

A few Clearings (#1)

Mushrooming thoughts on ecology and salvation:

In a clearing along the less travelled path on the far side of Buntzen Lake this morning, I stooped before a mushroom. With its white-spotted red cap, I recognized the poisonous fly agaric species. Alone and unblemished in a bare patch, the mushroom seemed to defy the season when so much of the forest floor lies dormant until spring...

For several moments, I crouched over it. It was wonderfully quiet: there was no wind, no motors; no voices. In the hushed solemnity, I tried to synchronize with the chill air and muted fall light. Tingling in the onset of a special moment, I let the mind run free...



I first thought of the idea that my consciousness was not sourced in a specific part of the brain—nor even in the brain alone. I tried to feel the web of nerves reaching throughout the body that spider up the spine to excite the neo-cortex. It occurred that the web of nerves within my body was like the web of roots underground...

Yet unlike a tree or a mushroom—unlike any one of the billions of interacting cells in any ecosystem—the miracle of my nervous system is self-awareness. Moreover, this self-awareness is terrified of its certain oblivion... Yet opposing its terror of oblivion is a longing to lose itself in transcendence...

I shut my eyes. The only glimpses of transcendence have been in moments such as this: in awe of the planetary Gaea within with every cell of every organism is exquisitely integrated... Why is there a need to ascribe this inter-connectedness of all life to an arrogant supernatural 'creator'?

Opening eyes to the mushroom blurring back into focus, the urge to 'lose myself' grew stronger... At the same moment, I realized that throughout the world, millions of others were sharing the same apprehension of their interconnectedness with the natural world. What love can run deeper than the love of the whole earth's ecosystem of which one's body is a miniscule part?

Looking closer, I noted the grey slime in the stem of the mushroom which 'hosts' it. That parasitic fungus seemed an apt reminder of the core belief of Abrahamic religion: *'let them have dominion... over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth'*.) Such regard of 'nature' (only in some languages conceptualized as a separate entity) as a boundless source for the exploitation of man, gives rise to the

possibility that the brief emergence of *homo sapiens* has been an evolutionary aberration: a cancer that ultimately kills its host.

Yet when we have these fleeting apprehensions of our integration within the fragile web of organic life— what possesses us to make war on ourselves?



I then remembered the boy of 12 or 13, sitting in his dooryard, taking pot shots with his BB gun. Suddenly, a barn swallow alit on the nearby clothesline. Without thinking, he aimed and squeezed the trigger. No sooner did the swallow flop on the ground than another swallow—probably its mate—swooped down over the lifeless body. The boy shot dead the second swallow...

It was in touching the still warm feathers that the boy was seized with profound shame... For nothing more than the satisfaction of hitting a target he, a thoughtless human, had destroyed 2 fellow creatures. He had disturbed the natural world— an unforgiveable 'sin'... He sobbed and vowed to put away the BB gun forever. It was more of a dawning awareness than an epiphany of deep ecology — but there were no more wanton killings...

Rising, I brushed off my knees. Yes, there was a time that instead of marveling at a mushroom in the forest, I would have crushed it under heel. I can only thank Gaea for pre-adolescent salvation...

2014, October

The con of cryonics:

Last evening's entertainment selected from random flipping of the TV remote was a documentary on the 'Reverse Aging Movement'. Creepy though it was, I recorded it on the VCR and this morning transcribed bits of it to explore, as follows:

The documentary featured one B. Faloon, the founder of the Church of Perpetual Life in Hollywood, Florida. He looked to be a man of about my age, despite his jet-black pompadour and taut face.

According to the background narration, Faloon's war on aging and death began with his work as an embalmer. He claimed that work led to his conviction that no cosmetic art can mask the sheer ugliness of a corpse...

As a sideline to his funeral services, he sold dietary supplements. He was briefly jailed for selling unapproved drugs advertised for longevity. In the meantime, he grew interested in cryonics: the freezing of bodies in the hope of future rejuvenation when appropriate repairs are available. He founded an association promoting cryonic preservation and guided its growth— along with his business of selling now unregulated dietary supplements...

In the lengthiest segment of the documentary, Pastor Faloon is shown speaking from the pulpit of his church. He wears the suit of a televangelist but presents himself as an academic. With mouth microphone and expansive gestures, he appears to be delivering a TED Talk...

Speaking rapidly while referring to PowerPoint diagrams, Faloon describes scientific breakthroughs that promise life-extension. He claims that aging can be drastically slowed by emerging techniques of cellular manipulations. He cites studies into senolytic (*i.e.*, targeting senescence) drugs, presumed to zap "zombie cells" responsible for the breakdown of healthy cells. He proposes that aging is a disease that will eventually be conquered.

"With a proper lifestyle, dietary supplements and senolytic therapies," he says confidently, "it is highly possible that many people already in middle age can live to at least 130."

He shifts focus to the intervention which he has already arranged when his own pampered body finally succumbs: cryonic preservation.

With his accompanying voiceover, a video is shown of the cryonics facility in Scottsdale Arizona, in which Faloon is jointly ventured. In a spacious lab setting, rows of water-heater shaped capsules store the deep-frozen bodies of subscribing "patients."

The scene then cuts back to Faloon urging his congregation not to delay in signing up for cryonic preservation. He assures the cost whole body preservation is continuing to come

down. A cheaper version of perpetual life is available for those who opt to freeze their head alone... The pastor emphasizes that the instructions for immediate transfer of the body of a “patient” to the cryonics facility must be made explicit to loved ones. The best hope for future resuscitation is with rapid cryonic preservation before cell deterioration.

“Unfortunately, U.S law does not allow freezing before death,” he says, “not like in China. The Chinese are well beyond us in their cryonic research and experimentation.”

The camera then pulls back to reveal pastor Faloon’s congregation from the rear. Most heads are snowy white and a few shiny bald. None appear to be nodding.



In the final segment, the pastor is shown behind an ornate desk with a backdrop of overflowing bookshelves. The interviewer, off camera, asks if any frozen bodies have ever been successfully resuscitated.

Faloon smiles. “Think of the human embryos that are now routinely thawed and which grow into healthy children!”

When the interviewer suggests that stem cells and embryos are far less susceptible to damage in freezing than mature cells— especially brain tissue cells—Faloon has a ready answer:

“Cryopreservation is an emerging technology which is constantly improving. Research into nanotechnologies will provide techniques in the near future that may seem like science fiction today. Already organs are being grown from stem cells. It’s truly amazing just how far we’ve come in the 25 years since I have been involved in cryonics.”

He speaks more quickly. “I can show you scans of the neuroelectric activity within a pig’s brain that have been thawed and resuscitated. When I see those, I can imagine my own brain, maybe 200 years from now with the blood circulating again— coming back to life. It’s going to be fun!”

“But really,” the interview asks, “with the current technologies, aren’t you selling false hope?”

Fallon knits his fingers and softly smiles. “When I look into our congregation— I see people who don’t want to age and don’t want to die. They are rebelling against that concept... There are countless examples of technologies we take for granted today that were thought impossible 50 years ago. Eventually science will conquer death as we know it— I am convinced of it.”

Folding hands, he rests his case...



After the screen went dark, I shuddered in the image of eyes in reanimated heads jerking open in horror. Definitely, the pursuit of immortality through science and technology is disturbing in a manner in which child-like depictions of heaven are not.

It occurred that the Church of Perpetual Life is just a single sect in the faith that science can conquer death. In another version of immortality through technology, it has been asserted that not only individually-customized hearts, and lungs—but even brains— will eventually be copiable in 3D biological printers. Then there is the hope that in the near future essential features of an individual—including all memory—can be copied and uploaded to the ethereal super-computer ‘cloud’.

Yet does a belief that a self can be copied or restored not contradict even a rudimentary understanding the nature of selfhood? However perfect a copy can be imagined of the exquisite web of neurons that give rise to an individual self-awareness— there remains the paradox that even a perfect ‘copy’ remains a *copy*. A reanimated copy of a brain would no more restore the original person than would an identical twin grown from a stem cell.

In such regard, I was reminded of the concept of ‘*dasein*, being-in-the-world, as understood in cursory engagements with Heidegger. Therein the sense of selfhood, is elusive and ever shifting. It is dependent on time, place and specific embodiment... Any comfort in living on as a restituted consciousness in a super-computer or in a resuscitated brain is equally naïve. While ostensibly based in scientific reasoning, such hopes for surviving death are not much dissimilar from the belief in an afterlife of a disembodied soul...



No doubt discoveries for the potential extension of life expectancy will continue to amaze. Meanwhile, the grossly unequal access to the new technologies will probably continue apace... Yet even those privileged few who may (according to Faloon’s predictions), live to 130, 140 or 150— will still not conquer death.

There is no escaping the biological reality that bodies are born to be discarded for the good of species integrity and the continuation of ecosystems. In a deep-ecological sense: dying is fulfillment of the ‘purpose’ of every living creature

A denial that mortality is a fundamental condition of being-in-the-world— is to deny the human condition. Unfortunately, the facts of the human condition need not deter the business of death denial!

As for the chances of my gambling on a hope of future resuscitation: I would rather imagine my body in the hell depicted by Hieronymus Bosch, than in a cryonic-preservation capsule. I have always dreaded the cold...

2013, October



fwt

The deaf extrovert:

LY, the young deaf man who dropped into my office yesterday, was among the most extroverted persons I have ever met.

Soon to finish classes in the Deaf and Hard of Hearing Department, he was ostensibly inquiring about studying in another program at the college.

Though his interpreter, another young Chinese man, I gave him the standard information about our university preparatory studies while emphasizing that special ‘accommodations’ for a deaf student could be arranged through the counselling department.

As the interpreter signed, LY grinned and vigourously nodded. After my introduction, the mild-mannered interpreter conveyed the deaf student’s initial question:

“I just want to know if you study a lot of Shakespeare and poetry.”

It was a little odd, not addressing who was talking, but I looked directly at LY throughout our exchange while regarding his interpreter as our ‘invisible’ functionary medium.

“Well, literature is part of our content for English practice,” I said. “But mostly it’s short stories. Some poetry. No Shakespeare, I’m afraid.”

When that information was signed, the young deaf man rapidly signed back.

“Is there any study of psychology, philosophy or political science?” conveyed the interpreter.

“Well, some of the readings in our classes do touch upon those areas. But only for the purposes of practicing language skills.” Aware that the interpreter might not be fully fluent in English, I tried to slow down. “Our courses aim to prepare students whose first language is not English for study in university level courses in English.”

When that information was transmitted, LY signed something that his interpreter didn’t quite understand. Looking quizzical, he signed something else. The deaf student quickly signed back.

“I would like to continue studying at this college,” the interpreter said in soft and careful English, “It is easy for travel compared to the university. Too many buses for UBC. With Skytrain— very easy coming here.”

“O yes, I said. “We are lucky to now have a Skytrain station right across from our parking lot. Very convenient!”

When this was interpreted, the deaf student began to sign furiously. The interpreter, more nervous, began to speak:

“We need more Skytrain lines.... We need tunnels all over the city... Like in Beijing, they can also be used for, ah, attack shelters? You know, in the case of bombing... You know we can make— ah, we can build— we can build many big rooms underground. We need that in case of— in case of atomic bombs...”

By that point that LY was rapidly gesticulating and moving his lips with growing excitement. The interpreter was struggling to keep up.

“Hospitals— everything can be underground. In future there can be cities, big cities all underground— even cities under the um, the ocean. Maybe a city on the moon... Maybe in a hundred years. But only— only without atomic bombs... you know, killing all of civilization... Don’t you think so?”

LY leaned forward, chuckling.

“Yes,” I smiled, “A nuclear war would probably destroy most life on the planet. You put it very well.”

When this was interpreted, LY smiled broadly and signed back. The interpreter, by then frowning, conveyed the message.

“I read a lot. I want to study Shakespeare and poetry.”

LY tapped my desk in emphasis and then clasped his hands. He raised eyebrows at his interpreter.

“Yes,” I said, “you certainly seem like a person keenly interested in academic learning.”

“We have to go now, sir.” For the first time the ‘invisible’ interpreter addressed me directly. “At 4:00 PM, we need to be at the Waterfront Station.” He averted his eyes.

“Well, I won’t keep you.” For the first time I directly addressed the interpreter. “You tell L. that I really enjoyed our chat. Tell him to look over the brochure. Come back anytime if you any questions. Our door is always open.”

I came round the desk and extended my hand to LY. “So maybe we’ll see you in January?”

LY signed a brief message.

“Maybe I go to UBC.”

“That would be great,” I said. “All the best with that.”

As they both turned for the door, I touched the forearm of the interpreter. “Thanks for helping. “You did a great job.”

He nodded stiffly.



I sank back in my chair... LY certainly did not need to vocalize to be *loud!*

Meanwhile, his interpreter seemed shy and introverted... In thinking of their odd pairing, there oddly came to mind, an image from *El Topo*, the trippy cult movie of the early 1970s. In one surreal scene, an armless man serves as the steed for a legless gunslinger...

Regarding LY and his interpreter— there was no doubt who was in the saddle...

2010, November

fwt

Raptor at the Airshow:

Through the free tickets C. is given by clients at her work, over the last 3 years I have attended for the first (and last) time an NHL hockey game, CFL football and the Celebration of Light fireworks... This afternoon, I made the most incongruous appearance to date: at the Abbotsford Air Show.

Amid a festival gathering of flying machine enthusiasts on the grassy perimeters of the Abbotsford airport, C. and I wandered past the displays of the biplanes, cargo planes, water-bombers and military aircraft.

We departed before the performance of the acrobatic Canadian Snowbirds but in our brief attendance we witnessed a flyover of an American F16:

The fighter jet screamed above the airfield in a thunderclap that shook the very bowels. Amid the myriad 'oohs' and 'ahs', perhaps I was not the sole dissident horrified by the display of American might. To those of like mind, the high-tech F16 was a chilling manifestation of the evolutionary reach of the reptilian brain...

At the same time, I thought of the impression made by such a monstrous Roc on Afghan villagers upon whom it has often swooped with extended talons... While one may loathe the supposed fanaticism of the rebels, it is difficult not to admit that it takes guts to leap out and fire an AK 47 up at the belly of the Yankee Nazgul. Yet some Afghan lads do just that!

As the high-tech raptor arched back southward to its nest in Washington State, I looked around at a young soldier. He was among the scores in military uniforms milling about the crowd. Whispering to a female counterpart in blue wedge cap, his aviator sunglasses looked incongruous with his peach fuzz mustache. He was no Rambo— no Top Gun. How prepared was he to defend his peaceable Middle Earth, from the threat of Mordor to the south?

It occurred that perhaps something of the passion of '*Allah Akbar!*' was wanting in our military...

2009, August



Of blindness in prediction:



On the morning run down along the Inlet, I thought about the video of ‘*2001: A Space Odyssey*’ (1968) watched last evening. Although seen at least a half dozen times over the decades, Kubrick’s classic has lost none of its capacity to inspire. As always, I was awed by the sublime rendering of the mystery and unbounded potential of evolution...

Yet despite the enduring malevolence of supercomputer, HAL, this time I was distracted by the depiction of the technology of the fictional 2001. Some scenes brought to mind the flying cars of ‘*Popular Science*’ magazines of the 1950s— if not the servant robots of *Jetsons* cartoons of the 1960s...

The Howard Johnson’s restaurant on the orbiting space station, looked commodious enough for a Shriner’s conference. Before that, the comfy shuttle ride to the earth-orbiting Hilton, served by beehive blonde stewardesses, could have been a 1950s ‘*Playboy*’ vision of the future. As for the mining complex on the moon and the manned voyage to Saturn: such undertakings could still be centuries away— if they come to be at all...

Even in the stunning visual of the *2001* space station gently rotating to the background strains of Johann Strauss, I winced in the image of astronauts worming though the *real* International Space Station of 2008. At the same time, teasing practical questions interfered with the suspension of disbelief: *e.g.*: How could the components for the Brobdingnagian craft have been lifted into orbit? Would the construction for such a gargantuan project not have to have been started *before* 1968?

It is interesting that Arthur C. Clarke who co-wrote the ‘*2001*’ script with Kubrick, was regarded as a master of ‘hard science fiction’— the genre in which the fictional depiction of the future is supposedly projected from a solid understanding of the science of the present. So, how could Clarke and Kubrick could have got the space technology of 2001 so wrong?

Actually, on the eve of the Apollo moon landings, there were few who doubted that by 2001 there would be orbiting hotels and an Antarctica-like research station on the moon. Even the possibility of alien civilizations reached by human starships within a century did not seem far-fetched. Science fiction writers with authentic scientific credentials (Clarke, Asimov, Heinlein *et al.*) were widely regarded more as visionaries than spinners of fantasy...

If visionaries are those with the gift of seeing beyond the paradigms of present, then it is curious that Clarke and other writers seemed to share a rather dusty metaphor for space exploration: voyages by *spaceships* that harken to vessels that sailed in the 15th century from Europe to *terra incognita* in the new world. Therein, scientific curiosity is deeply entwined with the spirit of conquest...

Although spaceships are imagined as having captains and crews (bridges, galleys, sickbays etc.) duration of their ‘voyages’ could hardly be compared with those of the wooden ships of yore. ‘Manned’ explorations beyond the solar system would face mind-boggling distances. Just to reach the nearest star system, flying at half the speed of light (a near impossibility) would apparently take 60,000 years! There has been imagined use of ‘warp speed’ and travel through ‘wormholes’—but such speculations do not easily conform with the laws of physics, as presently understood.

In response to the challenge of time/distance scale, vast mechanical ecosystems have been envisioned which could carry a human ‘society’ for eons through deep space. It could be asked whether the idea of artificial self-sustaining environments for carrying human civilization through the cosmos for thousands of years, is any less bizarre than the idea of a permanently self-sustaining space craft for pods of blue whales...

As little as I know of the genre, I certainly do appreciate that some science fiction writers have travelled far beyond this ‘spaceship’ paradigm... Many have explored the future direction of socio-economic and political trends along with the trends of science...

A good example is Vancouver’s own William Gibson, who extends the weirdness of the present— gene manipulation, the cyberworld, corporate globalism, *etc.*—into dystopian visions of the future. While I have found *Neuromancer* (1984) too frenetic for my taste, I well appreciate its popularity.

Of course, it is only fiction that depicts the near— as opposed to the distant— future that can be proven to have gotten it wrong. Along with 2001, one might consider how closely Orwell’s dystopian masterpiece written in 1948 forecasted the state of the world in 1984...

Similarly, we will know which aspects of the dark world depicted in the film ‘*Bladerunner*’ (1982) will come to pass. We already know that the “off world colonies” referred to in the film are very unlikely to be constructed within the next 10 years... Again, I think of the floating cigar-tube that manifests space station achievement to date...

The final image that stuck with me from last night’s viewing of ‘*A Space Odyssey*’ was not the usual one of the apeman at dawn of history, hurling the bone weapon into the air in the triumphant sweep of *Thus Sprach Zarathustra*. It was rather that of the scientist in the lobby of the skyborne Hiltons’ calling his little girl from a Bell video pay phone. Where in hell was his iPhone?

One should neither be surprised nor amused by the impossibility to acutely predict the future. Predictions are always bounded by the historicity of the predictor. What might seem like an obvious unfolding in hindsight is rarely ever unconcealed in the present—even to visionaries.

2008, July



fwl

The latest hostage-taking by insomnia:

Hoped to be a soporific, S. Pinker's *'How the Mind Works,'* was not quite dull enough to have the desired effect. Despite the boldness of the title, the prose and diagrams seemed familiar from Psychology 101 textbooks. In any case, its skimming delayed the spiral down towards REM sleep with questions about how dependent self-awareness is upon the 'software' of language...

Of course, there has to be consciousness without language... When we look into the eyes of our babies and pooches— our intuition deeply affirms such... Still, it is impossible to know at which point awareness rises to *self*-awareness. Is the chimp that seems to recognize himself in the mirror self-aware?

As much as abstract thought seems language dependent, 'language' is a very recent development in the evolutionary scheme... Apparently, the neuronal architecture of cognition was in place eons before the emergence of language in early humanoids (this idea was recently gleaned from *'The Hostage Brain,'* by neuroscientist B. McEwen). Correspondingly, from a neural Darwinist perspective (gathered from G. Edelman *et. al.*) language is an enhancer— but not the root driver of cognition and behavior... By this theory, in the absence of language there is awareness of things in the world – and mental images in the present—but not *self*-awareness.

As for remembering, planning and imagining—are these abilities possible without self-awareness? Can one be aware of wishing and hoping without the words 'wish' and 'hope'?

Surely, abstract thought is only possible through the software of language. To continue with the computer analogy: once booted up into the word-net, the mind refines the laughs, hoots, sighs, growls and barks of the reptilian brain into thought. Or it may just as easily ensnare itself in chimera...



Before sleep, the hostage mind veered in a different direction. I remembered lying in the dark in childhood, trying to imagine the edge of the universe... How could there be an edge to that which was limitless? How could limitlessness be itself conceived?

Similarly, I wondered what was highest number that could ever be counted to— even though there was always a higher number and one higher than that—on and on endlessly!

There were a few nights that I was so scared by such thoughts that I had lull myself to sleep by reciting the lord's prayer...

2005 October

A self-reflecting zombie:

Sleepless at 3:00 AM, I churned over the chilling possibility, as gleaned from a cursory reading of contemporary philosopher Daniel Dennett, that the sense of the uniqueness of one's mind could be illusionary...

As I roughly understand it, this idea arises from the possibility that *qualia*, *i.e.* perceptions that we can describe (*e.g.* my particular experience of the colour 'red' or the taste of beer) may not be unique entities in individual minds... If *qualia* do not exist, then the sense of an impenetrable and unique 'self' (or that which some call a soul) is tenuous...

While this theory is academically interesting—imagining it is truly bizarre... To grasp the theory in its import, one almost needs to feel *in the moment* something of the shifting neurochemistry of the consciousness as it grapples to understand itself.

At the same time, one must accept that the self which is wrestling with these questions is only distinguishable from other 'selves' by the locus of its neurochemistry of perception, feeling, thought and memory. Moreover, none of those components that are usually considered as constituting a self are necessarily unique in themselves...

With such an understanding of mind, one cannot discount the theoretical possibility that one's mind could be precisely replicated. Indeed, computer programs are apparently, edging ever closer to replicating the 'data' by which individuals can be identified... Tastes and preferences— even political and religious beliefs—will soon be precisely replicable in a computer 'mind.' If memories should become transferable to a computer (or android) which is also capable of precisely mimicking the speech of the person from whom the memories are copied— what is to distinguish the copy from the original?

What form of self-reference could a copied mind possibly use? Would the applicable pronoun be 'I', 'they', it or 'this'? (*e.g.*, If appropriately aroused, *this* can hope, fear, lust or wonder...)

Such possibility seems to turn on its head the old 'philosophical zombie' thought experiment. Imagining oneself alone in a world of zombies who trick one into believing that they are self-conscious beings is not nearly as unnerving as imagining *oneself* a zombie!



Whatever neurological science reveals about the bizarre nature of mind, it seems impossible to escape the Cartesian ‘illusion’ of a non-physical self, experiencing an external physical world. That very notion brought to mind an odd fantasy of childhood:

In absently walking along, I would sometimes imagine that my tongue, perched in the cockpit of the mouth, was a homunculus ‘driver’ of a body-machine...

Yet even as the homunculus whispered commands to the body-machine, it scared itself in the thought that the homunculus was itself a body machine within the tongue. Within that miniscule body machine there existed, in turn, a proportionally more miniscule homunculus whispering operating instructions. Within that was an even more miniscule tongue—and within that, an even tinier body-machine and driver tongue. All drivers were nested *ad infinitum* inside one another like matryoshka dolls...

This memory served to remind the middle-aged ‘zombie’ of why at the age of 11 or thereabouts ‘it’ was scared of the dark.

2005, *January*

fwt

A peek at the beating heart:

It felt strangely intimate this morning to be lying in a chilly darkened room with a young female technician standing beside me. Her wrists protruding from the long sleeves of a wool jacket looked delicate. With one hand, she tapped a computer keyboard while her other briefly tugged her brown ponytail. On the monitor screen she manipulated an ultrasound image of my heart.

As greyish images blurred into focus on her screen, the flicker of sensuality gave way to a queasy vulnerability. Those were my own pulsing ventricles! Every instant of my awareness depends upon the involuntary pulsing of the valves of that organ. No matter how desperate one's peril— even with a noose around the neck or a gun barrel in the mouth—this organ still blindly pumps lifeblood to the brain. From its emergence from an embryonic bulge— for 54 years that organ has performed unceasingly. Where lies its blind will?



In the wonder of that apprehension, I was reminded of the 'X-ray' chapter of Thomas Mann's magisterial *'Magic Mountain'* in which the young Hans Castorp stares in awe at the images of his own skeleton.

"I think we've got enough," said the young woman, breaking the silence. She pulled the electrodes from my arm, legs and chest.

"Does the mitral value look OK?"

"I'm not a cardiologist." she said, handing me the facecloth to wipe off the gel. "You'll get a report from your doctor... I *can* say," she smiled, "If there was something of immediate concern, we'd be keeping you here."

Buttoning my shirt, I reminded myself that this woman was certainly young enough to be my daughter. Yet oddly, I thought of Bertrand Russell. Into his 90s, he apparently charmed young female interviewers. Why should it be unseemly that even a 90-year-old heart can flutter in the presence of female beauty?

"Thank you," I smiled back warmly.

2004, January

Of the eagle and the higher unoccupied niches:



This afternoon, I pedaled the nearly 30 kms. loop around the Poco trail. Starting eastwards from the Coquitlam River, the trail passes through Port Coquitlam to the Pitt River dikes; south to the Fraser River and then back north to the Coquitlam River through the fields of Colony Farm.

My only stop was at a pier on the Pitt River, where a bald eagle perched on a piling 20 metres offshore. Whatever the degree of the eagle's sentience, I felt a presence more complex than one hard-wired on a food-sex loop— a presence that seemed involved and interacting in mutual being...

As I watched, a passenger jet ascended through the cloudless blue, eastwards up the Fraser Valley... In reaction to the sound of the jet engines, the eagle's majestic head turned slightly upwards and its tail feathers ruffled.

Was he aware of some mysterious creature passing faster and higher than he can fly? He certainly seemed to be warily observing a powerful creature thundering high above, hunting prey beyond the reach of his kind...

I looked back up at the jet's plume, hanging like a dissolving band of cirrus. Might there be a vacant niche, higher than the eagle's— higher than any bird can fly? I remembered a PBS nature documentary on the highest-flying birds. Apparently, some species of vultures, cranes and geese which fly over the Himalayas touching the uppermost edge of the troposphere...

I also thought of a recently read passage from Richard Dawkins, in which the celebrated Darwinist gave an example of the lower edge of the stratosphere as a "theoretically vacant biological niche". He imagined a creature which *might* have evolved to occupy it: a vast diaphanous floating jellyfish of the jet stream, sieving microscopic organisms from the rarified air...

Before getting back on the bike I gave a salute to the eagle. Though the sound of the plane and even the plume behind it had disappeared, he was still cocking his head upwards... For him, it seemed the human-altered world was far less of interest than potential threats from high above.

2003, August

