

## Snippets of Gratitude #4 (2007-2017)

### *A minuscule lessening of karmic debt:*

In the performance of the duties of the Department Head during her vacation, I observed a demonstration lesson of a prospective hire last night. Partnered with DK, the friendly Department Head of off-campus classes, I watched a straw-haired fellow in his mid-30s, struggling through an oral skills lesson.

His discussion topic (*'Should smokers qualify for Medicare-funded heart transplants?'*) and his approach seemed more suited to a high school English class than one for adult immigrants. It was no surprise to note from his resume that he had trained as a high school teacher. Also telling was that his ESL experience was mostly with younger international students rather than with immigrants.

In the awkward silence in which the students at each table were supposed to making a “group list of points”, I looked down at my evaluation form. Was I any better when I first started here? Given my slender resume in the winter of 1989, never to be forgotten was my lucky break in getting hired...

Meanwhile, the straw-haired fellow was squeakily drawing on the blackboard. The happy face and frowning face above two columns suggested he was hoping to record ‘pro’ and ‘con’ comments. Some students were still trying to make sense of the handout which outlined the controversial topic.

Through it all, my co-observer scribbled away on her evaluation sheet, pausing only to bite her pen. My own form was almost empty. Did the guy deserve a break?



For a few moments, I thought of another Hiring Committee assignment, a couple of months ago. That session involved interviewing applicants to determine whether they should proceed to the demonstration lesson stage. My co-interviewer was LM, a German-born colleague who prided herself on a no-nonsense approach.

Our last interviewee of the morning was a 59-year-old ex-childcare worker with a comb-over. In his post social-work days, he had taught ESL in Southeast Asia. A gap of several years in his employment history was somewhat suspicious...

From the moment he took a seat before us, it was plain that the interview would not go well. Looking dolefully around, he took off his glasses and rubbed them on his shirt. He then crossed arms and leaned back as if ruefully awaiting a hopeless parole hearing.

My efficient colleague and I launched into our scripted questionnaire (*“Can you describe an activity through which you have practiced the use of the present perfect?”*) ready to take notes. Our applicant had painfully little to say. He spoke haltingly, dropping his timid eyes

before trailing off in silence. Nose into my paper, I was torn between duty and pity... While the standard interviews took upwards of a half hour, within 15 minutes, from behind the closed door we were listening to the fading of his footsteps down the corridor.

“He almost looked defeated by life,” LM muttered.

“I know what you mean,” I said.

“Really not much to discuss.” She slid over her form. At the bottom of the paper, the ‘*Not recommended*’ box was already ticked. “Agreed?”

Nodding, I scribbled in my name.

“He could use help with interview skills,” I said standing up.

Stuffing our forms in the envelope, my colleague ignored the comment. “I’ll walk it up to the Dean’s office after lunch,” she said.

“Thank you for the extra effort.”

“No problem.” She held up the envelope. “Remember everything— even papers with doodles— has to go in.”

I gathered up the foolscap. Back in the fall of 1988, could I have imagined that one day I would so perfunctorily sign off on a luckless man’s ongoing humiliation? *There but for the grace!* It was not just for sitting down for 3 hours that I felt a little nauseous.



The 59-year-old with the comb-over was on my mind when I slipped into my office along with my colleague for the demo lesson post-mortem of the straw-haired young man. His twitching Adam’s apple suggested that he had no illusions.

“So, what exactly was your objective?”

While my co-observer, took notes, I feigned sternness.

Flushed, the young man admitted that his discussion had got off to a slow start. He still insisted that his time was up just as students were warming to the topic. Poker faced, I listened. After the requisite 10 minutes, I segued to the closing of our script.

“If you are successful in this stage of your application, we will then need to call your referees. Can you confirm that the phone numbers you provided are up to date?”

“Yes. So how long, um, before you let me know?” That question he addressed to the soft-spoken DK— assuming her to be the good cop.

“We’ll let you know about a week,” she said cheerily. “Either way.”

The young man pursed his lips— all but certain he was getting a thumbs down.



“So, what do you think?” asked the young Department Head when the door closed behind our applicant.

“Well, he showed an ability to be self-critical,” I said pointing to the criteria outlined on the form.

“He certainly could have done more comprehension checking,” said DK. “Did you see Linh, the older Vietnamese lady in the back? She didn’t have a clue what the topic was about.”

“Well, the lesson plan wasn’t so bad,” I said. “It just wasn’t quite level appropriate.”

‘Yes, but he did observe the class beforehand,’ said DK.

“Right. Still, hard to know what information he got from the class teacher...” I pointed to another criterion on the form. “...and he *was* respectful to the students. He even learned some of their names.”

“True.” DK looked silently over her notes. I sensed that in her hesitancy, some openness to my leanings.

“Well, it wasn’t much of a discussion, for sure. More like pulling hen’s teeth. But it was far from a disaster. I guess I’d give him a ‘C’ or ‘C+’”

“It’s just pass or fail,” she said worriedly.

“Well, if ‘C’ is a pass— then I’d call it a bare pass.”

She sighed. “I guess can go along with that.”

“He’s fairly young. He seems self-aware. He can get probably get up to speed quickly.”

“Well, I hope so.” Then switching to her more businesslike tone, DK divided our referee checking work. I agreed to take the paperwork up to the Dean.

Moments later, in the empty office, I prepared to close shop for the night. That guy was lucky getting DK and I. Yawning, I jingled my car keys. With the minuscule lessening of karmic debt, I looked forward to a good night’s sleep for a change.

***An honourable man in the making:***



I only noticed the blinking light on the phone in mid-morning, after returning from the walk with Romeo around Lefarge Lake. The message was startling:

*“This is Corporal R. of the Coquitlam RCMP. I’m phoning about your son, MHT. Could you give me a call back?”*

Chest pounding, I phoned the detachment. The lady on the switchboard connected me with the cop on desk duty.

“Hold on!” said the cop as if taking a call in a maintenance department of a car dealership. “You say your son’s name is MT? I’ll check to see if he’s in the cell.”

“In the cell?” I gasped.

After a sadistically long hold, the cop came back on the phone:

“No, your son’s not under arrest. He hasn’t been charged with anything yet but was seen on Saturday night destroying fixtures on a property in the Westwood Plateau. The owner could be pressing charges.”

I blew out a held breath. “MH is a good kid. This is the first time he’s ever been accused of anything remotely like this. If he’s responsible, he’ll own up to it. Do you have the owner’s phone number?”

“Corporal Robertson has the details. He’ll be back in the office in the afternoon. You’ll have to phone back after 3:00 PM.”

After the call, I paced the living room considering the response. It was a shock—but it could have been a lot worse. Still, I sensed a pivotal moment for father and son which needed handling with much care...



*“MH, could you please call me as soon as you can? There’s something we need to talk about.”*

In the message left on his mother’s answering machine, I tried not to betray anger or alarm. Then I phoned MT’s cell to ask if she had any clue what was going on.

“O, it’s probably some trashy kids,” she breezed. “Like the ones who live in your complex. They probably did something bad and are blaming it on MH.”

I winced in her insinuation that it was my “trashy” neighbourhood that induced her to move back in with her mother a few months ago. Still, it was no time to be drawn into another spat.

“How can you be sure that trashy kids on the plateau weren’t involved?”

“I’m sorry this has nothing to do with me. I’m on the way to work,” she said before ending the call.

I was again pacing the living room when the phone rang.

“Did you just call me?”

It was MH himself.

“Maybe you know, why I’m calling, M.”

“No idea.”

“I got a call from the RCMP. “They said you were involved in some vandalism.”

“What? That’s not true!”

As hoped, he did not persist in a denial. When I told him that the cops said they had “details about the incident”, there was a long silence. For a breathless moment, I feared he might cut off the call—but then he fessed up...

He said he was walking back from a house party on the Westwood Plateau along with a few other lads. He admitted that they had had a few beers. They stomped over some garden lamps.

“I’m pay for them,” he said.

“It’s not just about paying for the damage. We need to talk about the whole thing.”

There was another long silence.

“MH?”

“I’m come over after school this afternoon.”

At 3:00 PM, I phoned back the detachment and talked with Corporal R. who left the first message. I told him I would have a “serious talk” with MH who had agreed to pay for his share of the damages. I told him that other boys were involved. Corporal R. agreed to come to our place on Friday afternoon to get more details from my son.

When MH himself came through the door at 4:00 PM, I met him with a hug.

When we sat down, he was near tears. At first reluctant to talk, he gradually told how he and his 2 friends ran away from the lawn when a woman came to the window of the house next door. It must have been her, he figured, who called the cops. Soon afterwards, the cops came

to check on both the noisy house party and the reported vandalism on the same block. When the cops broke up the party, they must have asked if anyone knew the name of the “black guy” who was at the party earlier. Facing underage drinking charges, one of the kids at the party must have given MH’s name.

“Well, that’s not really fair,” I said, “if the other 2 guys get away. You all equally responsible.”

“It doesn’t matter, I’ll pay for it,” he said, looking away. He had a little money from his weekend job at the mall shoe store.

“It *does* matter. I’ll not excusing you for doing something dumb. But it’s still not fair that you were singled out.”

“I don’t care.” He said bitterly.

“I care—and so should you. You need to be treated fairly whether for good or for bad.”

“I’ll talk to my friends,” he said, “I’ll get them to contribute.”

“Well if they really are friends, then they will share in the blame.”

His eyes blinked in something of both sorrow and shame. Could an acknowledgement of the injustice of his being singled out be balanced with the need for restitution of a wrong?

I squeezed his shoulder. “Look MH, I’m very proud of you. You didn’t hide anything... “You know what? I think the owner would be really impressed if you would personally apologize. I caught his eye and asked gently. “Would you be ready to do that?”

He lifted his eyebrows in assent.



I pulled up to the curb slightly down the hill from a *feng shui* mansion on the Westwood Plateau. It was near the park where not so long ago, MH played peewee baseball.

Nervously I watched from the driver’s seat while MH got out and walked up to the massive doorway. A moment later, the door opened, and a Chinese man emerged. At first, the man looked hostile... Watching both of them in profile, I initially feared that the owner would begin gesticulating angrily. Instead, he seemed to be listening. For his part, MH was looking up and down while talking. Suddenly, MH extended his hand.

My son!

Watching from the curb as they shook hands, I trembled in gratitude...

2008, May

### ***On the cusp of turning 60:***

Yesterday for the second time this season, TE and I climbed the Diez Vistas trail.

This time, we hiked up from the north side—the opposite direction for most hikers. Instead of climbing with the sun at our backs, we faced the rising sun. The dazzling illumination of the hanging moss from the cedars was just one delight of our altered orientation. As always in hiking with my beautiful middle daughter, there was little need for talking. We both shared the understanding that chatter in the wilderness was a disrespectful intrusion.

In needing to stop more often than usual on the upward climb, I wondered whether the profusion of sweat was due more to the August heat or because I was on the cusp of turning 60... How much mileage was left in the old knees?

The automotive analogy seemed fitting: with a 60-year-old body one was rather like an old car on the third rounding of the odometer. To keep running, the old engine would have to be increasingly pampered. Will proper maintenance, could I squeeze out another decade of hiking? There was, after all, the inspiration of old Swede, Halvor Lunden, who not only forged the trails around Buntzen Lake but maintained them into his eighth decade.



Bolstered by that thought, I mopped brow and laboured on... Still, I could not quite shut out the darker speculations about turning 60 with which I taunted myself when hiking alone last week on Eagle Ridge. The following morning, I wrote in my journal:

*'Can the desire for living beyond 60 can be justified by something nobler than the satisfaction of 'consuming' more experience? Surely there is a higher dignity in the acceptance of mortality—the need to make room for the young. Those of us who have already eaten and excreted far more than our share, might well consider following the fabled Innuit tradition. Walking serenely out to the ice floe, lying down and gently falling asleep would possibly be the only morally responsible act an uber-consumer has ever performed...'*

Yet yesterday, in following in the heels of my 24-year-old daughter, I settled on a more measured view of reaching the threshold of seniorhood. I acknowledged the obligation not to be greedy. Every day of decent health enjoyed beyond the cusp of three score; I should never fail to regard as borrowed time. Yet if luck holds beyond the actuarial average—why shouldn't the gift be celebrated? Fundamentally, the desire for more time is not essentially selfish as long as one's presence is wanted by others...

So, when TE and I took a 'selfie from the cliff of Vista #1 with the panoramic backdrop of Indian Arm 900 meters below—that was the thought I held in mind. In striking my pose, I was particularly aware that the image, might even be viewed by future grandchildren, long after my absence.

*2011, August*

*Another lump of uneasy gratitude:*

Perhaps we panicked unnecessarily this morning. Perhaps the danger was exaggerated. But tonight, I still tremble in the possibility that our lives might have abruptly ended this morning here on the idyllic Oaxacan coast.

CM and I had spent a pleasantly touristic morning, breakfasting in an ocean view café in Mazunte, before slowly walking along the empty beach below the headland of San Augustillo beach. With the noontime sun growing uncomfortable, doubling back through no less than 1½ kilometers of beach seemed unnecessary. The bus shelter to catch the *collectivo* back to our hotel in Xipolite was less than half a kilometer above us. Finding a direct path across the headland at the top of the beach, seemed reasonable enough.

When we crossed a narrow footpath, I motioned for CM to follow me. Reluctantly, she did—even though a few meters into the scrub, the path crossed a trampled down break in a private fence. Sensing the risk for a pair of elderly *gringos* in the scrubby brush, I hastened along even as CM urged that we turn back.

A couple of hundred meters on through the brush, we passed a desiccated cornfield. Below it was a bare wooden *choza* with chickens scratching at the open door. On the far side was a thatched *palapa* lean-to. Suddenly, from within it stepped a burly man with a scruffy beard. He was holding a cell phone to ear. Seeing us, he pocketed the phone and walked slowly toward the path.

As he touched a belted holster, a trill rippled up my spine. I froze like a rabbit straying into the lair of a puma.

“*De donde viene?*” the man boomed out.

“We’re from Canada,” CM piped up a few steps behind me. She had not yet seen the holster.

The man stepped onto the path. He gave a sickly grin. “Yeah? You have *papeles*?” He asked in broken English, “I’m lookin’ for people with no *papeles*.”

At that moment, the rabbit instinct kicked in. I twisted round, pulled CM’s hand and yelled:

“Quick, Run!”

At first confused, she clutched her shoulder bag, turned and broke into a run towards the beach. When I looked back, the man was on the path—but not giving chase. We ran back over the trampled barbed wire fence onto the open but deserted beach. Several times I twisted around, clenching teeth against the possible sound of a gunshot. Only 200 meters down the beach, still jogging, did I sense we were out of danger. Heart pounding, I pulled CM’s hand down towards the shore.

“That guy could have been guarding a grow op or a drug smuggling operation,” I said.

“I told you not to go that way,” she tsked.

“Yeah, I’m sorry. Let’s not say anything to our kids about this, OK? They’ll think we’re reckless.”



I was still shaking through the breezy *collectivo* ride back to Xipolite. Had we not run, we would almost certainly have been robbed of camera, cell phones and money...

Worse?

There have been random killings of innocent bystanders by drug cartel violence all along this coast over the last several months. Much of that violence has been in the neighbouring Guerrero and Michoacán, but Oaxaca has not been untouched. The cartels certainly do operate in this state. So, it is not far-fetched to imagine we might have achieved international attention as the latest *touristas* to disappear in Mexico. We might have become corpses buried with lime back in that cornfield...

Instead, we are spared to resume our vacation in the sun and come back with a few anecdotes about our little adventure. It remains to be known whether or not the world will be better served by our continuation on the final slog towards retirement...

I swallowed back a lump of uneasy gratitude for one more shit-luck deliverance.

*2014, January (Xipolite, Mexico)*

*A tip of the hat to ‘Time’:*

On a foray to Value Village yesterday, I spent 10 minutes rummaging through a pile of old ‘Time’ magazines. Probably the detritus from an attic-clearing—some issues dated from the 1960s.

Many of the covers were familiar. From 1967, there was ‘*The Hippies*’ issue that appeared just before “the summer of love”, and ‘*The Beatles: A New Incarnation*’ acknowledging the hip *avant-garde* direction of the erstwhile “Fab Four.” From 1969 was the ‘*At War with War*’ issue about anti-war protests of the “New Left”.

At only 50 cents each, they were cheaper than the used ‘*National Geographic*’ magazines. Honeycombed with social history—those old mags make great bedtime reading. Especially amusing are the ads: from showing token African Americans driving Chevrolets to liberated women smoking Virginia slims... If I weren’t so encumbered in the office this week, I would have bought the lot (I did purchase the June 1968 issue with the Aretha Franklin cover). Much more than *National Geographic* from that era, ‘*Time*’ has a special attraction.



It first appeared in my living room in late 1963, just after the Kennedy assassination. I suppose my father took a trial subscription in attempt to make sense of the turbulent events of the era. Prior to ‘*Time*’ the only print subscriptions in our household were ‘*Reader’s Digest*’ and the ‘*Telegraph Journal*’, the provincial daily rag. My father regularly complained about the cost of the annual renewal to ‘*Time*’ but generously believed it to be “educational”.

Although I began only tentatively skimming though it, gradually I got hooked. In late adolescence, I came to mock its *all-you-need-to-know-about-the-world-this-week* formula but in earlier years, I was a devotee.

Yet even as I eagerly took up every issue (usually left in the bathroom) I tended to skim quickly through the news and politics sections in a rush to get to the ‘Arts and Culture’ section at the back... It was from *Time* obituaries that I grew interested in writers ranging from Jack Kerouac to Ezra Pound. It was from its music reviews that I first heard of Janis Joplin and Jimmy Hendrix. Through those back pages, I added to a growing reading list and affirmed pop musical tastes.

Many years later in Zimbabwe, I knew a blue-blood Harvard grad who once did a student summer apprenticeship at *Time* headquarters in New York City. He said there was a hierarchy in the editorial offices of ‘*Time*’ wherein the “front of the magazine” writers had higher pay and status than those who wrote for the “back of the magazine”...

Of course, in my adolescence, I could not have known that the international news and politics sections I skipped over were far more central to the ‘mission’ of *Time*, than any review of pop music. That was long before I heard about the agenda of its founder and publisher, Henry Luce.

It is interesting that Luce was an anti-Roosevelt Republican of the patrician WASP ilk (Not nearly as execrable as the present variety of Republican). The mission of his flagship mag was apparently to provide a quick and easily digestible news source for busy Americans. The weekly summary was neatly compartmentalized into sections ('*Public Affairs*', '*Foreign News*', '*The Arts*', '*People*' etc.) rather like Velveeta individually wrapped cheese slices.

Not surprising, the Luce worldview had a conservative bent. Even a semi-literate 15- year-old could infer the editorial support of the Vietnam War and the virulent anti-communism in every *Time* article that even tangentially impinged on the cold war.

Still, it was through the reportage of '*Time*' that my curiosity was tweaked for the affairs of a wider world. I gradually became more familiar with the sprightly '*Time*-ese' prose style and regularly noted down new vocabulary. I studied those word lists rather like the kid in his bedroom secretly following a Charles Atlas workout... I became a little more adept than my buddies in sparring in pop-culture parley. In conversation, I was even able to hold my own with kids visiting from the metropole cities like Toronto. In not a small measure, it was thanks to '*Time*'...



In looking through the stack of old '*Time*' magazines yesterday, I was a little disappointed not to find the '*Is God Dead?*' issue that came out around Easter, 1966. I don't specifically remember reading the article but the cover with the question in large red letters on a black background certainly had an impact.

In the summer of 1967, having grown my hair as long as I was allowed, I remember decorating my khaki bush jacket. On the back among splotchy flowers, I painted in black acrylic: '*God is Dead*'. That statement, transposed from the question on the '*Time*' cover a year before, was rather shocking to the village sensibilities. My jacket was subsequently confiscated and burned by my mother. Oddly enough, the family subscription to '*Time*' was not cancelled...

A half a century later, I tip my hat to *Time* for its unintentional subversive guidance...

2014, October

*Of unburdening and restoring:*

Down to my last weeks before retirement, I have begun the process of detaching myself from the work by which I earned a living for the last 2½ decades. Yesterday afternoon, I permanently cleaned out my file cabinet drawers.

With a near savagery, I dumped 25 years of worksheets. While other retirees have left materials to be filed with the general departmental resources, I was under no illusion that my classroom resources might be of any value—especially given the department's imminent demise.

There were moments when I hesitated, holding over the blue recycling bin a paper reminiscent of a particularly successful class—but mostly I dumped whole folders by the handful. Unlike the 'Heraclitean' burning of personal papers in the backyard trash pit before departing Zimbabwe in July '88, I felt nothing of remorse. By and large, the hundreds of overhead transparencies and thousands of worksheets seemed only sad artifacts of the bleeding away of half a lifetime...

Even with a sore back from 4 hours bending over, I felt a perverse satisfaction in wheeling the two large bins to the corridor. I cannot remember another endeavor so powerfully driven by a desire for finality...



What a contrast that activity was with setting up my new 'man cave' (CM's expression) in our new townhouse a few months ago:

After 6 years occupying a corner of a garage—and years before that cramped in living room corners—it is a great pleasure to have on the cusp of retirement, my own private workspace. I have finally been able to bring out souvenirs long stored away. The greatest satisfaction though, was in filling up bookshelves with old books also moved around in tote boxes for decades.

Of course, in the universe of on-line resources, most of these old tomes will serve only as decorations. So why should I be any less inclined to dump these 'trophies' of youthful bookishness any more than the quarter century of lesson plans?

I have deliberated on what to keep and culled many for thrift shop donations. I am not quite as sentimental as to regard those books I shelved as "old friends", but every one of them is an artifact of special memory. The hope is that a selection of those memories can be a rich resource that may be drawn upon through the time that remains...

In any case, I am deeply grateful to have a comfortable place for the work that remains—however unassuming that work shall be.

*2015, November*

*A bare escape:*

With 3-month-old Pancho on leash, I walked along the path between the blueberry fields at the end of Oliver Rd.

The sight of three Asian men in safari gear with cameras, and telephoto lens and tripods was at first baffling. Then it occurred that the word must be out: this area near the Pitt River marshes is like a safari park for bear viewing. Indeed, before the turn off to the scenic Minnekhada Lodge on the hillside (a common Hollywood North film locale) another knot of gawkers stood beside their parked car. To add to the circus, 2 kids on bikes swooped lazily past.

In the jolt of bitterness for the intrusion, I rushed on through the gate and up the trail towards the marsh. It seemed that a beloved place of solitude was now defiled.

With Pancho straining ahead, I started along the narrow path between the electric fence and the swamp. As always, I quickened my pace though the zone I had come to call '*bear alley*'. From mid-July through August, bears prowled back and forth along the electric fence. If the evidence of danger was not in the blueberry bushes hanging almost seductively over the fence, it was in the blueberry-studded scat splotched along the path.

About halfway to the end of the fence, I glanced behind to see a large bear, about 100 meters behind. Just out of the bushes, he was lumbering towards us. I stopped and waved my arm expecting that he would veer back into the bush. He kept coming. Pulling the puppy (who was unaware of the danger) I walked backwards for several paces to cover a distance safe enough to avoid a chase from behind.

Just as I turned forward again, from the underbrush less than 200 meters ahead there emerged a sow bear. Hopping behind her were two cubs. She sniffed towards the blueberry fields before ambling slowly along the fence in our direction...

Effectively trapped in a gauntlet between two bears and an electric fence—the throat tightening alarm was accompanied by the flash of a headlining story in the evening TV news: '*Mauled resident ignores bear warnings...*' Viewers would rightly feel that an old man got what he deserved—especially for dragging an innocent pooch into danger...

Expelling that thought, I looked back and forth, calculating that the bear with the cubs was least likely to give way. Still, the larger lone bear was moving closer.

"Get away!" I shouted.

The boar bear kept coming. Choking up on the dog leash, I cursed my negligence for leaving my whistle and air horn back in my drawer. Meanwhile, far behind at the gate, one of gawkers was taking a photo. Was a video of our mangling to be posted on the *LiveLeak* site?

Pancho, still not sensing the imminent danger, sat on haunches, sniffing.

“Go, go, go!”

Just when I was struck by the absurdity of the circumstances by which shit luck in innumerable follies might well have finally run out—the bear behind us veered off the path into the bush.

I walked slowly back to the point when he had disappeared, farther away from the female with cubs. A few moments later, she too, disappeared into the bush along with her cubs...

I then turned and hastened though the final section of the ‘bear alley’ gauntlet. In emerging onto the dyke before the Pitt River marshes, I stopped up to catch a breath.

How sincere could be the gratitude of one who had just squandered the 90<sup>th</sup> of 9 lives?

*2017, August*

fwt

***Muddling through\**** (\*A reflection on the latter-day digital transcription of an old journal)

When I skimmed through the journal from 1974 a few months ago, I was not surprised that it was left untouched for decades at the bottom of my old steamer trunk. Yet I was also reminded why I had not the heart to throw it away.

The ‘yearbook’, with imitation leather cover, was intended to keep track of progress on assignments piling up in my final college semester. As I slipped further behind schedule, the black bible-sized journal increasingly became a repository for self-castigation and despair. Similarly, the detailing of the daily New Brunswick weather in the winter of 1974 took on the tone of a hopeless struggle against malevolence...

Undeniably, I will always regard 1974 as the most consequential years of my life—however overwrought in the personal narrative. It was the year I left the insular college town in my home province and migrated west. Perhaps of greater consequence was the fact that I left prematurely, without finishing undergraduate work. By so doing, I missed the opportunity to undergo an apprenticeship of academic rigour for which I had never been riper...

1974 was also marked by turmoil in the wake of a breakup. That self-inflicted torment over a former girlfriend was not cleanly left 5,000 kms behind, as intended.

In recalling the defeats and setbacks of that year, I sometimes wonder what might have been my fate had I *not* emigrated west. In a rosy imagining, I might have found a sweetheart and buckled down on academic studies. I might have had an authentic academic career. Yet cosseted in my natal province—bleaker outcomes were far more likely.

Had I not pulled up roots, I cannot imagine having been tested in the ways I have been... Was I ever tested in the manner of many young men who are thrown into critical work, early marriage or war? Hardly a scintilla by comparison! Still, even with the hobbling of self-doubt, 1974 was the year in which I set upon a new course. The upward trajectory from despair would begin slowly, rather like the turn of an oil tanker. There was some backsliding, in drinking and smoking but on the whole, healthier habits were set. There slowly emerged from the chrysalis of that year, more autonomy and resilience.

Of course, that may not be my story as others see it...

In reviewing the journal, it occurs that the act of recording itself was an attempt to self-justify in the spirit of: “*what does not kill me strengthens me.*” Whether or not Nietzschean calisthenics worked better than those of Norman Vincent Peale, the scourge was rarely spared...

Consider, for example, an entry written in July 1974, a few weeks after my arrival in Vancouver. Therein is described an incident which occurred when riding my 10-speed to

work at the downtown library. When I was stopped at the red light, a passerby with a camera suddenly stepped off the sidewalk and took a quick shot of my hook gripping the handlebar. That night, I mused:

*'How many other would-be Dianne Arbus' in this city are eager to get a prize shot of a freak?'*



In transcribing the 1974 diary, I still seethe over the stupidities of the 23-year-old. Why was he so shy? Why in his rare social forays was he so given to 'confess' his vulnerabilities? Even in repentance for his follies— why was he unable to resist them?

At the age of 23 I was fully aware of what I would come to call the '*Tiresias syndrome*'. That is the power of foresight, such as was ascribed to the blind prophet of ancient Thebes, coupled with the impotence of altering what was foreseen...

In revisiting the self-castigation and despair of 1974, I have fantasized reaching back through the decades, shaking the 23-year-old by the collar and whispering: "*Don't be paranoid! Don't send that letter... Don't make that phone call... Don't go there... Don't be a blind fool!*"



Along with the taunting in the transcription of these old notes, has been reassurance... Even in nearing the end of the journey, perhaps even an old man can learn from the struggles of a 23-year-old. Perhaps along with imagining warning a younger self of impending folly, he can also imagine laying a ghostly hand on the young man's shoulder: '*It'll all work out.*' he might reassure, '*Yes, it will be by the skin of your teeth—but you will muddle through...*'

It is amusing to recall that the first diary I kept was in 1967. In journalistic parlance, that was the year of 'flower power' with the background music of the Beatles' *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely-Hearts Club Band*. Some nights in the fall of 1967, I scribbled out hopes and humiliations while listening to that album. Legend has it that the run-out groove of *Sgt. Pepper's* held a cryptic message:

*'...It never could be any other way... it never could be any other way...' (ad infinitum)*

As I approach my forever run-out groove, I find a little wisdom in the message that amused a 16-year-old. I remind myself that the present is as it is— only because the past was *exactly* as it was.... Even though a tautology, that understanding offers consolation. Despite all the imagining of actions that would have led to greater fulfillment— trajectories from innumerable moments could just as easily have led to disaster... Taking that consolation, I

assure myself that for all the timidity, sloth and self-torment that riddles the record, I *have* muddled through.

The most unexpected role that chance thrust upon me has been that of fatherhood. While I might have done better in what has surely been my most significant impact on the world—I could have done much worse...

When once we had a conversation about the weirdness of unpredictability, my 25-year-old son remarked that if the grooves in *my* record were not shaped precisely as they are—he and his sisters would not exist. I assured him I was profoundly grateful that it all turned out *precisely* as it has... Recently a grandfather, I rejoice that even in muddling through— it never *could* have been any other way!

2017, November

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