

Levity Redux (#2)

Near-life experience?

Reports of ‘near death experiences’ are taken much more seriously than claims of encounters with extraterrestrials—but they share some common features... That was my initial impression on the topic as presented last night on CNN’s ‘*Larry King Live*’.

It was no revelation that people who come very close to death often report strange visions. Those who have nearly drowned commonly speak of “my whole life flashing before my eyes.” Almost everyone has experienced the eerie freezing of time before a terrifyingly close call...

Larry King’s guests spoke of experiences which seemed similar to the visions induced by psychedelics: floating above one’s inert body, spiralling through a dark tunnel towards a golden light and being in a “a godlike presence...” Also, like many who have had intense trips on LSD, psilocybin or ayahuasca—the NDE voyageurs come back to the mundane world swearing to have been “spiritually transformed”.

Yet unlike pharma trippers—those who miraculously return from the brink of death insist their visions were not hallucinations... They speak of looking down on their bodies pulled lifeless from water or from wrecked cars, or more commonly lying on an operating table... Some claim to have been aware while detached from their bodies even as their hooked up brain monitors registered no activity...

In some cases, such claims of “out-of-body” experiences are supported by ‘experts’ who conclude that the experiences occurred while the subjects were in a dreamless deep-coma state... Offered as evidence are confirmed details about physical surroundings that a subject in deep coma could never have known...

One man who survived a massive coronary described the view from the ceiling of the operating room and accurately reported bits of conversation of doctors during moments when he was clinically ‘dead’. He swore that his experience of being a soul hovering above its detached body was “more real than reality...”

Of course, such testimonials could be highly embellished by numerous retellings. Still, the NDE stories seem to be based on sincere—often passionate—belief. Even so, a collaborative hypothesis that NDEs is proof of the existence of an immortal soul is no more credible than a ‘sincere’ claim about an alien abduction...



Larry King barely challenged even the wilder NDE claims of his guests. So, after switching off the TV, I repaired to the internet to do a little research. Over the following ninety minutes, I gleaned the following:

It is true that the phenomena of NDEs have been examined in a quasi-scientific manner. In his book, '*Life after Life*' (2001), psychiatrist Raymond Moody based his research on more than one hundred and fifty interviews with NDE survivors.

Yet unlike Lazarus, no NDE subject has come back from death itself. While some people have been revived from states wherein their vital signs were nearly absent—there is no evidence that their NDEs really occurred while the subjects were absolutely brain-dead. Their memories could well have been generated in the seconds or microseconds before their brains were temporarily checked out.

Studies of the brains of dying rats (however sadistic) have apparently shown spikes in ECG activity occurring just before flatlining. This suggests that the body/brain that narrowly escapes death undergoes most of the shut-down processes that occur up to the brink of death. This research suggests that NDEs generated in human brains occur just before the subject slips into the deep coma state. After waking up, details of the dramatic picture of oneself lying on an operating table might be filled in by guesswork or by information learned from others—all without intent to deceive, of course...

As for the notion that NDEs provide a glimpse of the hereafter? That assertion is no more worthy of consideration than the claim that a miscarriage was really a fetal abduction by extraterrestrials.

The idea that the mind/soul is an immaterial homunculus dwelling inside the head is almost universally rejected by contemporary science and philosophy. Neurological research had demonstrated in myriad ways what Buddhist thinkers seem to have intuited centuries ago: that mind/body are one.

Consideration of *real* evidence would probably lead to the conclusion that NDEs are epiphenomena of brain spasms spiked by the fear of extinction... Maybe what Christians call Purgatory or the Buddhists, Bardo, are hallucinatory realms generated in the final blowing of the neural gaskets. Maybe what is 'experienced' in a fraction of a second seems timeless... Since no one can ever come back to testify to that: a real death experience (a contradiction in itself) is one interview that Larry King will never have!



Of course, mystical experiences can be pursued before the shuffling off of the mortal coil. Otherworldly realms can be sought through means of ritual or meditation if not psychedelic pharma... Or one can remain safely planted on the ground without ever lunging at the veil. That's the safe and boring way to live and die...

Like most of the TV audience last night hearing the testimonials about NDEs, I was chastened for not “living each day as though it were my last” as exhorted by the survivors. At the same time, I wondered how many among the multitudes—unvisited by revelatory visions— are deficient in *near-life* experiences...

2005, May

fwf

Inclined to mordancy:

The interviewee on the CBC morning show was hyping an unconventional arts festival scheduled for next month in Vancouver. Billed as ‘*Kickstart*’—the festival will feature visual art, song, dance, comedy and theatrical performances—all by artists and performers who are disabled...

“We are challenging the stereotypes with tools of culture,” said the interviewee, a professor of Disabled Studies and community activist. She was not only promoting the festival but touting her scheduled poetry reading in it.

“It should be great fun, too,” said the CBC host, lapping it up...

“Yes, indeed,” said the professor and self-identifying feminist. “Audiences will see uniquely creative human beings celebrating their disability.”

Celebrating disability? There seemed something odd in that expression... Edging along slowly through rush hour traffic for the next fifteen minutes, I was inclined to mordancy:

Not for the first time, I wondered: how many with a common condition, grievance, or proclivity does it take to form a community...

How about a community of hemorrhoid sufferers?

Even though they are an ‘invisible’ minority—why should they endure shame in isolation any more than other marginalized people? They could rise up from their doughnut cushions in solidarity! If ‘Hemorrhoiders’ can’t have their own festival—at least one day of the Fringe Festival could be themed in their honour... There could be a university colloquium for discussing their grievances... Why not a Piles Pride parade through downtown?

“When I see someone on stage with a disability that used to make me uncomfortable,” the CBC host enthused. “Now I have a *wonderful* feeling when a person through his art, lets me share her humanity.”

The host’s patronizing tone could hardly have been pierced with a hunting knife. Meanwhile, the professor rattled on about “confronting ableism with story-sharing, humour and performance.”

The host was going gaga in her praise when I snapped off the radio.

More than once I have considered putting together—a sardonic list of ‘*what I won’t miss when I’m dead*’. High on the list along with sore throats and sleet—will be CBC talk radio...

2001, June



All the best people:



In every viewing of Kubrick's '*The Shining*' over the years, a different scene has stood out. Last night it was in one of the opening scenes wherein Jack Torrance [Jack Nicholson] and his wife are shown around the Overlook Hotel on the day before Jack is to assume his job as winter caretaker.

On the tour of the ballroom, Ullman, the hotel manager, vaunts the hotel's illustrious reputation over the decades:

“We've had four presidents who stayed here, lots of movie stars; royalty...” He smiles.
“All the best people!”

The *best* people— a little phase that conveys so much! As if there were a class of people who are a species apart from the common lot of *homo sapiens*— a more highly evolved species with more perfect bodies...

A manager of an exclusive hotel certainly has a nose for the best people— and has a well-trained staff to obsequiously cater to their whims. Meanwhile, the sycophants of the 'best people' are ever wary of not upsetting them with exposure to the *worst* people...

In that notion, I recalled an anecdote from a '*New Yorker*' article read several years ago. It was in a profile of Jacqueline Susann, the author of several lurid bestsellers of the 1960s. At a gala promotion party for one of her novels, Susann told the publicity director that that “no cripples” were to be invited. She believed that the presence of a handicapped person would ruin the ambiance.

When an invited guest showed up on crutches, Susann flew into a rage. She apparently grabbed the promoter by the tie: “I told you, you son of a bitch,” she seethed. “No cripples at my party!”

If crutches were so depressing to her guests—how would the author of the '*The Love Machine*' have reacted had the elephant man—albeit in a tuxedo— shown up at her party?



Although not openly confronted like the guest on crutches at Jacqueline Susann's party, more than once I have felt awkward in my appearance in upscale environs:

Most recently, was the reaction at the Intercontinental Hotel in Muscat, Oman. On both mornings of our stay there in February 1999 (my first and last time at a five-star hotel) the kids and I were ushered to a back table... Every time I passed through the marbled lobby, it seemed as though the front desk attendants were holding their breaths...

What a contrast that was from the reception at the grubby Pacific Hotel in Vancouver, where I stayed upon first arrival in the city in July 1974. However nervous among the skid row habitué—the smile of the scabby-headed desk clerk assured that I fit right in!

Another incident came to mind: It was in May 1975 in beachfront Santa Barbara, California, where I came into an upscale convenience store to buy snacks. I was not too scruffy (despite having slept the previous night on an open deck in the marina) but from the clerk's reaction, I might have crawled out of the sewer... While he did pick up my \$10 bill, there was no mistaking his disgust... The withering stare of another customer that followed my exit, make it plain that no matter what was in his wallet—no empty-sleeved *bandido* would be tolerated loitering in lily-white Santa Barbara...

Neither forgotten was the half-empty café in downtown Johannesburg in August 1982, where I sat unserved for upwards of a half-hour... Meanwhile, several other customers, who came in after me were catered to. I finally walked out—realizing that 'Right of Admission Reserved' in apartheid South Africa applied not only to the exclusion of non-Europeans. Any riffraff whom the management deemed likely to upset the dining experience could be denied service... *'No cripples at my party!'*



The final scene of *'The Shining'* never fails to chill. The zoom-in on the framed photo showing a tuxedoed Jack Torrance front and center of a group photo inscribed '*Overlook Hotel July 4th Ball, 1921*' suggests an eerie afterlife for the murderer and failed writer shown frozen to death in the previous scene...

Last night, in the image of Jack as a ghost among the ghostly soirees of "the best people", I imagined a similar ghostly afterlife for Jacqueline Susann. If cosmic justice were to be served, her eternal place would not be at the 1921 soiree of the Overlook Hotel, but rather amidst Pieter Bruegel's 16th century rendering of '*the Cripples*'...

2002, December



Arguably luckier?



In the photo accompanying the *Guardian* article: ‘*As casualties soar, America’s women face reality of front line*’, an attractive young woman in army T-shirt holds in her single hand, a myoelectric arm. Its molded shoulder is designed to fit over her the emptiness of her upper right side.

The woman, identified as Dawn Halfaker, and a fellow soldier on night patrol in Iraq last year, both had arms blown off by a rocket-propelled grenade. (No further information is given on the male casualty).

Halfaker was reportedly so devastated in the initial days of her recovery that she had the mirror in her hospital room covered by a towel. The young Californian realized that her dreams of becoming a professional basketball player were “as shattered as her body...” Yet a year later, the article happily notes, Halfaker is attending post-graduate college, snowboarding and playing one-armed basketball.

Yet it was the following paragraph that unsettled me: After reporting that another American female soldier, Sam Huff, was killed by a roadside bomb near Baghdad—the article states that Halfaker was “arguably luckier” than Huff.

Arguably luckier? Is it really arguable whether living with a missing limb is better than being dead?

Joanna Walters, who wrote the article would probably grant Halfaker the attributes conventionally applied to a disabled war vet: ‘courageous’, ‘tenacious’ and ‘inspirational’. Yet in comparing the magnitude of Halfaker’s sacrifice with the supreme one she narrowly missed—is the British journalist’s choice of modifier a slip that is seldom openly admitted?

Mutilation in an erstwhile perfect young body is particularly jarring. However loudly the rehabilitating amputee is lauded, there remain in many beholders—a secret dread in imagining their own amputation. Were the fear unconcealed, it might be expressed as: ‘*I’d rather die than bear looking like that!*’ ...

Still, a decade or so from now Dawn Halfaker may claim that her grievous injury was the best thing that happened to her. One can easily imagine her giving an inspirational talk about how her amputation gave her the purpose and drive she could never have mustered in a normal body...

Should a certain British female journalist (who might well be *arguably* less attractive than Halfaker) be in the audience—she would still smile and join in the standing ovation...



*Word of the day: **apotemnophobia** (n.) (L.) (psy.) ~ **ic** (a.)*

An intense fear of amputation or loss of one's limb appendages. A fear of amputees. An overwhelming sensation of needing to escape a situation in which one is exposed to amputation/amputees.

Use in sentence: *'When I pushed my shopping cart up the Safeway aisle this evening, an apotemnophobic couple stood back in muted shock...'*

2005, May

Half-cocked:

The hike up Eagle Ridge up Buntzen Ridge this morning with little Romeo was very nearly aborted by the half-cocked beginning:

Rushing from the Buntzen Lake parking lot to get the lead on a pair of young hikers, I failed to see on the left, the well-marked trail entrance. Instead, I took the dog walking trail—and ended up in an overgrown creek bed. Forty-five sweaty minutes were wasted in doubling back.

In finally reaching the trail head for the start of the sweltering six-hour hike, I thought of Tarot card images of the Fool. Having set off blindly into the world, he is as blithely unaware of the little dog nipping at his heels as he is of the open cliff before his forward foot...

In the grunting climb that followed, I was taunted by a succession of corresponding images:

There was the boy tripping over untied shoelaces or struggling to free a fishing line snagged in an alder bush. In another scene he is heading out into a -30° wind chill with an unzipped jacket...

Yet even the scenes of defiance of common sense for which there is no regret (e.g. the teen standing joyfully in a downpour) have a common element with the cringeworthy. In the midst of the entire cascade of scenarios is an old soldier, sneering:

'Think you're gonna get anywhere half-cocked?'

While denying nothing—neither the duping nor the self-duping—there has always been a compulsion to scream out: *Yes, you were right—after a half-century all the evidence is in. I still am without common sense—and still revel in it!*



With Romeo clinging to my shoulder (rather than nipping at my heels), I slogged up through slippery roots and rocks along the Halvor Lunden trail. At the top of the steep ridge, I negotiated the swampy maze of subalpine lakes and got to the high point of the Pulpit cliff. After a minute's absorption of the panoramic view of Mount Seymour to the west, we started down.

Having failed to bring enough water, I was tempted to scramble down a steep embankment to reach a creek. However parched, at the last moment I did heed the old soldier's warning that only fools go off the trail—especially in mountainous terrain...

Despite nearly collapsing from heat exhaustion, I made it back to the trail head unscathed. I avoided being carried down the trail on a Coquitlam Search and Rescue stretcher— another careless hiker to be shamed on the evening BC TV news....

At one of the taps in the picnic area, Romeo and I drank our fill. The sometimes fool and his little canine companion then made their way back across the parking lot in a faint glow of redemption.

2005, August



fwf

Getting used to a new wig:



Driving back from the prosthetist's in south Surrey, I cursed the new arm. The forearm was unnaturally skinny—half as thick as my real arm. The lock was slipping and causing the elbow to spring up without warning. The stiff harness was practically cutting off circulation... Yet walking out the door of the clinic wearing the newly built arm was like driving off the showroom lot with a new car... No getting around the fact that I *own* the lemon now!

Heading west on Nordel Way, I was tempted to double back. Yet I hated to face BT again. I could too easily imagine describing the bugs amid his mounting sourness. It wasn't that he entirely fails to listen—in fact, he is one of the more responsive prosthetists I've dealt with over the decades. With others before him, I sometimes felt like a body being worked on by an embalmer. Not that I was ever surprised. Indeed, those who would seek a career in prosthetic limb maintenance would have probably also have considered a career in mortuary science...

Admittedly, I have been a “difficult patient”. I ask too many questions. I'm demanding about getting the fitting exactly right... Understandably, a prosthetist would rather service stumps wheeled in from rest homes than to cater to those that yak and complain...

I glanced down at the plastic recycling bag on passenger's side floor—inside was the old arm... For a few minutes, I scanned ahead for golden arches. If I could find a public washroom, I could stop and do a quick change. I could then drive back to the clinic and drop off the new thing at the receptionist's desk. I wouldn't even have to see BT. I could send him an email—tell them I would pick the arm up only when the problems are fixed...

At the crest of the hill before the Annacis Highway interchange—with the Alex Fraser bridge in sight—I decided not to turn around. I couldn't afford any more delay in getting back to the office...

I waggled the arm against the center console. However uncomfortable—I needed to bite the bullet. I just had to get used to the feel of the goddam thing...

I sighed in the hassle of having to wear a fake arm at all. It has always been much more a cosmetic than a thing of practical use. Yet even as a cosmetic, my gloved rubber hand can be no less unsettling to the beholder than a bad wig. Wouldn't I be better off leaving the sleeve as empty as the head is bald?



I then remembered a passage from '*The Grapes of Wrath*', recently reread—lines memorable enough for double pencil ticks in both margins:

It was in one of the scenes depicting the migration to California of the Joad family, dust bowl refugees... Among the oddball characters the Joads meet on their arduous journey is a dirty one-eyed man in a junk yard. While the one-eyed man roots around for the spare part the Joads need for their broken-down jalopy, he mutters about his lonely lot. Young Tom Joad chides him:

"Course ya can't get no woman with that empty eye flap-pin' aroun'. You just gotta stop feelin' sorry for yourself, get yourself cleaned up and get a patch for that eye!"

Tom goes on to tell the one-eyed man an anecdote about: "*a one-legged whore who was so popular she charged double...*" Tom's final advice: "*Tell 'em ya dong's growed since you los' your eye!"*

I took that as a pearl of wisdom from John Steinbeck through the mouthpiece of Tom Joad... Eye-patches may be uncomfortable—glass eyes possibly less so—but nothing is as unsexy as an empty eye socket.

2013, November



Ebola Casino:



Headed back to the car after our chilly walk along the New Westminster riverfront promenade, C. and I stopped on the quayside to look at the gaudy Riverboat casino. The Royal City Star apparently had a former life as a working riverboat plying the Mississippi. C. suggested we take a peek inside.

The last time I'd been in a casino was a five-minute walk-through of the one at Victoria Falls, Zimbabwe, in July 1998... Gambling has always seemed to me, the least appealing of vices...

Umbrellas tucked under arms, we crossed the entrance ramp. Admittedly there was a tweak of excitement in crossing the threshold. It felt a little like entering a shopping mall on a dreary day... Yet the colours, scents and sounds engineered to open the wallets of shoppers are somewhat more subtle than those devised to empty the wallets of gamblers.

For a few seconds, it was a sensory overload: blight lights and whiffs of spice. The swirls of colour is the carpet were almost vertigo-inducing. Most dizzying were the rows of video slot machines—bleeping, flashing, whirling... It was like a sugar high—until I looked closer at the gamblers themselves...

They were mostly seniors. They sat in the gaming chairs holding Styrofoam cups of tokens. A few sat in wheelchairs. No one talked. Each gambler isolated with his/her selected VLT, could well have been sitting alone on a rest-home cot, staring out a dark window. One old man glanced over at me suspiciously... The other faces staring into the whirling symbols looked either miserable or numb.

Such was the impression from barely three minutes at the entranceway. Yet there was also the frightening sense that the longer we lingered, the more likely we would be hypnotically drawn towards captivity by a one-armed bandit... In tugging C.'s hand to turn around, it felt like I was exiting a place as potentially infectious as an Ebola fever ward...



Back in the car on the rooftop parking lot, I glanced back down the river towards the pit of despair we'd just escaped.

“What can be more depressing than a casino?” I muttered. “Except maybe a third world garbage dump.”

“Don’t let it get you down,” said C. cheerily, clicking her seat belt. “There’re a lot more important things to think about.”

“Right,” I said, turning the key. “Did you see any of the pictures of the Hubble telescope that came out a few days ago?”

Oddly enough, in looking away from the light winking from the Royal City Star, I thought of the swirl of galaxies in a space-time curve around the whitish center of our Milky Way... How strange it seemed, that a photo of a cosmic nebula would appear to hold the contours of the human vagina...

2006 May



fwf

Among the Nordic plebian elite:



If I were to make a bucket list of 1,000 items—attending a first NHL game would not be on it. I have always had an aversion to Canada’s premier sport. Indeed, I first politely declined C.’s generous invitation to see a home game of the Vancouver Canucks. I suggested she pass on the ticket to a real fan. Then on second thoughts, I took the opportunity as informal ethnographic research...

The security at General Motors Place last night was as tight as that of an airport. We passed through three rings of wand wavers just to get to our seats. Gifted to C. by her sales’ client, our seats were in the mid-section above the plexiglass screens. Rather than paying attention to the game, I spent most of the following two and a half hours looking around the coliseum.

Most dominant was the gargantuan video-screen suspended above the ice. When not showing commercials or following the play, the screen flashed random images of enthusiastic fans. Often the camera panned the 18,000 strong crowd before zooming in a single fan deliriously waving.

Almost as eye-catching was the electronic ribbon ringing the stadium like a news tickertape. It flashed corporate logos that pulsed in synch with the jingles blaring from the Bose speakers at a rocket-launch decibel level. No more background riffs from old pipe organs: heavy metal is now the accompanying soundtrack for 21st century gladiators on ice...

Waving arms to the deafening beat, the Canucks mascot in a grinning killer whale costume marched up and down the stands. Overhead, a whale blimp bobbed around the dome, dropping from its anus bits of colored paper. Hands lunged up as they fluttered down. Sometimes the blimp farted out puffs of steam. That would well have been vapours of barbiturates and meth...

Of course, the most hard-core fans were watching on TV at home or in a Sports bars. Even midway through the game, a few we passed on the way into the arena were probably still shivering by the gate hoping to score a cut-rate ticket from a scalper.

With even the cheaper seats upwards of \$75—I guessed that the demography of the surrounding seats was plebian elite: tradesmen, the comfortably retired and small business *volk*—girlfriends, wives and kids sometimes included. The gold chain and leather jackets in the premium seats down in front of the plexiglass seemed to advertise prospering gangsters. There was only a sprinkling of Chinese faces among the white. The eurocentricity of the crowd would have seemed a throwback to an earlier era but for the multitude of Sikh men—apparently fervent hockey fans...

Evidenced by red jerseys and white Stetsons, the fans of Calgary, the visiting team, were in abundance. While Calgary fans seemed more enthusiastic than the Canuck supporters, female fans of both teams whistled and roared more than the men... It seemed that very modest IQs were at a critical mass...

I sometimes did glance down to the action on the ice. It was notable that the zebra-shirted referees blew their whistle less often for penalties than for stopping the action for TV commercials. Thereupon the lads in Robocop helmets skated breezily to the boards and leaned on their padded elbows, looking a little bored as they waited to resume their performance...

That's what they seemed: lackadaisical performers. In the coliseum of ancient Rome, all would have received the exclamatory thumbs down. Yet for this crowd, a display of professional prowess seemed no more a priority than a display of speaker integrity would be for attendees at a torchlight parade...

Leaving several minutes before the end of the game to avoid the crush, I felt guilty for so often looking at my watch—which C. certainly noticed. She might well have invested the ticket in a more true-spirited son of the north...

2006, November



Munching with the Mariners:

Since MH outgrew Little League play, I have largely tuned out of baseball. Still, in marking his seventeenth birthday last weekend, I was glad to take him and TE to the Mariners' game against the Red Socks at Safeco Field in Seattle.

Just as with the NHL hockey game a few years ago, I was more interested in what was happening in the stands than on the field:

Sitting directly in front of us, rooting wildly for the home team, was a replica of the red-haired middle-aged woman in a scene from the movie, '*Total Recall*'. The stout woman in that movie becomes discombobulated when questioned by a custom's officer upon arrival on Mars. She was really the Arnold Schwarzenegger character in disguise.

The plump red-haired woman ahead of us kept bobbing up and wagging her massive hips. She lustily cheered— one arm jiggling around the neck of a younger version of herself. Just like in the *noir* sci-fi movie, it looked as though her head was that of an android going haywire and about to explode— revealing an Arnold inside...

More amusing were the prodigious appetites of the fans. There was hardly anyone in sight whose jaws weren't working on something. Every time I glanced over at the waddler on our right, he was scarfing something else: a footlong hotdog, a triple-tiered burger, a bag of caramel corn, a can of suds... He brought to mind another movie scene: that of the morbidly obese man in Monty Python's '*The Meaning of Life*' who gorged in a French restaurant until he exploded...

If that was typical snacking at baseball games in Seattle— I shuddered to imagine the eating orgies in the bleachers of Houston...

Still, Seattle being home to myriads of health-conscious gourmands, Safeco also catered to more refined appetites. Two rows below us, a couple who might have been software engineers at Microsoft delicately nibbled at chocolate dipped strawberries on a stick... Yet their ilk seemed to be vastly outnumbered by husky men, hefty woman and porky American children.

Noting the more wholesome faces of the men who drank coke instead of beer, I wondered how many evangelical Christians were in our midst. Of course, gluttony is a virtue to the American born-again. (The line-ups at pancake houses on Sunday afternoons is legendary). If the blessed saviour were to appear on the pitcher's mound to nourish his faithful, the loaves and fishes would have to be drenched in melted cheese!

It seemed unimaginable how those snacking fans would possibly cope with famine... Even deprived of burgers, they would probably turn cannibal before going vegan...



Of course, I could not deny offering MH and TE a snack. I was proud that in modestly Canadian fashion, they were content with medium sized hotdogs...

2009, May (Seattle)

fwt

My night at the opera:

When we took our seats last night at the Queen Elizabeth Theatre, I was excited by the prospect of my first live opera: Verdi's '*Macbeth*'. At least the damnable scowl (which apparently betrays my finicky palate) could not have been in evidence...

Even without much interest in stagecraft, I genuinely looked forward to the music. Years ago, I had come to appreciate the Saturday afternoon Metropolitan Opera broadcasts on CBC radio—if only at low volume. I especially remembered having been stirred by '*The Ring*' while listening in the bath...

Wagner would have been my choice for a first live opera, but I was curious about Verdi's interpretation of the Shakespeare classic. The program handout noted that Lady Macbeth would be played by a soprano of note, one Jane Eaglen. A famous baritone, Greer Grimsley, was cast as Macbeth. So, I was primed to enjoy the performance...



Yet for the following 3½ hours I could have been squeezed in the middle seat of a red-eye flight... There was even more to my discomfort than a narrow seat or the coughing of the man across the aisle.

Perhaps it was the failing of my old ears. While English translation was displayed on a screen suspended above the stage—the text was too far away to read... In any case, 19th century Italian opera seemed an untranslatable world away from the Elizabethan stage. From our seats in the upper back of the balcony, even the orchestra was barely audible...

But that was minor annoyance in the midst of a coarser deficiency in appreciation. Even in the exclusive seats down by the orchestra pit, I would have been taunted by cartoonish images from childhood when opera epitomised 'high-brow' snobbery to be mocked. That notion was embedded even before seeing Bugs Bunny and Elmer Fudd in medieval costume performing the overture to '*Tannhauser*'...



Just as silly was the reaction to any character on stage or in film suddenly breaking out in song. While Macbeth sang his aria before murdering King Duncan, I could not help thinking of Lee Marvin in '*Paint Your Wagon*', rumbling: '*I was bo-or-n under a wan-drin' star...*' In Broadway or movie musical no less than in opera—singing characters shattered any suspension of disbelief...

Gritting teeth, I also remembered that the zenith of joy in the life of Joseph Merrick, 'the Elephant Man' (as portrayed in David Lynch's film) was attending an opera. Still, the

Elephant Man could not have been as captivated by the performance had he been waiting for intermission with a full bladder...

Even with the relief of the men's room during intermission, there was the operatic performance in the foyer. Begowned and tuxedoed patrons poised with their goblets of BC plonk. It was a veritable pageant of the city's culture-vultures...



We drove back to Coquitlam in near silence. First it was the Festival of Light fireworks, then the B.C. Lions football match followed by the Vancouver Canucks game—and last the Vancouver Opera... As much as I have enjoyed C.'s company in all these outings, my response to the events themselves must be plain in my face... Realizing that I was not a sports fan did not surprise her, but she is surely disappointed in my reaction to opera...

She knows where I hail from—but she has yet to find out just how remote from 'high-brow' culture were some of the entertainment options of my boyhood... One could surmise with near certainty that a Greer Grimsley never gawked at freshly wrecked cars behind a village gas station....

2006, December



Of the reverse Midas touch:

When one of the bottles of spaghetti sauce (which had taken all afternoon to prepare) accidentally smashed in the middle of the kitchen floor, I spooned it up. Despite the possibility of contamination with bits of glass—I did not want to waste even a few dollops of sauce. Perhaps if I'd not known that my gold investment had plummeted \$500 in eight hours, I would not have gambled on the risk of a perforated gut.



Even since ignoring the financial advisor's tip (which cost \$250) three years ago, I have vacillated about whether to convert my low interest earning savings into bullion. Noting its fast-rising price in the last several weeks, I thought it likely to keep shooting up. Yesterday I broke down and showed up at the counter of the Vancouver Currency and Bullion exchange on Howe St.

At the wicket before a Chinese girl with minimal English, I sucked in my stomach and swiped the credit card for \$5100. After swooping up my signed receipt, she slid under the wicket five tiny gold bars.

About an hour later, I parked in the Coquitlam mall and fished into my slipcase to check my new investment. I had expected coins like the gold maple leaf or the South African Krugerrand. Instead, I got five plastic sheathed wafers of uncertain origin. Two of them were scratched.

Did the girl unload inferior product on someone she took for a sucker? Along with the sting of that suspicion, I was struck by the enormity of the gamble. The price could fall as quickly as it had shot up. How would I feel in a few months—if my five ounces were worth less than half of what I paid? Speculation, I gulped, is not for the faint-hearted—let alone for the fool...



The gut punch came with the headline in this morning's online news: '*Gold continues to plummet.*' The decline started yesterday afternoon—at the very time of my purchase. Within 2 hours, I had lost \$350—and within 24 hours upwards of \$500.

Along with the gut-punch of shock was the groin-kick of shame. I dare not admit to my kids that I lost invested a big chunk of retirement savings (their inheritance, if I croak before 65) on gold in the very hour of its twenty-eight-year peak. At the same time, how

could I have forgotten that as in the winter of 1997, I also bought gold-shares the day before the Barrack gold-mine scandal crashed Canadian gold stock?

Maybe I have a magical power to turn bullion into shit! It is almost as if I had masochistically acted on insider knowledge to make the absolutely *worst* possible investment. That possibility lent a little dark comedy to the rough justice of my latest financial folly... Maybe I've missed a career as a financial advisor. By making investments diametrically opposed to my gut instinct—I could have made a fortune!

My real regret ought to be in not having put the \$5000+ lost on gold down on the roulette table in Las Vegas. Along with the evaporation of my life-savings, I could have at least enjoyed a few drinks and a girlie show...

2008, March



Schmitt in the hot tub:

At the dairy section of Thrifty's supermarket last evening, I bumped into a teacher from the college. I only knew her from when I worked in her department for a few months back in low-seniority days. A decade later, she had the same page-boy haircut, but was greyer and chubbier. From brief resource room exchanges, she somehow remembered that we both lived in the northeastern burbs. I somehow remembered that she lived with elderly parents in an ocean-front house.

"What a pleasant surprise," she said smiling. "I hardly ever see a colleague around here."

In the spirit of collegiality, I balanced my basket on the edge of the dairy case and exchanged pleasantries. We concurred that we loved the neighbourhood and would choose to live here even if living closer to work were more affordable. The only drawback, we agreed, was the long commutes...

"Yes, sometimes I have to drive back and forth twice in the same day," she said shifting her bicycle helmet from shopping basket to free hand. "You know in our department we all have split shifts."

I gave the expected nod of sympathy to a colleague assigned shittier shifts by the iron law of seniority...

"I do wish I didn't have to drive so much," I nodded at her bike helmet. "But as you know, the bus service out here isn't so great."

"Geese," she leaned in smiling more broadly, "you know, we live so close. We should consider car-pooling. A lot of people in the college are doing that now."

In a glance towards the checkout, I smiled. "Hey, that's a great suggestion. But you know, now that I'm working in our department office, my hours are very irregular. Sometimes unpredictable."

"Well," she leaned back ruddy faced. "When you're back at regular teaching, let me know your shifts. "You can email me."

"Sure, I'll do that."

She hesitated— seemingly wanting to chat more. It occurred that she might assume I was unattached.

"Sorry, I gotta run," I said, nodding towards the carton of milk in my basket. "My son wants this before bed."

Scuttling off, I felt like Jack Nicholson's sixty-six-year-old character in '*About Schmitt*', waddling away from the elephantine Kathy Bates character who plops down beside him into the hot tub, naked.

2008, October



fwit

Before the 7-Eleven cooler:



However hot and thirsty, I failed to find a single offering in the 7-Eleven cooler that appealed. Yet in scanning the array of sugary drinks while MH got his Slurpee, I found myself reflecting on the varieties of soda pop I knew as a boy...

I have scarcely taken a sip of soda in decades, but the tongue can still conjure distinct tastes of fizzy sweetness. It seemed there were as many flavours of soda pop as words the Inuit have for snow. In a blindfold test, I could have identified more pop brands and flavours than a sommelier could name vintages. Meanwhile, I knew the broad category of 'cheese' only as cheddar and Velveeta...

Some soda pops—especially those produced by a local company called Sussex Beverages—tasted strange. Grape soda tasted nothing like grapes. Lime rickey was so slimy it furred the tongue. Sussex orange had weird floaties. Still, they all could satisfy the essential craving for sugar... In that regard, no pop was ever turned down—not even the slightly less cloying ginger ale or 7-Up. My favourites were the sweetest—black cherry, root beer and crème soda. Coca Cola—with astringency along with the sweetness—was a habit I did not acquire until my teens...

My preferred sugar fix was not soda pop but milk chocolate. Once I stole a quarter from my mother's purse, crawled under the outside steps and gorged on five bars amid woodlouse and millipedes. Only a heroin addict would admit to such depravity in desperation...

A shock it was when the price of a chocolate bar doubled, and that of pop raised from ten to fifteen cents... Once, when I came up short for a bottle of pop at the local variety store, the clerk looked at me grimly and said: "The price of sugar's goin' way up. Don't blame me—blame Fidel Castro!"



By my teens, along with the sugar addiction, I began to crave fats. America's favourite foods—fries, cheeseburgers and shakes—were ambrosia to me. Yet I could barely afford my cigarettes let alone fast foods, and the nearest golden arches were a two-hour drive away. By such random luck I was narrowly spared the fate of a rotten-toothed diabetic doughboy...

Only gradually over decades did the maturing tongue develop preference for the savoury, the piquant and the bitter. The gagging reflex when drinking beer in adolescence would likely now be triggered by even one swallow of soda pop...



“Let’s go, dad,” said MH from behind.

“So, what flavour did you get?” I asked, turning round.

“All kinds— just a mix.” Sucking at the red straw in his giant paper cup, he made the slurping sound for which his concoction is named.

2010 August

fwit

A few sobering facts:

As I move into old age, I try to think about time in more concrete and quantitative terms.

The facts are plain: In a life span of three score and ten, there are 3464 weeks. At my current age, I have already used up 3652 weeks. In the most sober assessment, I should not assume that I have more than 188 weeks left. Each one of those weeks (1316 days) ought to be considered more precious than its previous one... That can infuse existential angst into questions such as: when should we stop bulk buying at Costco?

I am not quite so pessimistic as to not expect to reach three score and ten. Despite having once been a strong competitor for a Darwin award, I have evolved towards risk-aversion. I'm still relatively fit for someone who spends so much time on his ass... I might stay lucky and have ten or more quality years left...

My desktop calculator shows that ten years comprises 315,360,000 seconds. I ought to remember that number the next time I waste time fumbling to untie a shoelace...

To be practical: everyone over the age after sixty-five should think of their remaining time in terms of a countdown. Of course, everything in the universe is on a countdown. Even the Milky Way is projected to be swallowed up by the Andromeda galaxy before the sun burns out in approximately five billion years... Five billion is five hundred million times longer in duration than ten years.

Such unimaginably vast numbers ought to be comforting to possible cosmic entities with which in comparison we are mere microbes. Yet sooner or later, everything ends. Perhaps none of the moving bits of the cosmos are any more capable of reckoning with finitude than I am with my ever-diminishing months weeks, day and hours...

A particularly sobering fact is that there are numerous items on our shelves and in our drawers that were purchased more than ten years ago... At my age, it is practical to consider that I will probably be outlasted by spray cans and sundry toiletries already in my midst...

But for the nonce, I continue to make bulk purchases at Costco...

2018, January


