy whatsoever. This is what I’ve observed. So, I have to ask myself what this is all about. Why aren’t we given the capacity to see, appreciate, experience, and drown continually in the beauty that surrounds us? Why, instead of us awakening momentarily from time to time to seek it, hasn’t it simply been given to us?

The other side of that coin is pretty dark.

The most wonderful people I know—the brightest, the kindest, the nicest, the sweetest, and the best educated—think that God, if he exists at all, is cruel. They see the proof everywhere. And though my experience has been otherwise, I have to ignore a lot of violence and want and injustice to reach the conclusion I wish to reach. The finest, most devout people I’ve ever known have had their doubts, and some have given up finding evidence of a caring God; the parallels between what can only be acts of God and what we know to be the acts of terrorists are undeniable.

If you can find the differences, let me know what they are. It's reasonable to wonder why God doesn't step in to prevent the random slaughter of innocents.

So, that's why we all have a yearning to build a better God. We say that we realize that God works in His own way, in His own time, and we admit that we're blind to the end. We must accept it on faith that He knows what he's up to. But, do we look at what is going on around us and in our lives and—claiming Faith—find ourselves forced to invent excuses for God?

How long can we retain, for any length of time, a righteous view of the wonders that surround us in the midst of the horror that surrounds us?

Regrettably/thankfully, my ability to see the sadness and cruelty that others are suffering, and to feel anguish in my heart because of what I see, is limited. I am not built to dwell upon it for any length of time. I cannot pray continually, or weep endlessly, and I cannot feel guilty for drifting away to easier thoughts. There are periods in which I dwell in the enormity of it all, but they are short lived.

Real humans, with real minds and real hearts must find all this laughable.

When a friend of mine, slated for his second liver transplant, casually asked me how I was doing, I replied 'I have a cold.' I said it with the misery that a cold can bring to a weakling like me. And he responded, "I WISH I could say I have a cold."

His problems were a thousand times what mine were. I laughed, but it didn't make my cold go away, and my sincerest prayers for him...  
I wonder about their effect.

In the world in which we find ourselves, we are not often given the opportunity to live life as it should be lived. We're rarely given the time for that. Life requires the luxury of time. Beyond that however, I wonder if we've even been given the capacity.

Personally, I don't have 16 consecutive uninterrupted minutes in any single day. And I find it impossible to appreciate the wonders of our world while arguing with some stranger in the elevator about whether he stepped on my foot or I stepped on his. That is what's expected of us.

Not a saint and not an angel, weak and whiny by nature, whether I would live Life as I suppose it should be lived—given the chance—still remains a question. Jesus suggested you toss all of that out the window and surrender to a life built entirely upon Faith in God.

If there was no phone in this room, I might give that a try.

## THE PROBLEM with BULLSHIT

I, like many self-professed believers, like nothing better than to call other people's beliefs into question. Basically, I know, like every self-professed believer, that the way I see things and the way God sees things are pretty much in sync, pretty much the same, and that everyone else is playing an extremely dangerous game of self-deception. They're fooling themselves, but they can't fool God and they can't fool me. They say they believe a thing, but they don't actually live their faith. Or, if they do live their faith, they're dangerous fanatics on the wrong path entirely. So then, let us begin with this.

The biologically embedded hope that allows us to believe also sets up every innocent for deception. Their willingness to believe, and their yearning to know, makes them susceptible to charlatans. Just look at some of the 'leaders' truly good people follow. Look at them. Who would follow any of those guys? Seriously, look at any religious leader and ask yourself, "Would I leave that guy alone in my house while I ran down to the hardware store for a pound of finishing nails?" Yet, they each have their adoring hordes.

Let's look for a moment at L. Ron Hubbard—a man who has apparently written more books on religion after his death than before, and who may have written more on religion than anyone else on this planet or beyond. I read somewhere that he's such a universally recognized embarrassment that two towns with similar names are involved in an on-going public squabble, each insisting that he was NOT born in their town.



“Nope, not here, it must be that other place.”

You can see why he’d have a dedicated slavish following of millions, can’t you? If not, perhaps you’ll see why, for yourself, after you read this small fragment of his uniquely styled wisdom: “We have to consider that we *can* consider before we consider an Isness.”

But, if that’s got you confused, he goes on to explain how this is to be done. “One considers that one considers and, therefore, what one considers is, is.”

If I understand what he’s getting at—and I’m not sure I do—it’s strictly not true.

On the other hand, “Alter-Isness is simply the mechanism by which we persuade things to exist. We say they’re something else than what they are and after that they exist. We get Alter-Isness, then, totally mechanically as a method of getting things to continue their existence. Now, that’s an important fact.”

Consider that for a while. It’s an important fact.  
It’s written in plain English and it’s an important fact.  
So, consider it carefully. I have.

I have, and I can tell you, for me at least, T. S. Eliot read backwards would make more sense. Captain Beefheart, without the pleasant subtle nudge of marijuana cradling my mind, would make more sense. But, if that speaks to you, if that Alter-Isness nonsense reaches the religious part of your nature, the Church of Scientology can probably be persuaded to accept you and your money (not necessarily in

that order); they're eager to assist you in any way necessary to get your foot up on that first rung of their golden ladder of wisdom-getting.

It used to be that if you could find no other explanation for a thing, you might call it Art. The common view was, "It must be Art, I don't know what else it could possibly be." But Hubbard has changed all that forever, because—taking those statements above for example—whatever it may be, it sure as hell isn't Art; and it isn't anything else on earth that I've ever come across; so we must take his many followers' word for it and call it religion. But what kind of religion is it? Hubbard makes it perfectly clear...

"And when we say an individual, we're talking about something as precise as an apple."

There you go.

And to clarify that (as if such a statement should require clarification) he goes on to say, "We're not talking about a collection of behavior patterns which we all learned from studying rats. We're talking about something that is finite. We're talking about somebody, the somethingness that *you* are... We're not talking about the color of your hair or the length of your feet. We're talking about *you* and we know what we're talking about when we talk about you."

Well, there you go. Hand me my checkbook. Who wouldn't want to support the world-wide dissemination of that kind of wisdom?

Really, I'm a bit embarrassed to confess that I have no idea whatsoever what that guy's talking about—even though I have in fact, at one time or another, dropped acid. I can tell you this also. I have a desperately homeless friend named Walter, who is—due to damnable circumstance—if not completely insane, certainly on his way there, and he makes more sense than this buffoon, Hubbard. He certainly makes more spiritual sense and has a deeper sense of what religion is about. I give money to Walter freely on a regular basis and feel good about it, but about this I could not be more sincere, if I dropped a penny on the street and it rolled away from me and landed at the feet of some Scientologist, I'd feel the deepest disgust and suffer pangs of remorse for the remainder of my stay here on this planet if I thought that penny might contribute in any way to the furtherance of L. Ron Hubbard's unbearable goddamned (safe assumption) idiocy. About that I feel an almost religious conviction.

Still, somehow, these words haunt me: “When a person has lost his ability entirely to recognize As-Isness, he's gone.” So, I must be gone. I must be, like, real gone... In fact, I was never truly with it. I have never been able to, like, you know, recognize my As-Isness.

As-Isness?

Although I don't usually struggle much over either scams or charlatans—recognizing them almost immediately for what they are—I sometimes wonder why others don't struggle maybe just a little more before devoting their lives to idiots.

## MORE ON L. RON

Apparently, I'm not done yet.

I am well aware of the generally accepted admonition against making fun of other people's religion, but this is not religion by any definition of the concept, no matter how torturous. His devotees must surely have surrendered their thinking-ness at the was-door. I'm not sure I can get any closer to my objection than that. I'm not sure I want to. I confess that I don't know why this disturbs me so. More frightening is the fact that so many people are comfortable with it. I have greater respect for people collecting Beanie Babies; although their devotion is as rabid and thoughtless, at least they don't claim it's a religion.

I have kicked myself a thousand times for tossing away the chart that once fell into my hands. It explained the various levels of (I don't know, I guess spiritual) achievement within Scientology. On that chart also were the price tags associated with each level of wisdom; what it cost you to attain that level. That's the way this 'religion' works. You pay a fee and become a member, you pay another fee and you take one step up the ladder, another fee and you take another step up the ladder. The fees were enormous (from my point of view) and they grew exponentially as you made your way toward the top where ultimate spiritual understanding lies waiting. Because you can't make it to the next level without having taken lessons in the level immediately below, they scalp you at each level. You can't, say, just hand them the fee required to become king of the world and then be declared king, you have to make your way up, a step at a time, and pay each fee along the way, to

attain that great position. It's certainly an interesting take on religion. The more you pay, the more enlightened you become. But at no point do you ever become fully enlightened; never do you become enlightened enough to see that you are being taken; OR, if you do, it hardly matters, they've gotten what they could from you along the way and there are plenty out there to take your place.

Still, if I had the kind of money it takes to shoot right to the top of the Scientological ladder, I don't think I'd do it, because I don't like idiocy that much, and even less do I like brainwashing.

Without a doubt Scientology is one of the largest and most meticulously orchestrated spiritual scams ever perpetrated on desperate, willing, gullible innocents. But, just to be sure I've given this abomination a fair shake, let me pull another quote from the most recent article I've come across in their apparently endless publication of official sanctioned mindlessness drivel. This statement, apparently, is designed to encourage people to take the next step up and attain the NEW OT VIII, whatever that may be.

“There is nothing more lasting and correct than moving up to New OT VIII. Not a new car, new house, new clothes, diamonds, etc. These things do not last, YOU DO.”

Ha! Tell that to the clothes you're buried in, or the car that you left behind in the garage of your empty house, where your diamonds collect dust in the drawers upstairs while the flesh falls off the bones of YOU.

Henry Edward Fool

But, that's religion for you. Your money is worthless, give it all to us. In exchange we'll fill up your mind with utterly useless crap. A mind full of crap is better than anything else you could attain on earth.

## THE SONG OF THE GOD damned

I'll never know why God hates me so  
I only know that He does

Knowing what I know of Him  
Maybe it's 'jus' because'

Maybe it's something I haven't done yet  
Maybe it's something that was

I'll never know why God hates me so  
I only know that He does

God, whatever He may be in actuality, is subject to our personal definition. For example, there seems to be a direct link between the value of the cars in the church parking lot and the degree to which the God inside thunderously defends the holy sacrament of avarice. Many Evangelicals still seem to think that God demands of them a proud pompadour and dressing up in weird synthetic knit fabrics of the most humiliating colors and prints. In short, our vision of God is custom-tailored to fit our needs. But it's not our fault that we have become a dull and selfish people. It's not our fault that we have been stripped of our capacity to wonder at nature's never-ending knack for novelty by the nagging necessities of new car payments and nightly news and news substitute.

What we want is a God who sees things the way we do; who agrees with everything we say and do and who dislikes anyone we may dislike with the added vengeful power that

God alone can bring to justice. Such is our injustice to things unseen. If it sounds like I'm being snide, there may be a reason for that. We know this much for sure, it's easy to believe in a benevolent God if things are going just swell. Our hope is that God's benevolence lies in a somewhat bigger justice; a justice, for example that might reach desperately dangerous inner-city kids trapped in inescapable gnawing need, who—seeking a little justice of their own—are forced to commit survival crimes. All of us who profess a belief in angels must ask ourselves: “Where are their angels?”

Whether we come up with an answer to that question or not, we have put ourselves in a better position to consider God by asking it. Of course we can ignore these kids, but you would expect more from angels, wouldn't you (?), and a lot more from God.

When we talk about God, most of the time I fear that we are not talking about God at all, but merely the idea of a God who cares for us. Meanwhile the real care of God is needed in parts of town where we would never go without rolling up our windows and locking our doors. God is needed in countries we've never heard of and don't want to hear of. God is needed by people we could not even look at, let alone look in the eye. Pray to that God for a while.

Before we talk about God, we must first learn something about God; we need to learn what every child must learn about that fascinating, perfectly enticing attraction called fire. Yet Christians continually stumble over the very first word of the only prayer that Jesus tried to teach them: “Our



Father...” OUR is an inclusive term, my very dear friends not an exclusive term. Put aside if you will for one moment what you find easiest and most comforting to believe, and look at Justice. Set aside grace and forgiveness for just a moment and think about justice. Justice (we hope) is surely a part of God. That’s the warning we’ve been given—whether it is true or not we do not know. I have my doubts. Those of us who believe God is Justice also hedge a bit and insist that the justice will come in some other world.

Beware, God is not confined by whatever we may think God is. And to claim that you are a man of faith is not the same as *being* a man of faith.

And that’s the good news.

## MR. POSANOV and GOD

One time, there was a gentleman named Posanov staying at the hotel where I work. When he checked in he appeared to have taken the trip especially hard and for some reason unknown even to myself I felt I would make his stay exceptional. My plan was to be nicer than usual, to shatter the language barrier with my humanity, and to win him over with simple courtesy. In the end we may not end up drinking buddies, but Mr. Posanov will look back and recall his stay at our little hotel with fondness.

So, I focused in on Mr. Posanov, and .right from the beginning I'm taking every opportunity to call this particular good gentleman by name. They seem to like that. "This is your room, Mr. Posanov. And here, Mr. Posanov... The keys, Mr. Posanov... Oh, and breakfast is served, Mr. Posanov, from 7:30 until..." But he's not having it. My consideration means nothing to him. In fact, I'm getting the idea that all of this attention is only irritating him. Now, it's a challenge. Now, it requires finesse. So, I back off a little.

Over the next few days, I make a point of restricting my enthusiasm saying only: "Hello, Mr. Posanov" whenever he goes by the office, "Good evening, Mr. Posanov" as he goes down to dinner, as he arrives back at the hotel in the evening, "Oh, Mr. Posanov... would you like a wake-up call?" Now, apparently he thinks I'm goading him. It goes on like that for weeks.

One day, the maids forget to place towels in his room. Mr. Posanov calls down to ask, somewhat irritably, for towels and I respond. I go dashing downstairs, grab the towels, and fly up stairs again with fresh towels for our dear good guest, Mr. Posanov.

“Here you go, Mr. Posanov,” I say with my very best artificial smile firmly fixed.

“What is *wrong* with you?” he demands.

“Wrong with me?” I ask in complete innocence. “Good day, Mr. Posanov.” he begins mimicking me, “Good afternoon, Mr. Posanov. Here are your towels, Mr. Posanov!” He’s spitting out the words with bitter distaste. I’m surprised of course—I don’t know what to say or do; I have no idea what he’s getting at. I stand there like an idiot, in complete silence.

“My NAME is ROSanov!” he shouts, “not Posanov. ROSANOV.” He takes the towels from me and he slams the door.

Back at the office I pull his file, and sure enough, the guy’s name is Rosanov.

So, that leads me to wonder about God. I wonder if God might harbor a little resentment when we treat Him like I treated Rosanov?

We’re familiar, we’re friendly, we’re trying to be helpful, but we don’t know the first thing about God. Maybe, like with Mr. Rosanov our well-meaning misunderstandings only piss Him off.

—CONCLUSION—

We all know what politics is and how it works and, for reasons that cannot be explained, will not admit it. We like to think we have some influence in that mess, when really, whatever our hopes, it's beyond everybody's control, even those professionally, inextricably involved. On the other hand, we know nothing whatsoever about God, and refuse to admit that as well. Nor can we accept the fact. We define both politics and religion to suit our own purposes and remain defiantly self-convinced that our speculations are correct. What we truly believe, I think, is that we have powers which we do not possess. And somehow the less we know about a thing the more influence we claim.

Unfortunately, dream as we might, some beliefs simply are not true, but we prefer our dreams anyway. Try telling an aspiring musician that the music business has almost nothing to do with music, and see how far that simple truth goes. Tell someone that cigarette manufacturers and the health care industry share the same concern when it comes to your health, and that person will not struggle with that riddle. It's the kind of observation made by stand-up comedians, and either immediately understood or cannot be explained. Any idea that requires either questioning or thought will be laughed at or rejected outright.

Though many of us cling to the hope—and especially those who claim to be most devout—God is neither Lord of the Lotto nor Santa Claus. Earlier on I admitted that the fact that I have no marketable skills is not the fault of some rich guy, no matter how he got his. That I am not a salesman of

any sort is not the fault of those who have no qualms about slogging around in the muck of that slimy mire, and thereby do OK in this world. That I have no grasp whatsoever on how money and finances work, is not the fault of those who do. Because of my various failures, I now find myself in a somewhat frightening situation, but that is not the fault of government. So, I can't expect them to remedy it. Now I find myself forced to admit that my spiritual failings are not God's doing. My experience leads me to understand that things work out though. Somehow, one way or the other, things work out. They have never worked out like I would have liked them to, but occasionally they have worked out better than I ever could have dreamed. And for that, dear God, I am most grateful.

So, we either cannot or will not face the truth about politics and religion. We persistently involve ourselves in things we have no influence in and no control over. We pretend knowledge that we do not have, and make decisions based on that non-existent knowledge. Meanwhile, we ignore the matters we might have some genuine understanding of, some real influence in, and some control over. We occupy our time meddling in affairs that concern us only in the most oblique way, and forget those things which we should be holding more closely.

See if you think this sounds right to you.

If you're serious about Politics, it requires an understanding of both history and political processes, as well as the continual monitoring of information. The real work of political involvement requires making your voice heard,

trying to involve others, and riding herd on the idiots in power. To do that you have to make phone calls, write letters, make phone calls, petition, make phone calls, and protest. In your spare time, when you can find the time, you are expected to make a few phone calls. Politics demands ongoing active participation. If you open yourself to Politics, you'll be quickly filled—with strife, frustration, disappointment, possibly bitterness, weariness of course—and there will be no end to it.

If you're serious about Religion, it requires trust, hope, and patience. The real work of Religion requires prayerfulness. To obtain that, we need first to give thanks and then to remain silent and listen. Religion asks that we surrender our *self*. If we open ourselves to Religion, we'll be filled with Life, and wish for it to never end.

Those are the promises of Politics and Religion.

Many people seem to do OK—and some even lead worthy lives—without immersing themselves too deeply in either.

“Life is fleeting, thus Love painful.” *Sabine Lambert*