

A Few Clearings #2

Before poking around with a broomstick:

5 minutes though the door from the last shift, I leaned over the kitchen counter and roughly twisted off the plastic cap on the bottle of Pellegrino mineral water. It jumped out of my hand.

“Shit!”

In dropping down to grab for it, it struck me that every second taken to recover it will be a quantifiable fraction of time shaved off my shrinking allotment... However infinitesimal a few seconds might be in a lifetime, their duration will be undeniably added to the choking immensity of time wasted, both willful and blind, in distraction from the essential curiosity of being...

Whether fretting for things lost and things to be fixed; whether rooting through internet muck or straining after a bouncing bottle cap — the final moment of awareness could well be a gagging whirl of the squandered opportunities set against fleeting glimpses of unconcealment...

My clumsy swipe failed to stop it from rolling under the fridge. How much more time will be wasted poking around with the broomstick?

2003, April



In missing the gold rush:

On the drive back from Superstore, I asked 11-year-old MH about his Social Studies project. He was making a list, along with drawings and written descriptions, of the supplies a fur trader would probably stock up on before heading back into the wilderness from a Hudson's Bay trading post.

I commented that the life of a fur trader in the north woods would have been awfully bleak. I said that heading off to a gold rush— although a bigger gamble— would have been a lot more attractive for a younger man in that era.

“So, if you were a fur trader in the northwest territories,” asked my thoughtful son, “would you have gone off to the California gold rush?”

“Good question, M. I guess it would depend how old I was and if I were still single...” I paused, tapping the wheel. “You know, honey. You could ask a similar question about career paths today. Would you stick with a dreary job just because it's secure? Would you be happier as a struggling artist or an ESL teacher with a pension? Well, how about you: would you have struck around Fort Langley if you knew there was a gold rush in California?”

“I'd have gone to the gold rush,” my son said, “because you only live once.”

Assuming a teachable moment, I ranted on. “Yes! We have this one quick pass between two black eternities. You'll be old before you know it. Failing to seize your best opportunities— ending up bitter for being too timid— that's the worst a person can do!”

“Yeah.”

“Of course,” I added, “Being erratic and jumping from one thing to another is the opposite extreme— and another sure pathway to unhappiness.”

“Uhhuh.”

“I just hope you kids will be bolder and more self-confident than I ever was in challenging yourselves.”

“For sure, dad. Stop sign coming up!”

“I see it.”

In a tingle of embarrassment, it occurred that in the practical realm of the here and now, MH was already guiding an aging father whose thoughts were given to stray...

2003, February



Of constraint behind the fourth wall:

“Can you describe a toy that meant a lot to you when you were a child?”

In adherence to the IELTS script, the middle-aged Korean lady candidate who introduced herself as a Buddhist missionary was given her topic for the monologue section of her speaking test.

“You have 2 minutes to prepare,” I said robotically. “You may make notes.”

She touched her glasses and gave a soft smile. While she wrote a few words on the scratch paper, I glanced between the timer and her jacket of brocaded red silk...

With the faint beep of the timer, she folded delicate hands.

“You may begin,” I signalled.

“When I grew up, I was poor,” she said. “I didn’t have many toys to play with. But my mother, my mother made me ah, um, box.” Sniffling, she stopped up.

Eyes on the assessment criteria grid, I motioned for her to go on.

“It wasn’t made very well; it wasn’t really beautiful— but it was made with love.” Her voice began to waver. “I loved that box very much...”

For the remaining 30 seconds of her allotted time, she silently dabbed tears from her cheek.

“Thank you,” I nodded to the stop-clock, “Now let’s move on.” I observed the 10 second pause before the designated follow up question. “Now, how do you think mementoes like the one you just described can enrich our lives?”

In a manner probably befitting a good Buddhist missionary, she composed herself and carried on.

“Well, I think it is good to keep some things— little things— from the childhood. Later, you can maybe show to your children. It’s like a piece of the history, you know, the family history for your children...”

Her polite smile suggested her grasp of the strangeness of the situation. In the assessment of her fluency, lexical resource, grammatical accuracy and pronunciation in the English tongue, she did not expect being reminded of her departed mother...

As for the robotic assessor whose script accidentally triggered her sacred memory: he was also touched by the irony of constraint behind the fourth wall...

2003, January



An act of affirmation?

With the cheque in the mail to the Pension Corporation, I had mixed feelings. Walking back from the postal outlet in the mall, I was taunted by the argument as to why a buyback of unused pensionable time, was *not* a good investment. Yet my reluctance to gamble my meagre savings in the college pension plan had nothing to do with its modest prospects for growth compared with mutual funds. The difficult decision was rather based on the simple question: what are my odds of living to retirement?

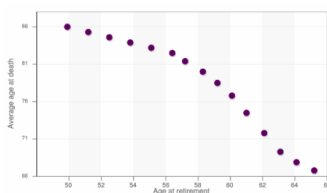
The doubt of that has been growing over these last three years. While I cherish the company of my fledglings, the nights alone get colder. Even in weekends off the work-commute treadmill, I am losing the capacity for simple pleasures. Travel still attracts, but with savings depleted from the divorce— the only foreseeable escapes will continue to be through the pages of the *Lonely Planet*.

Regarding other attempts at diversion: too often of late I have wandered into a video store, a liquor store— even a bookshop— and have come out empty handed. Food and drink that I used to relish no longer appeals. Songs once cherished have lost their charm. It sometimes seems that as the body ages there is a growing weariness with repetition itself... Having swallowed, absorbed and excreted morsels of this world like an earthworm in its passage— one grows tired after a half century of the same old dirt...

So, in the face of such nihilistic gloom, can I not regard the pension buyback as a defiant act of affirmation? Even if I never cash a single pension cheque, from now onwards, I know that I have made a gamble on making it to 65. I am gambling on the prospect of finding new soil—even on the hope of rediscovering intimacy...

Crossing Lincoln Ave. onto Pipeline, I shivered in a tiny surge of excitement...

2002, November



Illusion of contentment:

The anxiety of the past weeks has finally broken like a fever. Alone last night in the new apartment cleaning up and shifting some boxes— I felt eerily calm. I was a renter again, liberated from a heavy mortgage... If there is need for a plumber, an electrician, a handyman—that is a landlord's problem. It's no longer mine...

Sitting back at the one of the three chairs (a table still to be obtained from 'Buy and Sell') I thought of the recent TV news item. It was in the segment usually devoted to such stories as the rescue of a crippled dog and its rehabilitation with prosthetically attached hind wheels... This particular 'human interest' story involved a working poor couple who were selected for a low-interest mortgage for a unit in a low-income housing development... The couple were shown receiving a bouquet along with their keys.

"I never thought I would live under my own roof," said the husband. The wife alongside nodded and dabbed her eyes, "this is a dream come true!"

How curious, I thought in watching the groveling display: how curious that their dream was effectively my nightmare!

I took out my new apartment key and turned it over. I needed to ask the landlord for permission to make copies for the kids. In squeezing it, I wondered whether my unease in owning a home might only be typical of those not at ease in their own skins...

With a tsk, I dismissed that taunting thought and settled on the possibility that the feeling of ownership as a burden, tends to increase as one ages... After all, at some level, every possession is borrowed or 'rented'. One's very body is ultimately on short term loan. At some point, the body will become hazardous waste to be disposed of in accordance with public health protocols... So, all ownership is ultimately an illusion!

I then recalled 'The Secret Life of Dust', recently borrowed from the library. In it the author (H. Holmes) proposes that the body should be regarded as "temporarily borrowed elements" brought together for a cosmic instant in a "volatile and unstable organic organization" which gives rise to the utterly improbable (and miraculous) phenomenon of self-consciousness. In a somewhat Buddhist manner, she gently chides the vanity of living for the accumulation of things. She suggests that one ought to take comfort that one's body— like all matter on the planet— will eventually disintegrate into the star dust from whence it came...

With a long sigh I rose to continue the unpacking. While I could have done with a smaller apartment, of course, I need to make it pleasant enough for the kids. I can only hope they will not be uncomfortable in spending as much time here as at the house now solely in my ex-wife's name...

I looked out the curtainless window onto Pipeline Drive. Try as I might to justify the 'escape' from (appropriately named) Tory Ave., the fact remains that I have signed over most of my share of what was jointly owned. Meanwhile, lawyers remain to be paid. In middle age, I am starting over...

Regarding illusions— it may be merciful that the mind has the capacity to insulate itself with an illusion of contentment...

2002, May



fwt

In flight from Seoul to Bangkok:

At takeoff from Incheon airport, I held the photo of my 3 kids. It was taken from the shore of Jumeriah beach in Dubai 3 years ago. A 7-year-old MH crouches in front of his two older sisters. Both girls, with masks and snorkels pushed up on foreheads, are grinning.

There could be no better image to hold in mind should the plane crash...

When the seat-belt light pinged off, I blinked gratitude then slipped the photo back into my carry-on bag. I looked around. From my aisle seat on the left side of mid-cabin, it appeared that I was the single non-Asian on board. Many of passengers sported green-ribboned buttons of some tour group. Few looked under 70. At 50, was I one of the youngest passengers in the flight?

That thought was accompanied by a twinge of guilt. Very few men my age would blow a big chunk of savings on international travel. At the very least, I might have registered for some English teaching conference in Southeast Asia. Even a few days of token attendance would have been enough to justify the remainder of the exotic vacation...

I did have the excuse that most of the expense of my 'temple tour' would be covered by the weekend test marking over the last couple of years. Of course, the primary justification is getting a refresh before the final stage of divorce negotiations. Why leave my meagre savings intact for rapacious lawyers?

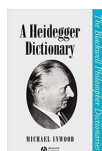
Still, I didn't have to vacation alone. I could have taken the fledglings on a March break trip to Disneyland... There was no denying it— I was selfish!

Craning around heads with earphones or bent to magazines, I glimpsed the scudding clouds at 13,000 metres... Every second was taking me further away from my kids. I was already half a world distant... I thought of how just 2 nights ago, both 10-year-old MH and 15-year-old TE were camped out on an air mattress beside my sofa-bed.

"Will you be safe?" asked TE when I showed her my hop-scotching itinerary of the cheapest booking available.

We have grown especially close over the last several months since I began helping her on her AP English assignments. I thought of the night last fall when we were talking about her poetry assignment on Emily Dickenson. I had mentioned how Dickenson had known little acclaim in her lifetime since much of her poetry was only discovered after her death.

"What usually happens to someone's writing after they die?" my daughter asked.



From the zippered pocket of my carry on, I pulled out the text chosen for slow reading on the grueling 36-hour journey: '*A Heidegger Dictionary*' by an Oxford professor of philosophy,

Michael Inwood. Pulling down the meal-tray, I took a few notes on the entry for ‘death and dying’:

As far as I could make out: as one’s life advances, ‘dying’ is the narrowing of possibilities that are open to *dasein*, being-in-the-world. Those possibilities ultimately converge on a single possibility— at which point they vanish altogether... It is this vanishing which “reduces each individual to his own uttermost individuality”. One may experience up to the instant of that vanishing (‘dying’), but one cannot experience ‘death’...

I further absorbed that ‘inauthentic’ attitudes to death include denying it, fearing it, dwelling on it or forgetting it. One ought to nurture an ‘authentic’ attitude: cherishing ongoing creative engagements while staying attuned to the exigencies of ever-shrinking limits...

I turned over the text and closed eyes to better engage the idea. Given my circumstances, is the attempt to seize the last opportunity for exotic travel before penury or decrepitude not a “creative engagement within the awareness of ever-shrinking limits”?

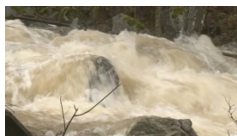
Suddenly there was a bump and the seatbelt light pinged back on... In staccato bounces of turbulence, I pushed up the tray and slipped the text back into the bag at my feet.

From the smaller zippered compartment, I pulled out the photo again. Face up on my lap, I held it like a talisman...

2002, March (SE Asia, in transit)

fwt

A question from the turbulent deep:



Arthritic old Nikki sniffed her way to the edge of the Coquitlam River, swollen by a week of heavy rain.

“You’d better get her back on the leash, I warned TE a few steps behind our muddy slog back from Crystal Falls. “If she fell in, she could get swept away.”

“I’d save her,” said my 14-year-old. “Here, Nikki!”

The old mutt hobbled back towards TE, who clasped her back onto the leash. We then walked silently along, pausing as Nikki sniffed trees. As the trail wound further from the bank, the roar of the river faded.

“T.,” I said, “You saw how strong that current is. You surely wouldn’t *really* have jumped in after Nikki.”

She hesitated, half smiling. “I love her. Why wouldn’t I?”

“Look, honey. You must have heard the stories of people who drown or fall off cliffs trying to save their pets. Both the pet and the master usually die. It’s such a tragic waste of as human life. Don’t you agree?”

TE held the leash in both hands, looking down at the new fallen leaves.

“T.?”

“Would you save me if I fell into the river?” she asked.

Carefully, I chose my words. “Well honey, I just hope I would not even think about it and would just automatically jump in... There would be a chance to save you. Anyway, I would far rather drown than live with unbearable guilt.”

My middle daughter gave her mysterious introvert’s smile...

2001, October



Consumer guilt:

“I just hate to be part of this,” I edged the cart forward in the checkout line up, “Every time we come here, we buy crap we don’t need.”

By the time I pissed off my elder daughter by refusing to buy her the video of *‘Empire Records’*, the Friday afternoon trip to Costco—one of the few remaining outings of late—had already plunged into gloom. It started in the TV aisle. Was I a sufficiently educated consumer on the differences between plasma VS liquid crystal models? Even if I could afford one, would a bigger or flatter screen make me any happier?

Perhaps it is some deeper restlessness than only the onset of middle age by which the appetite for consumption has turned almost to a nausea. What do I desire that can be obtained with money? Not clothes, furniture, stereo equipment or clothes. Not gourmet food or fancy drinks, videos or CDs—not even books. A better word processor or a tropical vacation? Maybe. But even with unlimited means to feed insatiable desire, one is still limited by a single mouth and anus... In living only to consume, what impact will one leave on the world at the end of days, besides the non-biodegradables of landfills?

“You come here, every week,” scoffed my 15-year-old daughter, “you’re the same as everyone else.”

“You’re right, honey,” I sighed. “I’m just like any one of the undead, gathering at the mall in *‘Dawn of the Dead.’*”

I glanced into our cart. But the way, do we need toilet paper?”

2000, October



A glimpse under the northern sea:

The only sensual pleasure that possibly exceeds joyful sex is that of snorkelling over a warm water coral reef. For the previous 2 years, I snorkelled almost weekly off the beaches of Dubai. I even took a few PADI open water dives: in the Arabian Gulf, in the Andaman Sea and lastly in the Bali Sea. Now without prospect of visiting the tropics for the foreseeable future, what consolation might there be in snorkelling in the icy Strait of Georgia?

In a gamble, I bought a wetsuit from Costco... Even with the 5 mm neoprene thickness designed by winter cold water diving, I waited for a hot day to try it out. Yesterday afternoon in the blaze of a high solstice sun at Whytecliff Park, West Vancouver, I contorted into the new suit, donned mask and snorkel, then gingerly waded into Horseshoe Bay. Against the wake from the ferry terminal in the next cove, I bobbed backwards and pulled on my fins. The second skin seemed to fit as snug as the hide of a dolphin.

While MT waited on the rocks, I began paddling around. The only iciness felt was on the feet in strapping on the fins and on the face, when adjusting the mask... The first views underwater were disappointing: only of dull browns and greens amid the murk of the summer plankton bloom. Yet within 15 minutes of kicking back and forth between the rocks there came a shock: twitching whiskers not 2 metres away.

I was face to face with a seal!

Hearing my yelp through the mask, I twisted round and bumped straight into a clam-encrusted rock, scraping my forehead. Chuffing jets of water through the snorkel, I kicked off the rock. Within a few seconds I glimpsed another seal nosing in my direction. Had I bumped amid a herd? I kicked harder, loathing the anticipation of the touch of a clammy hide— no less loathsome than the brush of a rat's fur.

I flipped back towards the shore in the thought in all my finning through the brimming life of a of tropical reefs, I had never felt such fear of the unknown that struck in this first full immersion under the icy northern sea. The verdict was certain: the cold-water wetsuit purchase was a bad gamble.

2000, June



Torments of the flesh:

With the boxes of stored books unpacked and shelved, I am pleased with the semblance of order in my reclaimed basement ‘office’. It is particularly satisfying to finally display a few of the souvenirs brought back from Southeast Asia.

Pinned directly over my desk is a water-buffalo hide hanging purchased last January in Nakon Si Thammarat, a Thai city known for its leatherwork. In shadow puppet form, the hanging depicts Hanuman, the monkey god, in the Thai version of the Hindu epic *Ramayana*. Hanuman’s red lips and teeth seem to sneer with his godly privilege of enjoying innumerable *Asparas* and human maidens.

On the wall to my right is a Balinese Hanuman, painted on a canvas scroll. It was purchased at the guest house in Lake Batur in June, on the journey back from Dubai. In this more luridly rendered depiction, Hanuman is ravishing a mermaid whose tail is sensuously curled...

At my back I have pinned up three small Balinese shadow puppets: of Rama, his wife Sita and her abductor, Ravanna. Above them, is a Thai parchment with a charcoal etching of svelte-hipped *Apsaras* playing flutes.



Surrounded by these images of other-worldly femininity, I was reminded this morning of an odd conversation with my Igbo friend, C.I. in northern Nigeria more than 20 years ago. C.I. spoke of his attraction for Indian actresses in the Bollywood movies which at that time were far better known to Nigerian audiences than western movies. Many of those old movies enacted stories from the *Ramayana*.

In an aside, C. asked if I was aware that those same beautiful actresses had neither genitalia nor lower body orifices.

“You can’t really mean that, man,” I laughed. “They are human beings!”

‘But they look like goddesses,’ he said, ‘How could they have the primitive sex parts of ordinary people?’

As bizarre as that sounded, I acknowledged a certain logic— albeit, figurative. I was still young enough to remember my own first encounters with female anatomy...



Perhaps as with many late adolescents in sexual fumbblings— there was a certain strangeness for which I had been unprepared. The tentative explorations might just as well have encountered mysterious creatures of the tide pool—sea anemones or trilobites... It was not that I was ignorant of anatomy— it was just the unfamiliarity with the raw specifics. The fount of desire seemed so initially alien to perfumed hair or soulful eyes. Most strange was the realization that organs evolved millions of years ago were exactly the same for all human females— whether princess or peasant girl. Still, it was a realization that deepened arousal...

At the same time, male genitalia seemed no less *arbitrary* in form and function. The dangling bits did not at all seem to fit with the Michelangelo renderings of the human form divine... Neither male nor female genitalia looked even remotely like anything an all-knowing creator would 'design'.

That perception, fortunately, did not smother any of the adolescent longing for 'romance'. Yet the certain messiness in the functions of biology was taken as evidence of a *godless* universe... Years later, I assumed it must have been a similar sense of the coarseness of bodies that my young Nigerian friend— a Christian— was groping to understand...

I looked away from the softly smiling *Asparas* and down at my desk. Might these images be distracting? On the verge of separation and possible celibacy of indeterminate duration— *Asparas* will be especially taunting...

1999, September



Oblivious of haste:

"You're getting like an old man," taunted my wife when I declined to accompany her to her friend's party last week. "You just want to sit at home."

I took up her challenge. When she went to a party —I loaded the Ford Explorer with the ice-chest and 3 sleeping bags. Accompanied by MH and TE (at first reluctant to leave the TV) I drove south on the Abu Dhabi highway to Jebel Ali. I turned off the side road to the Hard Rock Café, the biggest draw of traffic between Dubai and Abu Dhabi. We took a left turn following tire tracks towards the beach. A few hundred metres on, we parked on the edge of whitish dunes.

We walked down to the shoreline, picking our way through dirty Styrofoam and bottle shards. I barely had stomach to swish a finger in the salt water— let alone take off my sandals and wade in amid what appeared to be bits of toilet paper.

Still, TE and 6-year-old MH played tag along the shore, enjoying the novelty of an evening away from the Cartoon Network. As the sky darkened, we walked back to the SUV and had our snacks and drinks. We could not hear the waves from behind the bluff, but we felt cozily secluded. After eating, we pulled down the back seat to lay out the sleeping bags. Dark came a couple of hours before the usual bedtime, but the kids soon feel asleep.

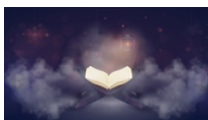


After a fitful night, I zipped up my jacket and stepped outside in the chilly pre-dawn. Fine dust hung like fog and there was salty dew on the windshield. Stepping back into the car, I started the engine. With the kids still sleeping behind, I switched on the high beams and bumped along the sandy track towards the turn off road. Switching on the radio to the station that plays pop music through the day, I was surprised to hear an early morning Koranic recitation in English. With the headlights joggling through the yellowish fog along the desert track, the verses were mesmerizing:

" Read in the name of your Lord who created— created man from a clot of blood..."

Driving towards the yellow lights of the Jebel Ali port, I turned from the roundabout north onto the divided lane of the Abu Dhabi Highway.

Suddenly, there came a blue flash from the opposite shoulder. I braked and slowly steered around the cop car and ambulance that were drawn up beside a Land Cruiser upside down, headlights still glowing... Another fatality? In a shiver, I remembered the *surah*, heard minutes before: *'Man was created of haste. I will show you my signs, so do not impatiently urge me!'*



Having broken through the inertia, I was eager for another overnight getaway. With the kids equally game, on Thursday afternoon (the ‘Saturday’ of the Dubai weekend) we drove to Fujairah Emirate and then north towards Musandam Peninsula. At Dibba Bay, almost on the Omani border, we turned off the beach road and bounced a couple of hundred metres along a wadi track. Secluded by massive boulders at the end of a ravine, we still commanded a view of the Arabian Gulf below.

After consuming our boxes of Kentucky Fried (with no intention to toss the garbage, as do many Emiratis), we walked down to the beach in the orange glow of late afternoon.

On the rocky hill at the far end of the beach there was a thick thorn tree, as rare in this landscape as conifers in the Arctic tundra. More surprising was the old man in red-checked Omani headdress sitting cross-legged under it. He ignored us. TE and MH went down to the shore and skipped rocks into the water. I stood listening of the waves lapping in the waning light.

Even in deepening silhouette, the old man did not move. He could well have been a Sufi in meditation. Watching him, for the barest moment I felt oblivious to haste...

1998, April (Dubai)

