

Striving #3

More fear and trembling:

At first it was the tender node on the right side of the neck that kept me awake. Yet long after midnight. it was the quip heard at work this morning that began looping...

It was RR, the colleague on the curriculum project, who was talking about the tragedy of a colleague in the literacy Dept.— a woman of about my age— who died at a recent language education conference in Seattle. She apparently had no symptoms until moments before she dropped dead of a brain aneurysm...

“Enjoy your pleasures while you can,” RR said. “You may end up with a sudden splitting headache!”

So what pleasures should I be seizing?

I first thought of the promise made to the kids soon after the divorce: a road trip to California. The kids are tired of bringing it up— tired of my excuses about successive fender benders to pay off... With MH’s fourteenth birthday coming up— maybe he is already too old for Disneyland. But he still would love to visit LA. Expense be damned, why not surprise him with air tickets for a May long weekend getaway? Why not buy tickets for all three kids?

Then came the pinch. There are upcoming baseball tournaments for MH, shifts at the gas station that MT can’t do without; final college exams that TE has soon to write... Meanwhile, the kids would no doubt prefer to visit Los Angeles without a dour dad...



Squeezing the pillow, it struck me that *in extremis*— “seizing pleasures” would be of little concern...

But if, in the meantime, one could better appreciate just how very fragile are the tubes that pump the life blood— one would be far more attentive to the manner in which we treat others... In such awareness, one might wake every morning like Scrooge after his ghostly visitations. One might dedicate every day to shoring up, reconciling and repairing every relationship... Indeed, what can be more urgent than avoiding leaving others haunted by one’s memory?

The clock radio showed 2:20 AM... I had no headache or double vision— but the neck node still throbbed...

2006, May



A late marriage vow:

Guilty for waking late on the sofa on a Saturday morning, I headed out at 9:30 AM for Minnekhada Park. Starting out in numbing -4°, winter sunshine I gradually warmed with the uphill counter-clockwise circuit of the dam. After 45 minutes, I came out onto the dike in the vista of the south slope of Burke Mountain behind the north side of the dam. I stopped up below the rocky outcrop, looking up at Burke Mountain. I stood there for several minutes, tingling in the contentment of solitude.

I thought of the comfort felt in the woods or lakeside on the opposite side of the continent in the early summers of childhood... For much of my life on the northwest coast, I could not feel such a visceral comfort in the natural landscape. The lakes were icy cold in summer and the mountains colder. As much as I liked to hike the rainforest trails, I did not, at heart—*love* the land...

That was not just because I was not born here. Indeed, in solitary walks amid the *kopjes* in Masvingo Province, Zimbabwe—where I lived for only a few years—I felt a visceral comfort similar to that known in of the woods of boyhood...

Yet on this winter morning, I felt a deep contentment... I realized that the late-blooming love could be taken almost like a middle-aged second marriage... I affirmed that this northwest marshland between mountain and river—more than 5,000 kms. from my birthplace—is where I want to be. For better or worse, this is home soil until death do us part...

2007, January



Getting a fair spin:

Nearly 3 weeks after the clumsy fall on Burke Mountain, I am desperate for any sign of healing of the broken collarbone. In the despairing moments, I wonder if I'll ever fully recover the use of my arm.

I have tried to seek solace in the messages in the 'broken collar bone' online chat group. Some young mountain bikers are "back in the saddle" within two weeks of a bad break; others require surgery and months of physiotherapy. Several postings make it clear that healing is age dependent. Indeed, some gloomy postings report the failed juncture of bones ten years younger than mine.

Will I ever be able to drive again? Might I be forced into long-term disability? I despair that the failure of body to close the hairline gap between the bones may evidence that *pranha*, the life force, is leaking away like air from a pin-hole puncture.



This morning, I feared that I damaged my shoulder again in absently reaching into the cupboard. The wincing pain that followed, was ironically accompanied by the voice of Warren Zevon on the CD drive bemoaning: '*My shit's fucked up!*'

I then remembered that Poor Warren, a musical genius, died of lung cancer at the age of fifty-six – the same age I will attain in a couple of months. He could well have been bitter but he just advised luckier folk to: "Enjoy every sandwich."

Momentarily chastened, there came to mind the image of twirling jacks. Depending on the force of the twist that sends them spinning, some spin in looping figure eights, while others spin perfectly straight until they start to slowly wobble...

I had to acknowledge that there are no grounds whatsoever for me believe that I haven't already had a fair spin...

2007, July



The taunting presence of certain artifacts:



I spent the morning in the yearly custom of rearranging my old books.

In every vacation, I plan to reread a few of my old tomes. Along with Penguin classics, I have kept a range of texts in history and philosophy. The oldest ones are from undergraduate courses. They were lugged along in my blue trunk in my migration across the continent. Some of my oldest books have spent years in storage lockers. A few have accompanied me on successive overseas sojourns. Many were purchased in second-hand bookstores while others (eg. the Heinemann African Writers' Series) were acquired overseas. The pages of many are yellowing at the edges. Some have torn covers and others are held together with cello tape.

As always, I spent a few moments with these artifacts of my history. I leafed through them, checking the date and place of purchase—usually written with my name on the inside cover. I noted the underlining and crabbed marginal notes... Then sniffing the mustiness—I came to the critical question: does it go back on the shelf or not?

With the plan to move in the spring into a place that will be shared with C. and the kids—I will have to ‘downsize.’ I also considered that many of the titles are now available as free e-texts online. Meanwhile, up to the present, the kids have shown little interest in browsing my collection. TE has borrowed a few for her English Literature research—but understandably would prefer newer editions... I also wonder whether I care to shift the burden to my kids to eventually throw out my books along with the rest of my junk...

There was a time when I displayed my books rather like taxidermized creatures bagged in pursuit of ideas. There was even a time when I believed that these old books might serve me in work in journalism or academia... Yet here in the future, a text like '*The Golden Bough*' is of no use whatsoever for the instruction of basic English... Indeed, here in the future, my moldy paperbacks have become taunting artifacts...



This morning, I decided to be more ruthless in my culling. As I filled a cardboard box of discards, there oddly came to mind an old steel pot.

Never used, the pot was hung in the mudroom of the house where I spent my early years. It was kept there by a certain old soldier—apparently to remind himself that his teen daughter, sick of his drunken raving, had once smashed it into his face. The scar on his cheek that he would carry to the grave may have twitched, every time he looked up at the mud-room wall... Yet somehow that sordid artifact needed to be hung in plain view above the root cellar trap door—its very purpose being to taunt...

One big boxful of old books is ready to be dropped off at either the Sally Ann—or into the dumpster. Still, the bulk of them went back on the shelf to continue serving their purpose...

That old house:

Although not the least interested in home renovation, I paid close attention to last night's episode of "*This old house*" on PBS. It featured remedies for upgrading the energy efficacy of heritage homes. In the American can-do spirit, craftsmen breezily showed options for converting drafty old places into modern homes, cozy through the most bitter winter nights...

What fascinated me were not the demonstration of installation of heat pumps, hi-tech windows or space station grade insulation—but rather the underlying principle of restoration. It was encouraging to realize that there were practical solutions to defects which I had regarded in early childhood almost as curses to be borne...



The house into which my family moved in the early fall of 1962 was on a leafy street, well away from the railroad tracks. It had a full bathroom—a social advancement from the previous dwelling... Yet I was soon to discover why the new old house has been unoccupied for the previous year. Village rumour had it that its renters had moved out after the first winter, complaining that the place was "cold as a barn."

By November, my father warned me: "If anyone asks you if this house is cold—don't tell them *nothin'*."

A couple of months later while getting a haircut, I was asked that very question.

"How do you like your new house," asked the village barber. "Is it cold?"

"NO!" I said bumping back against his clippers.

The truth was that by January, the old house was cold as a tomb. Perhaps it was its exposure to the north wind or the flawed framing of its windows and doors. Whatever were the actual defects, it seemed there was something in the very bones of that old house that resisted warming.

It was not that my father failed to take the customary winterizing measures for our harsh clime. The storm windows were installed and the oil tank filled. That rusty tank at the side of the house fueled the furnace which expelled bursts of faintly diesel-redolent air through a single vent in the middle of the living room floor. The thermostat on the adjacent wall was set no higher than 60° F., and no higher than 50° F. at night—certainly not when my father was at home.

In waking shivering in the middle of many winter nights in pre-adolescence, I would creep down the stairs in the dark. Even at the risk of scorching wrath, I would nudge up the thermostat, then crouch on the furnace grate. The first trickle of warmish air on icy skin was almost erotic...

After about 20 minutes of bliss, I would edge the thermostat back down and creep back up the stairs—shameful. I had often heard how the previous generation endured nights that froze solid piss pots under bunk beds. The point of such anecdotes was that only the sickly and morally weak flinched from cold. Those of stouter stuff found it "bracing"...

I later came to suspect that behind the claim of the tonic benefits of cold was a smoldering frustration. In that first winter, it was plain that the rumours were true. There had to be something flawed in the foundations of the place. My father knew he had failed to heed the *caveat emptor*. With his tendency for suspicion, he was taunted by echoes of village gossip. Yet he grimly accepted that he had got what he deserved...

As time passed, he nurtured something like a stoic pride in the old place. He repainted the exterior, worked on the flowerbeds, and kept the lawn neatly mowed. In summer, the house looked as tidy as any in the village. Over the years, he even installed new insulation and a furnace with multiple vents. In his latter years, perhaps my father even occasionally indulged in luxury of turning up the thermostat.



The first (and last) time since boyhood I slept in that old house in winter was the night after his funeral. I slept in my mother's room while my eleven-year-old daughter who accompanied me from Vancouver, slept with her nana in her late papa's room. The thermostat, thoughtfully, was set at 70° F. Still, I woke in the middle of the night to an icy draft.

As much as I was taken with the optimistic spirit of last night's episode of '*This Old House*', I was not entirely convinced that every flaw in an old house can be remedied by high-tech retrofits. I still cannot resist the suspicion that the character of an old house is set—for better or for worse—in its original timbers...

As laudable as the goal of preserving heritage certainly is—I still cannot understand why some enthusiasts go to such lengths to renovate old places which ought to be torn down.... Even then, a brand-new house built on the cleared property might be heir to some curse in the soil itself...

2007, November

20 minutes before a meeting:

On doing the final check of the cribbed notes on the meeting agenda at 9:40 AM this morning, I swallowed against the strain. I had rehearsed an introduction to every item on the agenda. Nothing had been left to chance. Yet this would still be my first ever chairing of a faculty meeting. No matter how carefully I'd prepared, I could not dispel the possibility that my mind would go blank—just as it had in my first ever time in front of a class. Should I so fumble, how forgiving would my colleagues be?

While loading the overhead projector trolley, there oddly popped into mind an image of my dear old mutt, Balingo:

More than thirty years ago in northern Nigeria I adopted him after he was hit by a car at the entrance of the school compound. He crawled away under the floorboards of the school office, expected to die. Although he survived on the dishes of water and tins of sardines that I pushed under the foundation, the locals thought it perverse to keep alive an animal which could never be able to fend for itself. Yet over a few weeks his broken hip healed. Within a few months, he was back in the rough and tumble of alpha male competition. His near complete recovery seemed almost miraculous. Except for a slightly angled back leg, one could never have guessed that a few months before, his hindquarters were almost paralyzed.

Still, one day, putting out food for him on my doorstep, I noted a curious behaviour. Balingo was across the pathway, sniffing among other male dogs after a female in heat. When he tried to mount the bitch, 2 mangy males jumped forward and tauntingly nipped at him *precisely* at the joint of his injured hip! Yelping, he withdrew...

Not for the first time in remembering that image, it occurred to me that humans—perhaps no less than our fellow mammalians—follow such instinctive cues... Not always in self-awareness do we catch subliminal scents, glimpse behind masks or nip at the most vulnerable places... Yet the inclinations are undeniable ...

Still, there was Balingo, undeterred. In the failure of the other curs to copulate with the snarling female, he twisted his weak side away and dove in again...

I glanced at my watch. I was ready as I could ever be. Shooing the homunculus of self-taunting back into the shadows—I wheeled the trolley out towards the fray...

2008, January



A wobbling faith in reason?

Amid the bat-radar reverberations of last night's insomnia was the anxiety of the recent silences of old friends. No replies have been yet received from the half-dozen emails sent last weekend... Of all the unusual silences, I was most concerned about that of CB. I worry that my old friend's physical frailties might be worsening with age. With his collapsed lung, he already needs a nighttime breathing apparatus. Might CB be facing an even graver health crisis?

Apart from our mutual pleasure in blasting Republicans, our favourite punching bag has always been religion. Raised as a Kentucky Baptist who only lost faith during his hippie epiphanies at an Ivy League school, CB's contempt for evangelicals ("the Christian Taliban") has always been virulent. Yet last night I wondered whether in facing mortality, he could resist seeking the comfort of the hillbilly faith of his childhood...



I have often remarked to CB that I felt lucky not to have been mind-mangled in infancy, in the manner often described by lapsed-Catholics or back-slid Baptists... Still, I cannot claim to have been "raised heathen", as my mother would describe the feral off-spring of those too slovenly to send their kids to Sunday school.

I cannot remember whether it was her, or my older sister, who inducted me into the ritual of bedtime prayers... The whispering of a long list of "god blesses" did have the practical function of inducing sleep. Yet sometimes in reciting the child's: '*Now I lay me down to sleep*' prayer, I was unnerved by the line: '*If I should die before I wake...*' Some nights, I fought sleep or kept the bedroom light on, lest the angel of death be tempted...

Up to about twelve, I was compelled to attend Church of England services. However innocuous—the litany was deadly boring. I remember aimlessly flipping through the Book of Common Prayer. From the rites of Baptism to Communion of the Sick and the Burial of the Dead, its scope of a life's possibilities seemed as limited as it was drearily predictable...

As soon as I could escape and tear out of church clothes, I often made for the woods... It was there—especially in high summer—that the inner voice was most genuinely at ease to confide in itself ...

Yet even up to that time, I was not without fear for the almighty taskmaster. Indeed, after the lengthening periods of neglect of 'prayer', it was terror that jolted me back to obedience. The sudden deaths of fellow villagers by fire, car crash, suicide or drowning—made darkness almost unbearable. In the latter years, the fear was of nuclear holocaust... While I whispered pleas to the skygod for merciful intercession, one of the most terrifying imaginings of that era was that of being huddled in the root cellar hearing the whistle of an incoming missile while my mother recited the lord's prayer...



By early adolescence, however, I nursed even more contempt for religion than for school or for cops... In my natal village, infamy may still linger for the teenager who painted the declaration '*God Is Dead*' on the back of his bush jacket. Then there were the pages of the New Testament which I tore out and set alight one bored Friday evening on the main street ...

Away from the village in my latter youth, I no longer felt a need to make war on Christianity. None of my friends and few of my fellow college students were conspicuously religious... Even attacking the repressive dogma of the Catholic Church at the time seemed rather like beating the proverbial dead horse.

So, it seems ironic that in my latter 20s and early 30s, I would be teaching in a succession of boarding schools in Africa founded by Christian missionaries... Yet none of the institutions where I worked made church attendance compulsory or demanded any declaration of faith... In any case, by that time I appreciated the art, architecture and music of the Christian tradition. In the era before the predominance of neo-fascist Catholics and evangelical *jihadis* (especially in the USA)—Christianity seemed harmless enough.

Still, in the early 1980s, every morning before stepping into a classroom under the dome of Kilimanjaro, I heard the voices of two hundred girls singing praises to *Mungu* echoing up into the mountain mists... There were no other moments in memory when I came quite so close to being drawn to some 'spiritual' conversion...

Those moments still reverberated through the weeks after I returned from Tanzania to the grey northwest. Amid the culture shock of that fall, I recall one particularly dark night... It was on the eve of a make-or-break observation by the supervisor to whom a couple of my young Japanese students had complained. Sleepless at 1:00 AM, I found myself whispering pleas for solace and mercy... Except for the tone, those pleas could hardly have been characterized as 'prayer'. They were not directed to a deity. Yet that momentary reversion to a habit of infancy did bring on sleep. The sleep got me through the observation which in turn, got me through the remainder of the short-term contract without further shaming....

That tiny 'crisis' was certainly nothing compared to the anguish that surely drives unanswered prayers... I cannot imagine how I would react to the worst possible news—such as something horrible befalling my children... Admittedly, even unto middle age I have scarcely been tested in any manner which a believer would regard as 'spiritual.'

With most Christian sects aligning ever closer to rightwing politics, it would take nothing short of brain damage for me to embrace one. If I am susceptible to what soldiers describe as a "fox-hole conversion", my solace would far more likely be sought in Buddhism than in Christianity. Yet in the inevitable decline of the coming years, there are almost certainly to be nights darker than any yet known... In the shadow of oblivion—how will my own faith in reason and science hold up?

I thought again if the silence of good old CB and vowed to send him another email on the morrow... At 2:00 AM, the bat-squeaks were still echoing...

2010, November

Not quite that old?

Huffing up the steep ‘Coquitlam Crunch’ path this morning, I thought of the inscape of my childhood, whereby every “stolen” pleasure seemed indebted four-fold to misery. This calculous seemed rooted in the very climate itself: wherein two months of summer were paid for by nearly seven months of winter... Only by escaping that climate in my early 20s, did I reduce that misery-joy quotient. Yet now I am less certain about that gain... Has it been only a reduction from 4-1 to 3-1?

Just a month away from the sixtieth birthday, I wonder what the prospects might be for more significantly reducing the ratio. If the health holds up, might a 2-1 margin be attainable in retirement? Freed from the oppressive routines of work and commuting, maybe I can finally nurture a little creativity. In a whiff of fermenting blackberries, came a trill of excitement...



On the downward walk, prospects looked grimmer.

I wondered whether my hopes were essentially borne of selfishness and greed... I thought of how the earth’s biomass (largely insect) keeps churning on: eating, excreting, reproducing and dying in all its seething messiness... I thought of how I was but one among seven billion humans (and counting) clamouring not only for air, food, and sex—but for ‘recognition’ and ‘dignity’...

In that context, it seemed obscene that a person who has already lived longer than the vast majority of *homo sapiens* should expect more time. Such a desire seemed especially greedy for one who has already squandered so much of his allotment...

Furthermore, it occurred that the greed is culturally determined by consumerism. When at any time in history before the modern era has ‘experience’ been regarded as a commodity to be insatiably consumed? Even if my level of consummation is the tiniest fraction of that of the *über* rich—my carbon emissions over sixty years are probably more than a hundredfold of that of most humans who have ever trod this earth... Crudely put: at which point do old throats and assholes simply have had enough?

For a moment, I thought of the old Inuit, trudging out to the ice floe, staring into the grey ocean—and serenely falling asleep... What can be more ethically responsible—more civilized?

For a moment, I stopped up I stopped on the dusty path, rubbing the back of my shirt against the trickle of sweat... But maybe sixty is not really quite *that* old!

Of sinking or swimming:



On the latest walk back around Minnekhada, I reflected on a scene from the movie, ‘*Insomnia*’ watched on TV last night. In it, a detective, played by Al Pacino, runs across rolling logs and falls into an icy Alaskan river. For nearly 3 minutes, he swims beneath the logs to a wharf where he surfaces, gasping. In reality, a person thus trapped would have succumbed to hypothermia well before drowning.

Still, the scene gave rise to an old haunting question: thrust into a seemingly hopeless situation—would I struggle?

Vividly recalled from adolescence are nightmares of fleeing malevolent forces. I typically stop up, stiffen—then at the last instant—I close my eyes and *give up*... I usually woke up disturbed in having so quickly succumbed...

At that vulnerable stage, I was just beginning to question that easily accepting defeat was the will of nature. I wanted to pursue romantic love, adventure, poetry—but had to hide such desires. My ‘duty’, presented as *fait accompli*—was to make way for the ‘stronger’ and the ‘fitter.’ Well before any acquaintance with Darwin, I had some intuition about natural selection and hunched that it worked against me....



The nightmare of surrender has recurred in various forms over the decades... In one memorable sequence, I am about to be ritually sacrificed by an Aztec priest. I crouch before him as he lifts the sword above my neck... In the flash of the falling blade, I clench teeth and wake up...

Over the years, I have come to a somewhat more nuanced understanding of the ‘natural order’... Whether due to adaptability, luck—or forces more mysterious—somehow a skeletal kid who at times almost felt ashamed to breathe, made it almost intact to the age of sixty...

Still, if he were pushed into an icy river, he just might clench teeth and sink...

2011, September

Of weak chins and timid eyes:

In one particularly bored moment this morning, I fell upon a short YouTube video of a charity event in a hardware store. It was a clip that could not have possibly come to my attention had I not Googled the name of the New Brunswick village where I lived until the age of nearly eighteen.

The jerking camera followed the motley villagers milling around tables of garage sale items. Except for the winter jackets, the scene could have been rural West Virginia, which to a considerable extent—shares the same genetic heritage. Just as with their hillbilly cousins to the south, the roly-poly figures in the video did not appear to embody the best inheritance of their largely Anglo Saxon, Irish and Acadian forebears. Yet even in noting weak chins and timid eyes, I did not for an instant forget that these were the faces of my own tribe....

Indeed, the faint sneer had already been rubbed off my face when the mayor, took to a screechy mike. He thanked the crowd for their community spirit. He plainly loved his village—as did his fellow inhabitants.

I was then reminded that his village had seeded the dominion with many scores of solid citizens. I could not deny that among its notable export of cops, preachers and teachers—my contribution to the commonwealth was paltry, at best ...

As for the villagers who kept to their roots—they are *proud* people. No doubt they assume themselves superior specimens to one who is some dim memories, could have been the fugitive killer of Dr. Richard Kimball's wife...

After exiting YouTube, I looked at my face in the bathroom mirror. Just maybe, the chin is not quite so weak nor the eyes *quite* so timid?

2013 April



Desire for finality:

This afternoon I filled 2 large recycling bins with the contents of my file cabinets.

Ruthlessly dumped were 20 years of worksheets and projector transparencies. Unlike earlier retirees of the department, I made no effort to preserve a legacy file of my old materials. Even if the department were not itself on the chopping block—I would have had no expectation for the future use of my old worksheets. Indeed, every file folder seemed only a sad relic of a quarter century, bled away...



At the same time, the cleanup provided a flash history of my shaky tenure in the college:

In the long slog towards seniority, I started as a seasonal grape-picker before rising to a temporary hired hand. In the sack-race towards ‘regularization’, I pieced together short-term assignments into full-time work. In the first years, I was usually shunted into low beginners’ classes...

Yet I have nothing but admiration for former colleagues who carried on for their entire careers teaching ‘survival’ English. Some would claim that low level classes have always been their teaching preference.

Admittedly, in the best of days, I did experience satisfaction in attaining a Zen-like simplicity in engagements with slower learners... Yet the repetitiveness could be deadly boring. The wooziness at the end of a six-hour shift, sometimes felt like the after-effects of inhaling gasoline fumes. I would never have survived twenty-five years at the college, without the godsend of a transfer into teaching EAP (English for Academic Purposes).

There were wavering moments in flipping through those latter-year folders. I was briefly tempted to put some worksheets aside just for my own record. After all, I do occasionally look through my old literature teaching files from Zimbabwe days. Who knows what bouts of nostalgia might arise in the coming years?

Yet my hand hesitated only briefly over the recycling bin. I was committed to pare back to the essentials—to jettison all detritus...

So it was that the three hours of drawer emptying was conducted with barely a twinge of sentimentality. Indeed, I can scarcely remember any activity quite so driven by such a powerful desire for finality. ...

2014, November

Misgivings on the cusp:

Heading up Burke Mountain above the Harper Road gun club road this morning, I was wracked with misgivings. My retirement date is now officially set for February 1st. By jettisoning twenty months early, am I not losing the opportunity to cruise to a much more comfortable retirement?

Like many colleagues, who carefully prepare the ground before jumping, I might have taken a pre-retirement leave. Even in working half time, I could have fattened my pension. More importantly, I could have followed the example of other former department heads who, for the final stretch of honourable careers, returned to the classroom...

I could also have taken the more typical approach of the transition to retirement. Many prospective retirees take so-called ‘leaves of excellence’ while retaining benefits and continuing pension contributions. Some even ensure that before retirement they have used up all their sick leave. Since this provides work for those lower in seniority—the practice is certainly not discouraged by the union... As much contempt as I have for a weaselly exit—I still wish for some reassurance that I did not sell myself short...

As for the VDI (‘Voluntary Early Retirement Incentive’) the lump-sum is equivalent to less than six months of salary—nearly half of which will be scooped by income tax... I wonder if my jumping at the kiss-off payment is akin to the behaviour of the impatient kid in the old psychology experiment. He is the one who gobbles up the marshmallow before his eyes rather than holding off in the promise of a bigger treat...

Meanwhile, I worry about the adequacy of a partial pension. As reminded by the support-staff union honcho last week, my pensionable service will draw an income that is less than half my current salary (“Can you live on that?” he taunted).



With a clammy forehead despite the December chill, I trudged on, planting my walking stick in the icy mud before each upward stride... Since news of my impending retirement got around over the last couple of weeks, I have defensively spoken of a desire for a “career change”. I have even claimed I am looking into working overseas again or volunteering in prison education.

Of course, that that was all bluff. The truth is that I have no plans for any more teaching in any capacity. Yet undoubtedly like most former English teachers, I harbour hopes of returning to long neglected writing projects. Most immediate will be the organization and editing of decades of journal notes. Yet that plan I care not to reveal—not even to my wife...

The worry is that I might choke again. The last time was eight years ago, when the recuperation from the broken collarbone provided an opportunity to tackle a monograph, well researched and long procrastinated. I frittered away two months on aimless web browsing...

It is well documented just how swiftly body and brain deteriorates without constructive engagement. Of course, that is why teachers whose identity is so deeply rooted in their work, fear retirement. Even in financial security they carry on, some even beyond seventy. I definitely

am *not* in that category... Still, should I give in to sloth—I will deserve the accelerating decline that is sure to follow!

Under the hydro-line wires, I stopped up. On the lower side, the cut through the forest extended downward towards the Coquitlam River. On the high side, grey stumps and underbrush gradually faded into mist.

There came the briefest shiver of panic. '*It is not too late to change my mind! I can go back to HR on Monday morning!*'

"*No!*" I shouted, my voice echoing down the line of pylons...

I crouched down, stabbing my hiking pole. A careful decision *was* taken—I need to trust in that. To renege now would be Sartrean "bad faith" in its most poisonous manifestation. I *will* tackle projects long neglected; I *will* resist the masochistic will to defeat.

As if in exclamation—shots from the firing range sounded from below...

-2014, December



A recurrent dream narrative, challenged:

There was a lesson today that needs to be programmed into the neural RAM:

Starting out with the plan to snowshoe on one of the trails above Westwood Plateau, I detoured from the meandering switchbacks along what seemed to be a direct path up along Noons' Creek. As the rocky path grew narrower, it became obvious that I was not on a path but on a runoff creek bed. When the rocky gap narrowed into thick brambles—I should have turned back. Instead, I pushed through the brambles thinking that a path was close by. Struggling forward a few metres, I came in view of a clearing. It then seemed certain that I was near the trail up the middle of the hydro line.

Slinging the snowshoes onto my back, I pushed along though the chest high bushes that were layered with crusty snow. Further into the hydro-line cut, it was nearly impossible to push forward against the springy brambles pushing back.

Reaching the middle of the hydro line, I saw in the middle-distance, the electrical grid tower passed on a hike back in the fall. I was puzzled why there was no trail running down the middle of the cut. Yet loath to push back though the same brambles, I pressed on.

Within minutes, I was in thicker brambles and deeper snow. Worse, the terrain was steeper—making every slippery step treacherous. In almost every attempt to part the springy bushes—I slipped down thigh deep into the tangle of thorny canes. Within minutes, my feet were wet and my legs raked with scratches.

A few times, I lay back in the snow gasping with laboured breathing. Out of breath, and unable to move backward or forward — I realized that if were to succumb to exposure or stroke— it would be rough justice. Were an old fool to perish among these brambles, it occurred that the body might not be found until spring.

As I often did while fighting panic, I thought of blowing out water from a diving mask. The memory of staying calm and methodical fifteen metres underwater was always reassuring. It reminded that flailing about wildly resulted in the worst possible outcomes...

So it was, wet foothold by foothold and thorny handhold by handhold—I dragged myself diagonally across the upward sloping cut. After nearly an hour of clambering, I reached the bank at the edge of the cut. Over the top of it was the edge of the trail. Only then I saw that there were 2 hydro lines running parallel and the trail ran under the higher one. I lay exhausted for a moment, as much in embarrassment as in relief...

Before pulling myself up with the hiking pole, I reviewed the hard lessons: there are no shortcuts in these mountains—at all costs, one must stay on the trails...

Yet there was one notable consolation: contrary to the narrative of recurrent dreams—I had not passively succumbed...

2016, January



Appreciating the slow turn:

In today's two-hour circuit of Addington Marsh dyke, I reflected on the gradual change of habits in my twenties. It is surely by those changes by which I retain a fair degree of fitness this far into my sixties...

As reminded in the recent review of the 1974 journal—up until April of that year, I smoked half a pack a day, drank about four nights a week, ate cafeteria fast food and barely exercised. Even if I missed an academic career by leaving university prematurely, I can't imagine how those habits would have much changed had I stayed on in New Brunswick...

The 1974 journal also chronicles (betimes in squirming detail), the pathos of those first weeks away from the natal province. No matter how regrettable the turn of events when I "crashed" in a student coop in Ottawa that spring, I will always be grateful for that first exposure to healthier habits. When I finally did muster the self-confidence to strike out for the west coast early that summer, I was a committed bicycle rider, a fledgling vegetarian and a tentative non-smoker...

There was some backsliding in the next few years. In the occasional visits with old buddies, I fell back into the booze and cigarettes—the natural complement to our gabber. It took ever nastier hangovers to convince me that I lacked a constitution equal to maintaining tribal bonding rituals...

I backslid into cigarettes for a few weeks in early 1979, but decisively threw a pack of Rothmans down a stairwell in Earl's Court, London, never to smoke again.

From mid-twenties, until marriage in my early thirties, I grew somewhat more ascetic. Still, the adoption of healthier habits was gradual—rather like the slow turn of an oil tanker...



Unfortunately, decades ago I backslid from vegetarianism—but do eschew fast food... On social occasions I usually stick to Perrier water. I still enjoy a craft beer—almost always sipped alone. Although never a jock, I still get enough exercise to keep the old machine chugging along...

Of course, no regime of nutrition and exercise can overcome what is coded in the genes...

By my reckoning, the shaken dice in my genome yielded about an eight out of the possible twelve... If the knees, ankles and lungs hold—I might be lucky to enjoy these trails for another decade or so... I cringe in any prospect of negotiating them by electric scooter...

Like most folk of ripe age, I sometimes imagine alternate lives missed by a different toss of the dice... Whatever accomplishments I missed by lack of grit—would also likely have been purchased by greater stresses. Would I trade imaginary successes for stroke, heart disease, or cancer which would probably have killed me already?

Blinking out over the marsh at the Pitt River, I reaffirmed that that the old mind-body has thus far served this passage respectably well...

2017, December

fwf