

Striving #1

The first of 12 steps?

As soon as T. picked me up from the parking lot, I gave her the bad news— budget cuts and layoffs are expected on April 1st. As usual, she asked if I would have a better chance to keep a job if I had higher qualifications. As usual, I told her that in a union workplace— only seniority rules...

As usual, we drove in silence. Looking grimly at the clunking wipers, I reached my hand into the backseat to hold the hand of 8-month-old MH, strapped in his safely seat.

However gloomy the mood, we stopped off at Costco for groceries before driving home.

For nearly ten minutes T. circled the parking lot before finding a tight space— beating by a half second a rival who eyed it from the opposite direction. While T. jiggled baby MH in his red snowsuit, I wandered through the rows of cars looking for a cart. Again, just as a rival headed towards it, I grabbed the handle still warm from the hot hands of a fellow shopper. Following my wife holding the baby, I rammed the cart through the slush. Pushing into the shopper traffic jam at the warehouse entrance— I made this interior resolution:

'Yes, I once assumed that I was above scrambling amid the hordes. I once believed material security was available without extraordinary effort... Yet there has finally come a rude awakening from that delusion. The shock of it may be similar to W.S. Burroughs' "awakening" from heroin addiction at this same age of 41 ...'

However dangerously late, there may yet be time to save my children from the worst of my folly. The falling away of the scales, is just the first stage towards potential recovery...'

Only as we passed inside the portals did I unclench my teeth.

1993, January



Believing against the odds:

Rarely is a moral lesson repeated in the same form. Yet a very similar lesson came almost a year to the day from the first.

Last year in game #6 of the World Series, the Toronto Blue Jays were 2-3 behind the Atlanta Braves after a nail-biting extra inning. Unable to watch what was expected to be the game's bitter end, I switched off the TV and went to bed. I consoled myself that getting an early start on Word Processing in the morning was all that really mattered.

Unable to sleep, within a half hour I came back downstairs to grimly confirm the expected outcome. In turning on the TV, I was shocked to see champagne spraying in the Blue Jays' locker room. By being faint of heart, I had missed the storybook triumph of the team I had rooted for since summer. I was chastened...

This year, I was again on the Blue Jays' post-season bandwagon. Again, I often found myself on the edge of the sofa, superstitious of jinxing their games.

Last evening, also in game #6, the Blue Jays were behind the Philadelphia Phillies going into the bottom of the 9th inning. Yet I did not despair. By hanging on, I saw in real-time, the magical home run by which the World Series was decided. Watching Joe Carter dancing around the field—*homo exultans* under the exploding fireworks—I was humbled by the mythic power of belief against the odds...

1993, October



15 seconds at the red light:

At the red light on Lougheed and Kensington on the way to work tonight, my heart sank in the prospect of the impending slog through a 6-hour class. At the same moment, there crept forth a devastating thought:

It occurred that there is really one fundamental choice one ought to make early in life: that is whether or not to strive for something beyond the self... That striving—whether one is religious or not—is essentially a bid for immortality. The hope that one's works could endure beyond one's oblivion can sustain almost any heart. The possibility of failure is still endurable so long as one can truly believe that one has *tried*...

Alternatively, one might choose to live largely for pleasure... Even when the capacity for pleasure begins to diminish (whether before or after boredom sets in) one might still have the consolation of juicy memories...

It occurred that the worst one could do was to shirk from either choice. By such—whether through timidity or fear of failure—one would be left at end of days with *nothing* to console...

As the light turned green, I tightened stomach. In 6 ½ hours, there would come the relief of surviving another Low Beginners' night...

1994, March



A prayer wheel, turning:

With T. in bed early, after telling the girls' a "dark story" I had the rare opportunity to listen in the dark while MT mumbled her prayers...

"God bless *Sekuru, Ambuya, Nana and Papa*," she began, ensuring equality to both sides of her family. Then after listing cousins, she said: "Please make auntie K.'s cancer get better; make Andrew's brain get better and make mamma get a job."

Again, she balanced her prayer for the wellness of her Canadian aunt with one for a cousin in Zimbabwe... Deeply touched by my 9-year-old's sensitivity, I was still struck that the mysterious being to whom she addressed her prayers was no less (or no more) real to her than the blue genie in '*Aladdin*'...

Crouched beside MT's bunkbed, I wondered how many other prayers at that same instant were being cast into the void? Throughout humanity— how many candles were being lit, beads fingered, prayer wheels turned?

The imagined roar of that vast ocean of hope, fear and anguish— was deafening...

1995, January



A moment in the spotlight:

While T. stayed home with little MH, TE and I walked down to the auditorium of Forest Grove Elementary to watch her older sister's Grade Three class production of '*Oliver*'.

MT was 1 of 10 'narrators' thrust to the far left of the stage. She scanned the audience anxiously and then smiled when she saw TE, 5 rows back squirming on my knee...

Her time in the yellow spotlight was barely 10 seconds—but she performed her 3 lines perfectly without a hint of nervousness. So, what if the little Oliver, Nancy, the Artful Dodger and Fagin had much larger roles than that assigned to my beautiful girl? What mattered was her enthusiasm...

May she continue to perform her roles with such grace and humility—and blessedly free of an inherited self-consciousness.

Like all parents, I waved and even took a few snapshots over the bobbing heads... Yet I could not quite forget how enthusiastically she had rehearsed for the part of Oliver and how upset she was not to be chosen...

1995, April



Of satisfying work:

Sweating from mid-morning into mid-afternoon, I took apart the eyesore beneath the backyard fence.

The rotting structure in the narrow strip of our backyard has been a constant irritant since first moving in last fall. Whether the platform was built as an unattached deck or a platform for a hot tub never installed—its removal should have been set in the purchase agreement. In fact, every glance out the kitchen window is a reminder of that mistake.

So on this first balmy day of spring, I pried loose the rotten boards with a zeal almost borne of vengeance. Having seldom used a crowbar, I was surprised at just how satisfying was its heft and rhythm. Even with the ricocheting rusty nails, it seemed the perfect tool for the job. I was reminded just how difficult it was to take apart a mouse-infested Value-village sofa a few years ago. With a crowbar, I wouldn't have torn my thumb on a jagged corner.

'Two Tramps in Mud Time' by Robert Frost then came to mind. In his ageless poem, Frost describes his satisfaction in splitting firewood until he is interrupted by a passing tramp who offers to finish the job. As a man of letters for whom physical labour is a pleasure rather than a necessity, the poet momentarily feels awkward and guilty in denying the hungry tramp a little paid work. . . .

Similarly, for a moment I felt a little reckless in one-handedly wielding the crowbar. But then—rather like in the Frost poem—doubt evaporated in the sheer pleasure of the exercise. How rarely, it occurred—how rarely even a glimmer of such satisfaction comes to teaching—let alone to writing. How lucky are those who feel an expertise in whatever tools they wield...

Finally, with the grey planks piled up (with the help of 9-year-old TE) and the bare ground exposed, there was the anticipation of T.'s gladness in seeing that a tiny space has been cleared for her to plant a tiny backyard garden...

1997, April



Of the Hanged Man:

"You can't ever make a decision!" scoffed my wife from the other side of the bed.

"Please," I weakly protested, "I just need to do more research."

In truth, I was dithering. With just a few days left before the deadline for either accepting a doctoral studies opportunity or an offer to teach English in Dubai, I am still sitting on hands.

Regarding the Dubai offer, I should be going through the terms of employment contract with a magnifying glass. Considering even a few of the wrinkles (e.g. loss of health care and pension contributions) the enticement of a tax free salary is probably fool's gold... Although T. wants to go along with the kids (her chance to visit Zimbabwe), that would require uprooting them again after only 8 months in a new neighbourhood. Then there would be the prospect of renting out the house to keep up the mortgage payments. It all seems so daunting!

As for the doctoral studies option: am I really up to 3 years of combining half time teaching with full time studies? Could I possibly summon the discipline for devoting every spare hour to meeting deadlines? I shudder in the prospect of driving in the rain up to the university already groggy from several rounds in front of a Beginners' class... Meanwhile, little MH, who wants a dad to take him to sports' practices, would come know me only as the baldhead grumpy not to be disturbed when rarely home... Still, there would be no harm, in arranging a meeting with the prospective advisor. I could get a sense of compatibility. Maybe I could even get excited....



I did take out a library book on the history of the United Arab Emirates but it remained untouched on the bedside table along with Northrup Frye's '*Educated Imagination*'. Instead, I read the latest *National Geographic*.' The article on the python-researcher in Cameroons— shown caked in mud and sweat pulling at the fat coils around his neck— seemed especially appropriate...

Yet before sleep, I turned to a source of inspiration that I hadn't drawn on in over a decade... Out from the blue trunk in the bedroom closet, I pulled my old Angel Tarot pack. I bought it in Foyle's bookstore in passing through London in August, 1983. Many nights thereafter back in Zimbabwe, I pored over the images of the Major Arcana. I was especially intrigued by the image of the Tower—the figure toppling down headlong after the striking of a lightning bolt. That represented the life-altering change that I so desired at the time. It later did not seem coincidental that those were my final months of bachelorhood...



Last night, I had to look at the worn little instruction booklet to remember how to do a simple 10 card spread... When I was ready—I shuffled the 22 face cards and laid them out in the old pattern... Eerie it was that the first card turned over was that of the Hanged Man!

1997, April

Of the Tower:

Our next-door neighbour, a gruff barber, had only recently begun warming to us. Seeing him hosing down his driveway yesterday afternoon, I thought it opportune to break the news.

“O, by the way, G., we’re going to be moving out at the end of the month. I’m going to be working overseas for a couple of years. We’ve got a renter coming in with his family.”

Whipping his hose, he grunted. I stood awkwardly beside the open car door as he continued spraying in scowling silence.

For a few moments, I absorbed his telegraphed thoughts: *‘Why did you bother movin’ into our nice little neighbourhood if you weren’t gonna stay for a while?’*



Several hours later, I was startled awake by the phone on the bedside table. As with any call in the middle of the night, I was hesitant to pick it up.

“Mr. T.? Sorry about the time difference.”

It was Deborah, the college personnel officer in Dubai with whom I’d exchanged several emails over the last weeks. She was delivering an update that stung like an electric shock in the dark. My work visa for the UAE would only be issued with the approval of a government medical committee. They would have to see me in person.

“If you agree to this requirement, your interview will take place within a few days of your arrival,” she informed in her soft limey accent. “I don’t see a major problem—but there is an element of uncertainty. It might be better for you to initially come alone. You could bring in your family once you are settled.”

“My family has to come with me,” I gulped. “We’ve already given notice to the school district that my kids won’t be coming back in September. Our house is already rented out. Our flights are booked. It’s too late to change our plans.”

“Well, it’s up to you, Mr. T.”

I leaned forward on elbow. “So, what are the chances I’ll be approved by this committee?”

“We can’t guarantee it—but I think you should have no worries. It is likely a matter of confirming that your um, disability is not a result of an um, operation. But I still have to caution you. The work visa approval is out of the college’s jurisdiction.”

“Well, we have no choice then, have we?”

“It’s entirely up to you, Mr. T. So will you be arriving with your family in early August, then?”

“That’s our plan.”

“Have a good trip.”

“Thank you, Deborah,” I croaked.

The bed squeaked when I dropped back the phone.

“Was that a call from Dubai?” asked T., sleepily from across the bed.

“Just go back to sleep now,” I whispered. “I’ll tell you about it in the morning.”

The mind raced. There is no way in hell I would have applied to work in the UAE had I a clue that such humiliation would be necessary. Yet it is too late to bail out...



Endingly looping until the grey of dawn was the memory tape of the Thursday night in May when I sat at the kitchen table after a night shift, looking through the contract offer from Dubai. It seemed just too bloody complicated. Why in Christ hadn’t I followed my gut instinct?

Yet doggedly, I went ahead. I applied for and received an extended leave from my job. I filled out a succession of lengthy forms, notarized documents and paid exorbitant UAE visa fees to sponsor T. and the kids. I arranged for the storage of property, the sale of car and renting of the house... Now I can only wonder whether all that risk was sheer recklessness...

So why didn’t I choose the doctoral studies option? It was a chance to break through a life-long stigma—a chance to build a reputation as something more than the survival English teacher with a rubber hand. Yet whether due to lack of self-confidence or the more insidious self-defeating tendencies—I declined it. So maybe it is justice that such humiliation is due...

Against the raging self-incrimination, I tried to summon reason. Surely, there is a fair chance that the sojourn in Dubai might still work out. There still is the opportunity to give the kids an eye-opening break from suburbia. After a decade of dreary slogging in the north—there is still a chance for some exotic travel. Money-wise, there is a chance to save a few dollars while still having a job to come back to... Surely the risks were calculated with *some* measure of prudence...

So why the customary self-flagellation? Why gnaw at one’s own flesh for failing to be a seer?

I further tried to console myself in recalling the stasis of last winter. In long late-night commutes from classes of unhappy immigrants, I yearned for a sea change. So, in a metaphorical rejection of the Hanged Man and choice of the Tower, I gambled on the 2-year Dubai getaway.... Three weeks hence, I will either be vindicated or pitched down headlong from the turret...

Before the Committee:



At 1:45 PM, I made my way by taxi to the General Directorate of Residency and Foreign Affairs building. My appearance before the Medical Selection Committee was scheduled for 2:00 PM. Within 10 minutes, I was perched on a high plastic chair before a long table where the 3 committee members were reviewing a stack of documents. From an ornately framed portrait on the dark-panelled wall behind them, His Highness, the inky-bearded Sheik Zayed of Abu Dhabi, surveyed all proceedings.

In the first moments of paper-shuffling silence, an Indian servant in white set before the committee members a silver tea pot and a tray of cups. Instead of availing themselves of refreshment, they got straight down to the business at hand.

First, they introduced themselves. In stating his name, the slightly smirking Egyptian doctor toyed with his pen. On the opposite side, an Eastern European doctor with head down filling in a form, mumbled his name. Between them a grey-headed Syrian in a natty suit briskly identified himself as the Committee Head. Presumably the expert on Islamic jurisprudence, he began by politely asking:

“You say you’re worked in an Islamic country before. Where was that?”

“I’ve worked in Nigeria and in Tanzania.”

“Where in Nigeria?”

“In Kano State.”

“How long were you there?”

“About 2 years. I was teaching in a boys’ secondary school. Nearly all of my students were Muslims.”

The Egyptian glanced over at the Syrian Committee Head. Too late, it struck that my attempt to show a familiarity with Muslim students had only added to the suspicion that somewhere in Africa, I might have fallen afoul of Sharia Law. Now resting with me was the burden of proof that the missing arm was *not* lobbed off for thievery!

The Committee chair shifted direction. “So-oo, this statement is from your family Doctor in Canada?” He held up the letter for which my GP in Coquitlam had charged \$50. “What’s all this about ‘*my medical degree from University of Alberta*?’ I don’t understand!”

I forced a smile. “I guess he was just stating his qualifications to show that he has the authority to make the statement.”

He touched his steely glasses. "You sure he's not boasting?"

The 2 other doctors smiled in this interjection of mild levity.

"I don't know why he would do that."

"Well, he does not state whether or not you had an operation on your arm. Did you ever have one?"

"No."

In the instant before dropping my eyes, I tried to signal to the fellow human being behind the glinting lenses of authority: *'Just how much more degradation do you need to subject me to?'*

The Syrian looked at his colleagues and then cleared his throat. "Well, I think we should be able to give you a visa. Since you're teaching English it shouldn't interfere with your work. You will have light duties, is it not?"

"I will work like every other teacher. Whatever responsibilities I am given, I will do my best to fulfil them."

He continued looking directly into my face, as if prompting me to make a statement.

A little less guardedly, I began: "I do understand of course, that this—" I nodded at the brown glove on the prosthetic hand—"this can be a bit of a shock for anyone when they first see it. But honestly, over the 20 years or so I'm been teaching I've found students get used to it. After a few weeks most of them hardly notice it at all."

"Well, I think that your students might be a little suspicion at first," the chair pursed his lips.

"Well, I can deal with it," I grimly nodded.

"That will be all, Mr. T." He scribbled into his paper, not raising his head as I rose from the chair.

"Thank you for your time, gentlemen." I forced a smile.

The returning nod and supercilious smile of the Egyptian signalled that he was giving me a break for which I should be grateful. The bearded European—hopefully embarrassed—kept his head down as I turned towards the door. Perhaps he even caught my last telepathic message: *"No wonder you don't dare to look me in the eye—you fucking mercenary toady!"*



Even though I remained composed whole degrading process; even though the air conditioning was in the room was blasting—I stepped into the sweltering glare in an oily sweat... So, we will be spared the next plane out... So, the gamble on the Dubai 'adventure' is still not lost... But just how foolhardy is it?

"I caution you, Mr. T.—the college cannot guarantee your work visa...."

The 2:00 AM phone call last month from blonde Brit Deborah now seems like 10 years ago. Even then, I might have cut losses and bailed out with endurable humiliation. But pig-headedly, I doubled down and pushed on...

So along with the relief of disaster narrowly averted, is a needed chastening. For a moment, I imagined breaking the news to T. that my visa was turned down and we would have to head straight back to Canada. Back to what? That would almost certainly have ended our marriage.

Even in the furnace heat, for a few minutes I was shivering...

1997, August (Dubai)

fwt

Of pride in one's humble calling:

"I will not compromise on quality, Mr. F. On that you can be assured!"

Mr. Jaffery, the Pakistani owner of a hole-in-the-wall furniture shop in the Al Karama neighbourhood, assured that the modesty of his showroom should not dissuade us.

In acknowledging his persuasive savvy, I was also guiltily reminded of my shoddy performance when my class was observed by the supervisor yesterday. Like a band playing their one-hit wonder with eyes closed—I should have at least one seamless performance to pull out on demand. Yet there I was, bumping into furniture and putting transparencies backwards on the overhead projector....

"Mr T. I will make you a quality sofa." said a grinning Mr. Jaffery. "I love sofas. Sofas are my life!"

While T. and I decided to check one more shop to compare prices before returning to make a deal—Mr Jaffery, could not have known that he left me both humbled and inspired. How many take such pride and confidence in their daily work as Mr. Jaffrey? Perhaps he is among the lucky few...

1997, October (Dubai)



Holy Terror:

“What’s your earliest memory?” TE asked me while we were washing dishes together after supper last night.

“Well,” I began, “memories from before I was 6 are hazy. Sometimes what you think are early memories are really based on dreams or stories that others have told you... I can’t think of any really clear memories from before I started school— except one that stands out.”

I went on to tell my 11-year-old daughter of a muggy afternoon when my little cousin and I defied his father’s warning to stay clear of a hornet’s nest in the tree behind his house. He might well have told us not eat of the forbidden fruit. When we threw stones at the nest, hornets rushed out, swarming after us. Just as we started running, the sky began to rumble with an approaching thunderstorm...

Running a little ahead, I twisted around to see my cousin yelping and swatting... In the same instant, I too, felt a hot needle jab in my neck. As we both ran wailing towards his door, the first raindrops spattered down. Then in a clap of thunder, the ground shuddered...

“At that moment,” I told TE, “god’s punishment through the stings was as real as the spanking hands of our fathers... I suppose for some religious adults—the belief in god stays that *real*...”

I looked over at her, hoping that I haven’t just been talking to myself. “So what’s your earliest memory, honey?”

“I’m not sure,” said my middle daughter with her mysterious smile.

1999, June (Dubai)



A decent allotment:



In the mowed patch on the Poco side of the Coquitlam River bridge, I leaned on my handlebars holding MH's bike while he played momentarily in Lion's Park.

Watching my 8-year-old climb across the dull-coloured snake of tire tubes, I thought of the statue of the Merlion (half lion, half dragon) statue in Sentosa Park, Singapore, where we stopped over on our return from Dubai last July. Having seen children playing near the jets of water spurting from the nearby musical fountain, I had been reminded of the spasmodic spurts whereby they—and indeed, every person—have miraculously sprung into being...

Rocking my son's bike in this shabbier setting, it occurred that such a memory could hardly be typical of a mortgage slave without decent living room furniture. Barring a lottery win (unlikely, since I never buy tickets) exotic travel is done. No doubt the cost of the 2-year sojourn in the UAE will be extracted with Calvinistic interest...

MH dusted himself off then scampered from the tire tubes to a climbing structure of yellow plastic. It occurred that if I care to have any claim to responsible parenthood, I will have to start saving for my fledglings' education... Even if I'm lucky to retain a job, I'd better get used to the continuance of dreary shift work and long commutes. That is presuming I keep my health...

Then taking a turn on the monkey bars, MH looked over grinning. I nodded back. Still, I consoled myself, there will be weekends and vacation time. Hopefully, that time will not be pissed away in mindless diversion....

If I can stay close to my kids—what more of an allotment dare I hope for?

Just then, MH hopped off monkey bars and ran back to his bike. Before us was an hour's ride along the river in the slanting September sun...

1999, September (Coquitlam)
