The power of purpose

Winning essays of the 2004 competition

In day-to-day life, we encounter men and women who seem driven by something outside of themselves, whose commitment to their profession or volunteer activities, their community, or their cause seems to rise above the necessary, above the possible, above even the human. Indeed, we say that in such people we see “the divine spark.” Even for the growing number of people who describe themselves as spiritual, but not necessarily religious, there is a certain attachment to this concept of the divine spark. It is the sense that our lives can be guided from within by something more important than our simple survival, something not merely intellectual either, something in our souls.

Though we might normally think of the battlefield as the place where people perform selfless heroic acts for each other and those back home, there are groups of civilians whose bond is just as strong and whose lives are just as driven by their cause. How do we recognize purpose in groups of people? It is beyond our power to gaze into the souls of our fellow human beings to measure either the strength or the nobility of their purpose. Our only hope for understanding, let alone spreading, this inner fire that contributes so greatly to civilization as we know it is to study the external evidence of purpose. However, we can describe the deeds these purpose-driven men and women have performed, the works of art and architecture they have produced, the look in their eyes when they are working, the joy they bring to those around them, the needs they have met in their communities and their countries, and the various factors that helped them to discover this drive.

Though the evidence of purpose in man and purpose in nature are often observed separately, man and his environment are ultimately connected, and so are their purposes. Indeed, it could be said that part of man’s purpose is to learn nature’s purpose.

Finding evidence of purpose in our fellow human beings as well as in nature and the cosmos can help us to see the benefits of purpose, understand its origins and, perhaps, even broaden its reach. Purpose is a subject worthy of study by parents, teachers, religious leaders, journalists, politicians, and everyone else who affects the lives of the next generation.

Source: http://www.templeton.org/powerofpurpose/index.html

Contents

Crying Forever is Struan Stevenson's moving account of the people he met in Semipalatinsk in 2003- people the Western world would largely have forgotten- the true victims of the Cold War - in the area of East Kazakhstan where the Soviets carried out over 600 nuclear tests between 1949 and 1990, using the half million local population as human guinea pigs. Stevenson's essay explores the daily life of these communities, their suffering, pain and sense of hopelessness as they struggle to survive in a polluted environment.

Fixing Haiti

Randall Frame, Wayne, Pennsylvania

A young man's encounter with a child at risk of starvation leads to a new realization about life's priorities. This account is based on the author's one-week experience in Haiti in the mid-1990s.

Streets of Mud, Streets of Gold

Fruma Klass, Mt. Lebanon, Pennsylvania

The time: a hundred years ago. The place: a "Fiddler-on-the-Roof" kind of town, but in its squalid, starveling reality. The family: intent on coming to America, with no money, no resources outside themselves, and only an overwhelming sense of purpose to direct them.

The Bathroom Cleaner

Elizabeth Orndorff, Danville, Kentucky

My story was inspired by a column by Merlene Davis in the (Lexington) Herald-Leader which told of the Colored Women's Clubs of the 1930s through the 1950s in Lexington, Kentucky, one of which "maintained" a bathroom in a beauty shop for use by colored folks who were downtown shopping and had no other place to go.

The Natural Order and the Human Mind

Stephen Pimentel, Annandale, Virginia

Mankind has always seen order within nature, leading to the belief that nature itself is purposeful. Some modern philosophies rejected this belief, holding instead that nature may be ordered, but not purposeful.However, contemporary advances in physics and biology have discovered order within nature on the deepest levels, an order that is governed by laws consistent with purpose.

The Skating Rink

John Casteel, Traverse City, Michigan

The Skating Rink is a fictional story of a mentally disabled man who finds his purpose—and earns his town's love and affection—through his job clearing the ice on the town's skating pond and encouraging generations of children as they learn to skate there, although he himself never did.

What Ever Happened to Chris Olsen?

Carol Franks, Portland, Oregon

What Ever Happened to Chris Olsen? is a personal essay exploring the implications of one man's need for good neighbors and public health care coverage. The thesis is that there are "too many Chris Olsens? in the United States, people who are living on the margins of poverty in situations that can, ultimately, cost them their lives. What Ever Happened to Chris Olsen?" is among a set of essays in a manuscript exploring great losses that are often overlooked.

Fixing? Helping? or Serving?

Dr. Stan Goldberg, San Francisco, CA

The care provided for the dying is neither altruistic nor depressing. It is one of the most enlightening and life-changing events one can experience. Lessons for living are given just by being compassionate and present. This essay relates an experience the author had with a woman in hospice who struggled with letting go of life. Rather than dying and ending her suffering, she waited until her mother was prepared to accept life without her. The experience the author had with this woman and the others he has served led him to have a greater understanding of life. As one approaches death, there are few superfluous agendas. Being continually involved in the experience of dying, is the greatest teacher one can have for living. All you have to do is listen.

A Prisoner's Purpose

Kenneth Hartman, Lancaster, California

After spending most of my life in prison it became clear to me that change was needed. I had worked long and hard to change myself; through this process I became convinced that I had an obligation to work for the betterment of the world I inhabit. The Honor Program at the California State Prison in Lancaster is the

product of this awakening desire to become a force for the good. I set myself a seemingly impossible task, motivated by a desire to do something worthy of the life I have; changing the world's largest prison system from inside one of its cells. The Honor Program remains an ongoing struggle, but a struggle worthy of pursuing, worthy of the effort. Purpose, and the power that emanates from purpose, can change even this world of violence and despair.

Listening to Purpose

Bennett Johnston, Sausalito, CA

This is a thought-provoking essay that explores the power of sharing our personal stories and of listening deeply to others. It underscores the vital role that all of us, especially our elders, can play, in creating communities of vision and purpose, through sharing our life stories and personal memories.

The Day of the Shoes

Lisa McMann, Mesa, Arizona

Christopher, a former executive, trudges through snow on a mission for shoes. Six hundred miles away, Gloria, a homeless single mother of three teenage daughters, has responsibilities that seem endless. Christopher is motivated by passion, while Gloria is motivated by survival. Together, these two unlikely friends strive to create compassion in the lives of the indifferent and hope in the souls of the homeless.

Who Will be Joseph?

Esther North, Gibsons, British Columbia, Canada

When you're planning a Christmas pageant it seems that no one wants to be Joseph. Life is a lot like that: few of us want to stand in the background and give center stage to others. Who Will Be Joseph? is the story of a man whose rich, largely hidden life was, like Joseph's, motivated by love that lead him to unexpected destinations and decisions. The story is told by his grandaughter who grew up following him around a prairie farm, listening to his stories, and learning to see the wonder of God in all things.

Footprints of Purpose

Diane Pleninger, Anchorage, Alaska

In the course of poking about as an amateur mushroom enthusiast, I happened

upon the story of an extraordinary fungus. A rust called Puccinia has developed a survival strategy that is fascinating, complex and gives every appearance of being purposeful. About that time, I learned of a call for essays on the topic of purpose. I thought that the story of Puccinia might serve as an introduction to a meditation on purpose, and especially on human purpose.

The Stone Bird

C. Kevin Smith, Big Sur, California

A stone sculpture gives shape to a love of beauty, a knowledge of suffering, a dream of flight.

The Goodness of Trees

Doug Wesselmann, Walnut, Iowa

When a scarred and traumatized young man returns from combat under the deadly trees of the Mekong River's Nine Dragons region in Vietnam, he searches to find his purpose in the world. He seeks answers in a small isolated monastery among the quiet trees of the Ozark Mountains, where he finds lessons are often taught in silence and in song. A hermit, a night beetle, and an ungrateful little girl lead Vincent to the healing he needs and a realization that changes his life in a single sentence: "I am here for you."

Brother John

By August Turak

"In any case, I feel I can personally guarantee that St. Thomas Aquinas loved God, because for the life of me I cannot help loving St. Thomas."

-Flannery O'Conner

Uncertainty as to life's purpose is much in vogue today. So too are the relativistic notions that would consign life's purpose to a matter of taste. The agony of life is uncertainty and the rationalization is that uncertainty is certain. However, the plain truth is that for all our anguish we treasure uncertainty. Doubt forestalls action. The problem with life's purpose is that we know damn well what it is but are unwilling to face the changes in our lives that a commitment to self-transcendence, to being the best human being we could possibly be, would entail. It wearies us just thinking about it. So we rationalize that it's all "relative," or that we're already doing enough and don't have time. Worst of all we rationalize that those who do accept the challenges inherent in self-transcendence are uniquely gifted and specially graced.

It was eight in the evening on Christmas Eve and I was waiting for Mass to begin. This was my third Christmas retreat at Mepkin Abbey monastery and my third Christmas Eve Mass. Mepkin Abbey sits on 3,132 acres shaded by towering mossy oaks running along the Cooper River just outside Charleston, South Carolina. Once the estate of Henry and Clare Boothe Luce, it is now a sanctuary for thirty or so Trappist monks living a life of contemplative prayer according to the arduous Rule of St. Benedict.

Already 18 days into my retreat, I was finally getting used to getting up at three in the morning for Vigils. However I also knew that by the time this special Mass ended at 10:30 it would be well after our usual bed time of 8 o'clock. The church was hushed and dark, and two brothers began lighting the notched candles lining the walls as Gregorian chant sung by the hidden choir wafted in from the chapel. This chapel, a favorite meditation spot for the monks, sits just off the main sanctuary.

The magic of these pre-Mass rituals quickly had me feeling like I was floating just above my seat. Soon I was drifting back to my first service ever at Mepkin, when Brother Robert, catching me completely off guard, urgently whispered from his adjacent stall, "The chapel is open all night!" This man, a chapel denizen who sleeps barely three hours a night, was apparently so convinced that this was the answer to my most fervent prayer that all I could do was nod knowingly as if to say "Thank God!"

The sound of the rain pelting down on the copper roof of the church on this cold

December evening drew me from my reveries, and I noticed with the trace of a smile that I was nervous. I had calmly lectured to large audiences many times, yet I was, as usual, worried that I would somehow screw up the reading that Brother Stan had assigned me for Mass. But reading at Mepkin, especially at Christmas, is such an honor.

I felt that my reading came off very well. Returning to my seat I guess I was still excited because, heedless of the breach of etiquette that speaking at Mass implied, I leaned over and asked Brother Boniface for his opinion. Brother Boniface is Mepkin's 91 year-old statesman, barber, baker and stand up comic. He manages these responsibilities despite a painful arthritis of the spine that has left him doubled over and reduced his walk to an inching shuffle. Swiveling his head on his short bent body in order to make eye contact, Boniface lightly touched my arm with his gnarled fingers and gently whispered through his German accent, "You could've been a little slower… and a little louder."

After Mass I noticed that the rain had stopped. I headed for the little Christmas party for monks and guests in the dining hall or refectory. Mepkin is a Trappist or Cistercian monastery, and its official name, "The Order of the Cistercians of the Strict Observance (OCSO)," is taken seriously. Casual talking is actively discouraged and even the vegetarian meals are eaten in strict silence. Parties are decidedly rare and not to be missed.

It was a fine affair consisting of light conversation, mutual Christmas wishes, and various Boniface-baked cookies and cakes along with apple cider. Mostly I just basked in the glow of congeniality that I had come to associate so well with Mepkin.

I didn't stay long. It was almost midnight, and after a long day of eight church services, packing eggs, mopping floors, feeding logs into the wood burning furnace, and helping Father Guerric put up Christmas trees, I was asleep on my feet.

I said my good-byes and headed for my room several hundred yards away. Halfway to the refectory door I heard the resurgent rain banging on the roof reminding me that I had forgotten to bring an umbrella. Opening the door I was cursing and resigning myself to a miserable hike and a wet monastic guest habit for morning services, when something startled me and left me squinting into the night. As my eyes adjusted, I made out a dim figure standing under an umbrella outlined by the rain and glowing in the light from the still-open door. It was Brother John in a thin monastic habit, his slouched 60 year-old body ignoring the cold.

"Brother John! What are you doing?"

"I'm here to walk the people who forgot their umbrellas back to their rooms," he replied softly.

Flicking on his flashlight we wordlessly started off sharing that single umbrella. For my part I was so stunned by this timely offer that I couldn't speak. For in a monastery whose Cistercian motto is "prayer and work" and where there are no slackers, no one works harder than Brother John. He rises before three in the morning to make sure coffee is there for everyone, and is still working after most of his brethren have retired.

Brother John is also what might be termed Mepkin's foreman. After morning Mass the monks without regular positions line up in a room off the church for work assignments, and with several thousand acres full of buildings, machinery and a farm with 40,000 chickens there is plenty to do. (As a daily fixture at the grading house packing and stacking eggs thirty dozen to a box, I could easily skip this ritual. I never do. Perhaps it is the way Brother John lights up when I reach the front of the line, touches me ever so lightly on the shoulder and whispers "grading house" that brings me back every morning. Perhaps it is the humility I feel when he thanks me as if I were doing him a personal favor…) Yet Brother John keeps it all in his head. Every light bulb that flickers out somewhere is his responsibility. He supervises when possible and delegates where he can, but as he is always short handed he is constantly jumping in himself at some critical spot. Throughout the monastery the phones ring incessantly with someone on the line asking, "Is John there?" or "Have you seen John?" And through it all, his Irish good humor and gentleness never fades or even frays.

Now after just such a day, four hours after his usual bed time, and forty years into his monastic hitch, here was Brother John eschewing Boniface's baking, a glass of cider, and a Christmas break in order to walk me back to my room under a shared umbrella.

When we reached the church I reassured him several times that I could cut through to my room on the other side before he relented. But as I opened the door of the church something made me turn, and I continued to watch his flashlight as he hurried back for another pilgrim until its glow faded into the night. When I reached my room, I guess I wasn't as sleepy as I thought. I sat on the edge of my bed in the dark for what I can say with some conviction was a very long time.

* * *

Over the next week I went about my daily routine at Mepkin as usual, but inside I was deeply troubled. I was obsessed with Brother John. On one hand he represented everything I had ever longed for, and on the other all that I had ever feared. I'd read Christian mystics say that God is both terrible and fascinating, and for me Brother John became both.

Of course, this had nothing to do with the fact that he was a monk and I was not. On the contrary, Brother John was fascinating precisely because I intuited that to live as he did, to have his quiet peace and effortless love, had nothing to do with being a monk and was

available to us all.

But Brother John was also terrible because he was a living breathing witness to my own inadequacies. Like Alkibiades in Plato's Symposium, speaking of the effect Socrates had on him, I had only to picture Brother John under his umbrella to feel as if "life is not worth living the way I live it." I was terrified that if I ever did decide to follow the example of Brother John, I would either fail completely or at best be faced with a life of unremitting effort without Brother John's obvious compensations. I imagined dedicating my life to others, to self-transcendence, without ever finding that inner spark of eternity that so obviously made Brother John's life the easiest and most natural life I had ever known. Perhaps his peace and effortless love was not available to all but only to some. Perhaps I just didn't have what it takes.

Finally, I asked Father Christian if he could spare a few minutes. Father Christian is Mepkin's feisty, 88 year-old former abbot, and my irreplaceable spiritual director. Slight and lean, his head is shaven and he wears a bushy chest length beard which he never cuts. When I commented that his beard didn't seem to be getting any longer, he regretfully said that his beard had stopped growing and added, "While in the popular mind the final length of my beard depends on my longevity, in actuality it depends on my genetics." Fluent in French and Latin and passable in Greek, he acquired PhDs in Philosophy, Theology, and Canon Law as a Franciscan before entering Mepkin. His learning, his direct yet gentle manner, and his obvious personal spirituality make him an exceptional spiritual director. And while he grouses once in a while about the bottomless demand for this direction I've never known him to turn anyone away.

I told Father Christian of my experience with Brother John, and I told him that it had left me in an unsettled state. I wanted to elaborate, but he interrupted me. "So you noticed did you? Amazing how many people take something like that for granted in life. John's a saint you know."

Then seeming to ignore my predicament he launched into a story about a Presbyterian minister having a crisis of faith and leaving the ministry. The man was a friend of his, and Christian took his crisis so seriously that he actually left the monastery and traveled to his house in order to do what he could. The two men spent countless hours in fruitless theological debate. Finally dropping his voice Christian looked the man steadily in the face and said, "Bob, is everything in your life alright?" The minister said everything was fine. But the minister's wife called Christian a few days later. She had overheard Christian's question and her husband's answer, and she told Father Christian that the minister was having an affair and was leaving her as well as his ministry.

Christian fairly spat with disgust, "I was wasting my time. Bob's problem was that he couldn't take the contradiction between his preaching and his living. So God gets the boot. Remember this, all philosophical problems are at heart moral problems. It all comes

down to how you intend to live your life."

We sat silently for a few minutes while Christian cooled off. Maybe he finally took pity on the guy or maybe it was something he saw in my face, but when he spoke the anger in his clear blue eyes had been replaced by a gentle compassion. "You know, you can call it Original Sin, you can call it any darn thing you want to for that matter, but deep down inside every one of us knows something's twisted. Acknowledging that fact, refusing to run away from it, and deciding to deal with it is the beginning of the only authentic life there is. All evil begins with a lie. The biggest evil comes from the biggest lies, and the biggest lies are the ones we tell ourselves. And we lie to ourselves because we're afraid to take ourselves on."

Getting up from his chair, he went to a file cabinet in the corner of his office and took out a folded piece of paper. Turning, he handed it to me and said, "I know how you feel. You're wondering if you have what it takes. Well, God and you both have some work to do, but I'll say this for you, you're doing your best to look things square in the face."

As he walked out the door I opened the paper he had given me. There, neatly typed by his ancient manual typewriter on plain white paper, was my name in all caps followed by these words from Pascal.

"You would not seek Me if you had not already found Me, and you would not have found Me if I had not first found you."

On close inspection, so much of our indecisiveness concerning life's purpose is little more than a variation on the minister's so-called theological doubts. Ultimately it is fear that holds us back, and we avoid this fear through rationalization. We are afraid that if we ever did commit to emulating the Brother Johns of the world that we would merely end up like the Presbyterian minister: pulled apart between the poles of how we are living and how we ought to live and unable to look away. We are afraid that if we ever did venture out we would find ourselves with the worst of both worlds. On one hand we would learn too much about life to return to our comfortable illusions, and on the other we would learn too much about ourselves to hope for success.

However, in our fear we forget the miraculous.

This fear of the change we need to make in our lives reminds me of an old friend who, though in his thirties and married for some time, was constantly fighting with his wife over her desire to have a baby. Every time he thought of changing into a father the walls closed in. Fatherhood, he thought, was nothing more than dirty diapers, stacks of bills, sleepless nights, and doting in-laws in every spare bed and couch. Fatherhood meant an end to spontaneous weekends and evenings with the guys. It also meant trading in his sports car for a mini-van and a bigger life insurance policy. It was all so overwhelming.

Then one day he gave in. He set his jaw and made the decision to transform himself from a man into a father. He took the chance that he would find himself with all the responsibility of fatherhood and with none of its compensations. Then on another day, his wife handed him his newborn boy.

Unexpectedly an inner alchemy began, and something came over him from a direction he didn't know existed. He melted and magically the baby gave birth to a father. He was so full of love for this child that he didn't know what to do with himself. While he once feared losing sleep he began checking his baby so often that the baby lost sleep. He found himself full of boundless gratitude for his re-birth, regret for the fool he was, and compassion for single friends who simply couldn't understand. He called it a miracle.

Similarly we must take a chance and act on faith. We must give in, make the commitment, and be willing to pay the price. We must commit to becoming one with that passive spark of divinity longing for actuality that Thorton Wilder in Our Town describes so well,

"Now there are some things we all know but we don't take'm out and look at'm very often. We all know that something is eternal…everybody knows in their bones that something is eternal and that something has to do with human beings. All the greatest people ever lived have been telling us that for five thousand years and yet you'd be surprised how people are always losing hold of it. There's something way down deep that's eternal about every human being."

We must commit to facing our doubts, limitations, and self-contradictions head on while holding on to this voice of eternity. This eternal voice is urging us to take a chance on an unknown outcome in much the same way that nature's voice urged my friend to take a chance on a new life. And we must fight distraction, futility, rationalization and fatigue at every step.

From this side of the chasm we may react with dismay at all the work involved in never again "losing hold of it." From this side it may be hard to imagine that just as changing a diaper can be magically transformed from drudgery to an effortless privilege so can standing outside in the rain for others. But to experience the magic of this transformation we must put aside these doubts. We must resolve to act decisively while trusting in the aid of something we don't understand and can never predict. We must open ourselves up to the miraculous, to grace.

Working toward this miraculous transformation, re-birth, or inner alchemy is the true purpose of life. This transformation is what the West calls "conversion" and the East "enlightenment," and is the fruit of our commitment to the authentically purposeful life that Father Christian described so well. It is this transformation that turns work into effortless privilege, makes the unnatural values of Brother John second nature, and

proves that the answer to the monk's last prayer each night at Compline for a "restful night and a peaceful death" is eternally ours. And when we're ready Brother John will be waiting for us eager to share this miraculous umbrella. Like him we will be utterly grateful for who have become, remorseful for who we were, and compassionate towards those who do not understand.

I am not a monk, but I spend enough time at Mepkin Abbey that Father Feliciano introduced me to a visitor recently and followed it with, "He's always here." I am often asked why I go. I go because Brother John loves God so much he doesn't know what to do with himself. He doesn't know what to do with himself so he stands outside on a cold Christmas night with an umbrella waiting. Waiting to offer us some protection and human comfort on our long journey home.

August "Augie" Turak is indeed a man for all seasons. In addition to being the founder and Chair of the Self Knowledge Symposium (SKS), a non-profit organization working with college students on issues of spirituality, leadership and personal transformation, he has also been a successful entrepreneur, multiple business owner, executive, lecturer, teacher and consultant. But at heart Turak is a self-described "seeker" who traces whatever he has accomplished to a promise he made at 19 to live a life of service in the pursuit of spiritual transformation.

After selling his software business, Turak retired from a full time professional business life at age 49. Currently he focuses most of his time and energy on his graduate studies in theology at St. John's University in Collegeville, MN, executive coaching, and mentoring the young professionals who manage the not-for-profit organization he founded in 1989.

Will Willimon, the long-time Dean of the Duke University Chapel, author, and Bishop of The United Methodist Church says Turak is "a modern day Socrates," and describes The Self Knowledge Symposium as the "hottest thing happening in higher education today." Turak has been featured in the Wall Street Journal, Fast Company, Selling Magazine, the New York Times, Success Magazine, and in various other publications and media.

The Face Collector

by Dr. Mitch Abblett

The therapist at my Vietnam veterans' therapy group said if I were really an "animal" like I used to say, then I wouldn't have carried so much pain around for the past thirty

years. “Animals” don't have a conscience. They don't hurt at the recollection of past wrongs. I told myself at the time -- ten years ago -- that she never stepped foot inside Vietnam, so she didn’t know what she was talking about. All her psycho-babble would never stop that girl's face from rising up from the murderous muck of my nightmares. Her soft, empathic shrink's voice could never sponge away that look from my mind.

A silent face with large, wet unblinking eyes on the verge of tears, but watching me. The crying on hold. She's waiting. She's alone, standing on the edge of a rice paddy. Her clothes are tattered and the wind creates whipped chaos with her hair. She stands there staring at me with dewy eyes. For years, I called them “ “girl-gook eyes.” Now, they look different even though I don't see her much anymore in my dreams. Things changed after I became a face collector.

I drifted from job to job and marriage to marriage after my tour was up in Vietnam. After I was “recycled” back into society. Like a crushed can of soda, I was deposited back home in hopes I might still be of some use. But just like an empty can, once you've been crushed, obliterated -- you can no longer do what you were originally intended for. You're just a piece of trash to be kicked around, for people to cut themselves on. You're in for a good long rusting.

And then I happened upon a decent camera at a flea market. I grabbed it up and started snapping shots in my free time. And since I couldn't hold a job, and kept alienating my family and friends with all my boozing and bar fighting, I had quite a bit of time to myself. My therapist, and the other guys from my group prodded me on, told me I had an “eye” for photography. I laughed them off in public, but kept it up in private. Got myself a better camera. Took pictures like a madman.

I found myself drawn to taking face shots of people. Catching them at the split second their emotions drew them down a new path. The freshness of the moment fluttering across their expressions like breeze across a bed of flowers. These are the faces I collect. Moments I try to render through the contours of shadow, light and hue. And my restlessness keeps me on the move, always searching for more. Never tiring of it, because I'm always learning from these faces. I'm an emotional archeologist, unearthing peoples' pasts and giving evidence of their pain, sorrow, jubilation and joy in the present. In the angle of their lips, position of their bodies, the way their eyes hold or retreat from the light.

And now I get paid for these pictures. Not a lot, but enough to travel the world to collect faces. And the people I meet have their likenesses displayed in magazines across the world. A couple even landed on the cover of National Geographic. Haunting shots of children's eyes. Their innocence lost in the wake of war, famine or disease. Faces finding their own soundless, motionless language. Pain captured and imprisoned behind the hard line of their lips.

I'm also a teacher of sorts. When I'm in the States for any length of time, I'm usually busy traveling around the country speaking to auditoriums full of junior high and high school kids. Sometimes, I even speak in places of higher learning. Places where you'd think my basic message would be well-engrained in students by that point.

It’s not.

They bill me as a warrior. A “hero” who has come to talk to kids about how service and sacrifice for God and country has shaped me into the man I am today. And the kids show up excited over the possibility of hearing stories of real-life combat. Like something daring and dangerous they have come to expect after a lifetime of gorging on a Hollywood diet.

Kids are usually excited to see me. They have shining, smile-filled looks as they watch me from their seats. Like I’m an astronaut or a Super-Bowl-winning quarterback. It helps that I always show up in my old Marine dress uniform. I’ve had to log a lot of miles jogging to fit into it, but it seems to add something to my message. I walk up to the podium with my white cap tucked neatly under my left arm. My pressed dark blue gabardine coat with its gleaming gold buttons commanding their attention. My ribbons, sergeant's stripes and medals soliciting their admiration. Except for the graying hair, it’s like I stepped off the recruitment poster.

It's the same uniform I wore just prior to hopping the transport to Vietnam. Only now, it feels different, heavier. More than medals, it has thousands of echoes pinned to it. Though it’s spotless and crisp, there are stains and tattering in the material. In the process of its donning before one of my talks to kids, it serves as my reminder. The dark coat as my own portable marble war memorial, with dozens of dead names invisibly etched there.

And today is no different from any of the hundreds of talks I’ve given. I’m standing at a podium on a high school stage. I’m jet-lagged from my flight in from Hong Kong, so I’m a bit foggy on the details. I know I’m in Washington, outside Seattle. I couldn’t tell you the specific name of the place. The school’s mascot is the Grizzly bear. And I only know this because I’m staring up at a huge banner emblazoned with one of these clawed beasts, on the back wall of the auditorium.

I’m betting these kids are taught just like I was at their age. That winning is crucial and losing is unacceptable. That with enough determined effort, victory will be at hand. Somehow these values didn’t carry the day in Vietnam. But I don’t get into these issues during my talks, not even if I’m asked. The teachers sometimes try to draw me into political debates about the war. That’s not my point. “Others have much more to say about the big, political picture regarding Vietnam,” I say to them. “It's impossible to focus on the forest when you spent your time in Vietnam lost in among the trees.”

I've seen thousands of kid faces during my talks. The mass of their eyes and lips is too much for me to capture. I have a pre-talk ritual where I pick out one or two faces to focus on. To serve as representatives for the rest. Someone to judge my progress by. A young Asian girl seizes my attention. Pretty, with long, dark hair. She's in the second row. A faint, nervous smile quickly emerges and retreats across her face in mouse-like fashion as my gaze meets hers.

I close my eyes for a moment and flash to her face. The face I conjured that should be forty years old by now. But it's not. It's young, a baby-san's face, about to be streaked with crying. For years I would tell myself that the slanting of her gook-eyes made it harder for the tears to break loose and fall. That it was her fault, her race's fault, she couldn't get on with the crying. That, while I may have killed her, I had nothing to do with anything else the war had done to her or her family. I wasn't to blame for the sorrow she always shoves at me in my dreams.

I open my eyes and face the students. "My name is John. I'm 55 years old, and I am a veteran of the Vietnam War."

The kids don't care what my name is, how old I am, or that I was in Vietnam. They see my uniform and the medals, and they follow the word "war" with applause. They offer it up to me freely. And it's this part that is always the hardest. Having to stand and listen to them cheering for someone about whom they know nothing real. I'm merely a clothes hanger on which they drape their stereotyped dreams and ideals. And that's why I'm here. To teach them to really see people. That just as easily as they assumed to know and love me with their applause, they can come to hate and destroy others. They have to learn to spend the time looking beneath the surface. Collecting details and hints of others' depth of being. Like how I do so by collecting faces.

"I was awarded a Purple Heart and a Congressional Medal of Honor for my actions on one particular day during my tour of duty in Vietnam. May 25th, 1969." I'm pointing to the medals on my chest. The kids settle into a respectful calm. They are waiting for the story.

"I was 20 years old, and a marine sergeant. I had been in Vietnam for 8 months, and saw enough violence and death to last the rest of my life." I tell them about seeing buddies killed and mutilated by the enemy. Vietnamese villagers whose skin had been charred and peeled away by napalm. How I had trained my rifle on a Viet-Cong soldier running across a field in the distance, lead him a bit with my aim, fired and watched him crumple forward in a heap as if tackled from behind by some invisible lineman during a football game. I tell them about the thunderous noise of helicopters and artillery. The silence of a terrified night of waiting for the enemy's arrival. The unearthly smells. The heat, the damp, the blisters, the crying during unrelenting downpours so no one noticed.

“That was the typical Vietnam,” I say to my quiet, staring audience. “The typical war experience. Nothing really unique about it.”

It’s at this point that the kids are always silent. They are receptive because I've stepped outside the pep rally mentality that usually kicks off my presentations. They’re waiting for me to clean things up. To pull them up from the raw description of war I’ve just delivered. To lift them up with a story of bravery and happy endings. Something appropriately followed by a commercial for sugary breakfast cereal.

“I want to tell you about what happened on the day I earned these medals,” I say, the spotlight they have trained on me, temporarily blinding me from my focus on the young Asian student's face. “But first, I want to show some of my work. I'm a photographer now, and I want to share some of my pictures with you before I continue the story.”

I cue the teacher who is manning the slide projector, and he flashes the first of my snapshots on the large screen over my head. It's one of my favorites. A three-year-old boy from Colombia. He’s holding a piece of bread to his lips with pudgy, mud-caked fingers. Recent teary riverbeds are clearly visible, streaked through the dirt on his cheeks. “This is my collection. The faces I've found from all over the world.” I nod toward the light of the projector, and the parade of pictures begins. A new face every few seconds. And, as is my habit, I just stand and watch my audience as they scan these foreign faces. I do not give any description. No instructions for the viewing. The clicking of the slide projector breaks the silence, which continues for several minutes until the slides end and the screen is left awash in white light.

“What do you make of these? All these faces?” I ask. “Anyone have a comment?” This talk is like most. No hands. No comments. The kids don’t know what I’m looking for. They don’t see the point. “It's alright,” I say. “I’ll come back to these in a moment.”

I find the Asian student's face, watching me intently, ignoring the whispering of the restless friend sitting next to her, and I continue. “May 25th, 1969.” I tell them I was driving a large truck that day, heavily loaded with artillery munitions. My unit’s 2nd Lieutenant was riding shotgun. We were under orders to deliver our load to a forward artillery emplacement for an attack scheduled that evening. Intelligence had forecast a significant surge of North Vietnamese army activity in our area, so a swift response was necessary in order to prevent the decimation of our hard-won positions. “Get these munitions there on time, or else many of our boys are going to die,” the Major had said.

I hesitate for a moment. I hold onto the Asian student's eyes. Closing mine, I focus on that familiar, young, war-swept girl’s face.

“For you,” I whisper to myself, and I watch her tears break free. Falling forward like two miniature translucent boulders.

I look out at my audience and point to my Purple Heart pinned to my uniform. “We came under heavy sniper fire as we neared our destination. I got this for the shrapnel I took in my arm, leg and abdomen.” I point out the locations of my old wounds and then I point to the Medal of Honor. “I got this because I kept the truck moving despite the barrage of enemy fire. I almost passed out a couple of times, but I kept my foot on the gas, and we got there. The artillery attack commenced as scheduled.”

A few kids start clapping. “Way to go,” one of them calls from the back. Applause ripples across the auditorium, but weaker, less intense than upon my introduction. To some of these kids, I’d gone all the way. Scored one for the team. And maybe, as I have told myself thousands of times since that day, I did save some lives.

I cue the projector once again, and the face of the young Colombian boy reemerges. “Can someone tell me about this picture? What do you see here?”

Several seconds of book bag-shuffling and a few dry, bored coughs. “The kid's been starving. He’s probably from one of those poor countries,” some voice calls out.

“You're right,” I say. “But what you don’t see, unless you really look, is how he’s been crying because both of his parents are dead. Murdered by a local drug lord. He ate the piece of bread I gave him, but he never stopped crying while he ate it.”
“ What does this have to do with Vietnam?” another voice calls out after a moment’s pause. A few kids laugh. I nod silently, taking my cue.

“I need to tell you the beginning of the story. About that day in the truck.” I tell them how my Lieutenant and I were speeding down the narrow dirt road with our load of artillery shells. How we came up quickly on a bend in the road. Too quick to do much about the young girl riding her bicycle along the right-hand shoulder. Nowhere for the truck to go. No time to swerve. I saw a white flash -- her shirt -- and heard the impact with the right front of the truck. I caught only a glimpse of her in the rear-view mirror. Just enough to see her bloodied body, limbs twisting at unnatural angles, as she and her bent bike were hurled by the force of contact toward the ditch. No scream. No words. Just the dull thud. Like we’d merely hit a bump in the road. Although all that blood arcing up into the air was all I needed to see to know she was going to die.

“I told the Lieutenant I was going to stop the truck. Go back and see,” I say to the kids. “But the Lieutenant told me to keep it moving. ‘Didi mau,’ I remember him yelling at me. Take off. Scram.”

I remind my audience that I was under orders. There was the risk of G.I.’s killed if we didn’t make our delivery on time. Our soldiers. Real casualties.

“Just a gook kid, anyway, the Lieutenant said to me after her bloodied image had

disappeared. And we knew it was a young girl because Vietnamese girls wore white. Older, marriage-age women wore dark colors. I told myself she was probably Charlie -- the enemy -- anyway. Probably one of those kids who'd smile while walking up to you holding a live grenade behind their backs."

I tell them I didn't really want to stop the truck. Even though death was not new to me, I didn't want to see her body.
" And so, I never saw her face," I say to these kids. "And then what cinched it for me was that I got medals for getting the truck there on time. When the General pinned them on me, no one knew that I wasn't speeding toward my fellow marines in need of ammunition for the battle, but away from the murder I'd committed."

The high school kids are staring at me with empty faces. The ticker-tape parade looks of jubilant adoration are gone. They are finally seeing past my uniform. Into pieces of the real me. Or at least the real man I was.

I tell them that for years after that day in 1969, I convinced myself the young girl wasn't really a human being. "Just a gook," like the Lieutenant had said. I told myself she was not a life worth caring about. Like running over a cat or dog, someone would come along sooner or later and lift her up off the road and discard her. Clean things up for me. "So for years, I let alcohol, drugs, sex, and back alley brawling keep things clean."

"But your mind keeps a record. It reminds you of what's real. And that girl was real, and I had to go back and find her. But since I never saw her face. Never knew her name, I've had to find her face wherever I can. And so I find her in pictures like these. So now, I'm a face collector. And in these faces, I discover bits and pieces of the people beneath."

The slide projector advances. With each slide, I tell them a snippet about the person I met. The girl in Kenya who carries water from the river to her village where her grandmother is dying; the grandmother who always sang to her about their ancestors. The boy from China whose mother died the week before of SARS and now is crying because he can't understand how such a strong woman could die so quickly. The old man from Florida who suffers from Alzheimer's and, just before snapping the shot, told me, in a rare moment of clarity, that he missed the smell of his long-deceased wife's hair.

To my surprise, the young Asian student I've been using as my focal point, the fulcrum for my talk, raises her hand. "I don't understand why you've blamed yourself all these years for that girl's death. I mean, it was an accident. You didn't intend to hit her, and you couldn't have prevented it."

I smile at her, and at the face that has been crying in my mind for decades. "You're right, but I could have prevented myself from killing her memory all these years. Covering it up and burying myself, my soul, with her in that unmarked grave somewhere in Vietnam."

I point up to the huge face hovering above us on the screen.

“These are faces worth collecting. They are my human bookmarks. They help me remember that we can only kill and discard someone once we have convinced ourselves they are not worthy of our caring.”

“Find a way to see what's real, deeply human, about everyone around you -- find these things and collect them. We need to hold onto these details so we don't lose contact with one another.”

And with the audience's applause, I close my eyes, and feel the warmth of the spotlight on my sweaty face. The baby-san is wiping at her tears as she watches me. She bows her head slightly, closes her eyes as the wind dies around her.

Mitch Abblett, Ph.D. is a psychologist who has worked in outpatient, inpatient and residential treatment settings with a variety of clinical populations – from combat veterans to elderly patients with mental health issues to children and adolescents with severe and dangerous behavioral difficulties. He currently works in a residential treatment setting with adolescents and developmentally delayed adults. In addition to his clinical work, Mitch enjoys writing creative fiction and nonfiction. In his writing, he is particularly drawn to the exploration of characters who demonstrate the courage to struggle with themselves in pursuit of a deeper personal identity – a purposeful life. He lives with his wife, Katy, in the Boston area.

How Wonderfully We Stand Upon This World

By Dr. Alan Hirshfeld

Step through the front door of George Riebau’s bookbindery at 2 Blandford Street near Manchester Square in London and feel the present dissolve into centuries past. The pungent aroma of leather, glue, and varnish invades the nostrils. A murmurous drumbeat—the binder’s mallet tamping gathered pages—sounds an insistent rhythm: *work, work, work*. Books are everywhere, on shelves, on tables, even wedged into the cubby-like window frames, where they eclipse the light that struggles to enter. In this dim paper-and-leather universe of long ago, French émigré George Riebau and his three apprentices stand at their posts, plying the bookbinder’s craft. Before them lie the

accoutrements of their trade: needles, thread, Jaconette cloth, engraving tools, standing press, cutting boards. The room buzzes with conversation, for Riebau is a genial man who likes to keep his workers and his customers happy. Yet for all the chatter, the binding and selling of books appear to be the sole order of business here. In short, George Riebau's modest establishment is the last place one would conceive as an incubator for an aspiring scientist. Especially in 1812 England.

But move beyond the benches to the fireplace that keeps the workers' fingers supple through the frigid London winters. There on the mantelpiece, arrayed in no particular order, is a curious assortment of devices that bear no connection to the binding of books: Voltaic piles—batteries, in today's parlance; copper and zinc electrodes; coils of wire; bottled acids; glass cylinders for generating and storing electricity. Nearby, meticulous pencil sketches of electrical machines. And alongside these, jottings about electrical phenomena. Here is the after-hours "laboratory" of young Michael Faraday, one of George Riebau's apprentices, who is at present probably counting the minutes until he can set aside his tools and resume his homespun experiments. Faraday's teachers, such as they are, do not wear silken robes or roam ivy-covered buildings; they speak to Faraday silently from the printed pages that pass through his hands on the way to more advantaged customers. To Faraday, Riebau's shop is truly library, classroom, and laboratory. The mantelpiece curios are manifestations of a dream by a young man whose ambitions press ever more despairingly against the harsh realities of British society. This is an age when the term "upward mobility" holds no practical meaning for the mass of humanity—when, for the most part, scientists are born, not made.

In a few short months, Michael Faraday's apprenticeship will end and, for his family's sake, he must dutifully take up the career for which he trained: bookbinding. And therein lies the source of the searing realization that his life might be spent in the mindless packaging of countless words on countless subjects, and not one of his own devising. For Faraday longs to uncover nature's secrets, not as a hobbyist in some dusty shop corner, but as a professional man of science in a real laboratory. Only then might he fulfill his deep-seated goal: to discern God's invisible qualities through the very design of the world. That this modest apprentice would surmount the many obstacles in his path and lay the foundations of our modern technological society is the true essence of the power of purpose.

Born in a London slum in 1791, Michael Faraday came to George Riebau's bookbindery

in 1805. The shop proved a fertile environment for the inquisitive, but virtually unschooled, Faraday. Books came in, books went out, a steady stream of treacle and treasure that Faraday sampled haphazardly in his off-hours. This week's "lesson" might be *Arabian Nights*, next week's a collection of Hogarth illustrations, and after that, Fanny Burney's edgy take on English society, *Evelina*. But it was books on science that excited him most.

At the dawn of the 19th century, science and its institutions were in flux, spurred as much by new discoveries as by the growing belief that scientific research might enhance a nation's agricultural and industrial development. The fundamental building blocks of matter—atoms—were as yet unknown. Electricity, magnetism, heat, and light were variously "explained," none convincingly. Through careful measurement, the mathematical character of nature's forces could be determined, but their underlying mechanisms, interrelationships, and means of conveyance through space were subject to dispute. Faraday plunged headlong into this melange of ideas, trying with his meager knowledge to sort out fact from fancy. His scientific musings tumbled joyfully, almost uncontrollably, in his head. Riebau described his young charge as perpetually scouring the countryside, "searching for some Mineral or Vegitable curiosity ... his mind ever engaged." All around was God's handiwork, in plain sight, yet inextricably bound up in mystery. Faraday saw no higher purpose than to study, comprehend, and share with others the subtle plan of nature.

Inspired by his literalist reading of the New Testament, Faraday eschewed pride and wealth in favor of piety, humility, and community within his small Protestant congregation. Much of his overt serenity in later life owed itself to the affirmative aspects of his religion. "He drinks from a fount on Sunday which refreshes his soul for a week," noted a friend. Faraday's spiritual framework informed his science without compromising his objective consideration of facts. He believed that God's signature would appear in a fundamental unity of the universe, a philosophy that shaped his scientific outlook. And he took human fallibility as a given, so never staked his ego on the correctness or acceptance of his ideas. He was a scientific pilgrim, inching his way toward the heart of a complex universe. Whether his chosen path proved mistaken was of little consequence; there was always another path. The joy was in the journey.

Although the young Faraday might have fancied himself a proto-scientist, he was too grounded not to see who stared back at him from the mirror: a rough-edged, ill-educated

son of a blacksmith. Characterizing his own language as “that of the most illiterate,” he took elocution lessons two hours every week for seven years. He ordered his friends to mercilessly correct his speech, spelling, and grammar. For ready reference, he carried in his pocket the popular selfhelp volume *Improvement of the Mind*. He attended evening lectures on science and began a commonplace book, whose pages he filled with miscellanea about the natural world.

When the new edition of the *Encyclopedia Britannica* arrived in the shop, Faraday devoured the 127-page entry on electricity. He followed up with Jane Marcet’s *Conversations on Chemistry*, which detailed the electrochemical discoveries of England’s celebrated scientist, Humphry Davy. Faraday was the consummate skeptic: he trusted his eyes and senses to be the sole arbiters of what was true and what was not. In Riebau’s back room, he validated Davy’s experimental claims as best he could. “I was a very lively, imaginative person, and could believe in the ‘Arabian Nights’ as easily as in the ‘Encyclopedia’; but facts were important to me and saved me.” Faraday had further reason to admire Davy: the now-famous chemist had risen from humble circumstances like his own; Davy had become what Faraday longed to be.

In early 1812, a customer learned of Faraday’s scientific interests and invited him to hear Humphry Davy speak at London’s Royal Institution. Davy’s evening lectures had become social events for the well-heeled, turning normally sedate Albemarle Street into a frenzy of carriages and pedestrians. Faraday’s pulse was surely pounding as he ascended the broad, stone staircase to the Royal Institution’s auditorium. Hearing Davy describe his recent work only strengthened his resolve. “The desire to be engaged in scientific occupation, even though of the lowest kind, induced me, whilst an apprentice, to write, in my ignorance of the world and simplicity of my mind, to Joseph Banks, then President of the Royal Society.” England’s venerable Royal Society, established in 1645, was England’s premier scientific organization and boasted in its lineage the likes of Christopher Wren, Isaac Newton, and Edmund Halley. Faraday went to the Society’s offices only to be told that his letter “required no answer”; in the eyes of the scientific establishment, Michael Faraday did not exist. Undeterred, he wrote and illustrated a 386-page synopsis of Davy’s theory of acids and sent the leather-bound volume to Davy, along with a letter pleading his case. This time there was a reply, delivered to his door by a footman in a grand carriage. On March 1, 1813, Faraday took up his new post as Humphry Davy’s laboratory assistant: salary one guinea per week; lodging in the attic with fuel and candles; and, most critically, access to the Royal Institution’s apparatus.

Faraday reveled in his day to day interactions with Davy, who tutored him in all manner of laboratory techniques. In October 1813, the pair embarked on a prolonged tour of Europe's scientific facilities. To Faraday, who had never strayed more than three miles beyond London, the trip was a living tutorial in science, geography, art, history, politics, and manners. Imagine the impact of the snow-capped Alps on a young man who had earlier marveled at the "mountains" of Devonshire. Every day presented a sight or event worthy of entry into his journal: glimpsing Napoleon in a procession; describing the anatomy of French pigs; inspecting Galileo's celebrated telescope; incinerating a diamond in Florence; climbing the slopes of Vesuvius. By the time he returned a year and a half later, Faraday could maneuver with confidence through the social thicket as well as the laboratory. He worked incessantly, both for Davy and for others in need of his analytical skills. In 1816, Faraday published his first scientific paper, on the chemical properties of caustic lime. Other papers followed in quick succession. Faraday delivered his own series of lectures at the City Philosophical Society, and was increasingly sought out as a technical advisor. To Davy's consternation, the standing of his acolyte from the slums began to rival his own.

In 1820 came news of a remarkable discovery: Danish physicist Hans Christian Oersted had found that an electrical current flowing in a wire deflects a magnetic compass needle: electricity generates magnetism. Repeating Oersted's experiment, Faraday realized that such electrically induced magnetism might be harnessed for rotary motion. In 1821, he assembled the first electric motor, in which a suspended, electrified wire circled the pole of a magnet. Announcement of the curious contraption brought Faraday immediate notoriety—and near ruin. Rumors circulated – rumors, Faraday learned, stoked by Davy—that he had stolen his idea from unpublished work by William Hyde Wollaston, one of England's foremost scientists. Only after two agonizing years, and repeated entreaties from Faraday, did Wollaston grudgingly break his silence and speak in Faraday's defense: the discovery of the electric motor was Faraday's own. Davy subsequently opposed his protégé's nomination to the Royal Society, to no effect; Faraday was elected – the lone dissenting vote presumably Davy's own. Even so, Faraday never spoke ill of his mentor; his spiritual imperative was to reveal the workings of nature, not the shortcomings of man. To do so would have merely detracted from the nobility of his cause.

Faraday's most far-reaching contributions came in 1831, when he succeeded in

generating electricity from magnetism. First, he showed that the magnetism of an electrified wire coil creates an electric current in an adjacent coil; here lay the foundation of the modern electrical transformer. He found, too, that he could induce spurts of current in a coil by simply thrusting a magnet into the coil's interior. And by spinning a copper disk between the poles of a magnet, Faraday produced a steady stream of electricity—the world's first dynamo. Here was the generation of electrical power by machine. The societal implications were enormous.

Pondering next the interconnectedness of electricity and magnetism, Faraday entered the laboratory of the mind and modeled electrical and magnetic forces in a completely new way: as tensioned lines of force surrounding electric charges, magnets, circuits—invisible motive tentacles that impel material objects that stray among them. In Faraday's conception, force arises, not when some impulse shoots instantaneously from a seat of power to a remote object, but when the object encounters the "force field" that surrounds every seat of power. In keeping with his unified view of nature, he wondered whether light might be a related phenomenon, perhaps a vibratory disturbance of intertwined electrical and magnetic fields. He envisioned waves of light—ripples of "electromagnetic" energy—fanning out through the field like waves on a pond.

Here Faraday's quest to elucidate reality encountered its severest challenges: his own intellectual limitations and the prejudices of his contemporaries. Faraday's particular gift was to make visible in the laboratory that which had been invisible, to magnify nature's subtle effects to the point of sensibility. He was a powerful thinker whose speculations (by choice) were anchored solely in what was rendered plain by experiment. Only now he had entered a realm of study in which experimental verification was difficult, if not impossible—the realm of the mathematician, who solves equations to find plausible explanations of physical phenomena. And Faraday, facile as he was in the laboratory, was a grade-school mathematician. At a time when mathematics was fast becoming the key analytical tool of theoretical physics, Faraday put forth his revolutionary ideas in the only way he could, through the skilled use of intuition, logic, and language.

So taxing was his mental effort to explain nature's underlying architecture (heaped high atop other work) that by late 1839 Faraday was felled by nervous exhaustion, and for five years remained silent on the subjects of electricity and magnetism. He returned with an exquisite experiment proving that light can be altered by magnetism; as he had predicted, light possesses a magnetic character. Then came a speculative paper

summarizing his thoughts on “ray vibrations,” a remarkably prescient forerunner of the modern electromagnetic theory of light. The scientific establishment viewed these “ramblings” with bemusement, if not scorn, for the new language of science was mathematical. Faraday’s response: “Nothing is too wonderful to be true, if it be consistent with the laws of nature.” It would not be until the 1870s that the gifted mathematician James Clerk Maxwell fully translated Faraday’s complex ideas into the hard dialect of equations. Only then did scientists concede the essential correctness of Faraday’s views on force and light, which Einstein characterized as the “greatest alteration … in our conception of the structure of reality since the foundation of theoretical physics by Newton.”

Beyond the motor, generator, and other electromagnetic advances, the list of Faraday’s contributions to humanity runs long, touching areas as diverse as chemistry, geology, metallurgy, optics, cryogenics, and education. He sought no personal gain from his discoveries and routinely refused honors and lucrative consultantships as immaterial to his committed purpose.

For nearly forty years, Faraday invited the public to the Royal Institution to share his enduring sense of wonder: “Let us now consider, for a little while, how wonderfully we stand upon this world.” Complete with sparks, flames, and all manner of devices, Faraday’s Friday Evening Discourses and annual Christmas lectures for children established him as England’s scientific ambassador to its citizenry. One attendee recalled how Faraday’s “enthusiasm sometimes carried him to the point of ecstasy when he expatiated on the beauty of nature.” Transcriptions of his children’s lectures reveal his gentle, avuncular style, and also how addressing young audiences provided a source of renewal: “I will return to second childhood, and become as it were, young again among the young.”

There is a serenity in knowing that nature is explicable and beckons generation after generation to know it better. Michael Faraday sought to understand the natural world on behalf of us all, in the belief that the revealed knowledge would nourish the collective soul of humanity. He was one of those rare scientists in the mold of Galileo, Newton and Einstein, free of blinding preconceptions about nature and thus endowed with a vision denied his contemporaries. Faraday’s legacy is nothing less than our own technological society. Through his unrelenting power of purpose, the onetime binder of books appropriately invited nature to pen another chapter in the story that is our universe.

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A past winner of a Griffith Observatory/Hughes Aircraft Co. national science writing award, he is currently working on a popular biography of 19th-century scientists Michael

Faraday and James Clerk Maxwell, to be published by Walker and Co. Publishers in 2005. He is co-editor of Sky Catalogue 2000.0*. His three-part series on the history of observational astrophysics is currently featured in* Sky & Telescope *magazine. Other writings have appeared numerous places, including the* Astrophysical Journal*,* Boston Globe*,* BBC History *magazine, The Mathematics Teacher, Isis, and American Scientist.*

He currently serves on the advisory board of the American Astronomical Society's Historical Astronomy Division and was named in 2003 to MIT's Distinguished Lecturer Series.

Grace

By Leslie Larson

When I met Grace Hills, she didn't know the alphabet. She could write her name, but she couldn't read the newspaper, take down the address of her doctor's office, or pass the written test to get her driver's license. She was seventy-four years old, the third of eleven children born in Empire, Georgia. She had started chopping cotton when she was seven; when she was thirteen she took a job as a housekeeper in a white woman's house. She married at seventeen and spent the rest of her working life as a seamstress. She had raised five children, three girls and two boys. Now that she had retired, she wanted to learn to read. Not only did she want to read, she wanted to learn to write. And not just write. She wanted to write poetry.

She didn't tell me all of this right away. The first time we met was on a winter day in the main branch of the San Francisco public library. She was waiting for me in the reading room, which had tall ceilings and enormous windows that filled one wall. You could see the gray sky outside. The tables were filled with homeless men who had come in to get out of the cold. Some thumbed through magazines, many slept with their heads on the tables. There was a close smell of musty books, old coffee, and human bodies.

Grace was sitting at the corner of the table nearest the reference desk. As soon as I saw her I cursed myself for suggesting we meet in this place where Grace was clearly uncomfortable. She sat with her purse in her lap, her knees together, and—though she didn't move her head—her eyes shifted from side to side, keeping an eye on the men. She looked at me with distress and reproach. What in the world were you thinking? her eyes said.

I introduced myself and suggested we find our own table. When she stood, I was surprised at how tall she was. She was dressed as if for church in a dress that reminded me of Blue Willow china, navy on white. Her skin was very dark and her hair very white, pulled straight back into a bun at the nape of her neck. She had a long face and prominent teeth. I had never met anyone whose name suited her so perfectly.

I was in a hurry to get her away from the smell and the snores of the men, but she walked stiffly, taking small, careful steps. I would soon learn that everything Grace did was unhurried and precise. We finally found a table in the stacks, hidden in a thicket of bookshelves. I told her a little about myself: that I had moved to San Francisco when I finished college, that I was trying to make a living as a freelance writer. I explained how reading had always been important to me and how, since reading had enriched my life in more ways than I could express, I wanted to pass that gift along to someone else.

I was in my twenties, earnest and enthusiastic. I expected Grace to react with appreciation and eagerness. But though she listened politely, I could tell she didn't much care what brought me there. Instead she eyed the stack of paperback books and the folder of paper I'd brought. She made it clear, without saying a word, that we should get down to business. She was there to learn.

I opened one of the books I'd chosen from the rack on the main floor of the library. It was for beginning adult readers; there were stories about fixing cars, finding lost dogs, and applying for jobs. I placed the book on the table between us and pointed to the first line. I wanted to get an idea of how much she knew. Grace leaned forward. She looked at the print for a minute, then she ran the palm of her hand down the face of the page as though to absorb the meaning through her skin. When she was finished she leaned back and smiled at me, nodding for me to go on, to teach her.

During the course of that first hour I saw that we'd have to start pretty much at the beginning. That first lesson we took on A, B, and C, practicing recognition, sounds, and writing. Grace worked hard. At the end of the lesson I was exhausted.

That week I drew up a game plan. I made flash cards, selected readings, and created worksheets. Teaching someone at Grace's stage of life to read seemed like an enormous endeavor, but I was determined—at least at first. We worked our way slowly through the alphabet. I taught Grace the way I'd learned myself in elementary school. B was for BLUE, BOOK, and BOY. H was for HARD. Some letters were tricky, you never knew what sound they were going to make. Grace kept her head down, the pencil clenched in her hand. She was serious and a little shy, not very talkative. She never laughed at the jokes I made, she just looked at me to see if I was finished so we could get back to work. I quit fooling around. She learned short words: THE, IT, DOG, RUN. The flashcards got soft and tattered. We met for an hour and a half once a week. At the end of six months, we'd worked our way through the alphabet. The rain stopped and the fog came in, giving an underwater glow to the reading room when the weak sun shone through the big windows. The homeless guys moved from the tables to the steps outside. Grace recognized all the letters; she knew the sound each made. She could read about thirty or forty words and was well on her way to sounding out a lot more. I prompted her as she stumbled through simple sentences, sticking and bumping, but eventually making her way to the end of the paragraph. The last few minutes of every lesson, I always read a

passage from the Bible she carried in her purse, usually one of the Psalms. We were both tired by then and it was a relief to hear my voice moving, unimpeded, over the words. All I had to do was read and all she had to do was listen.

To break up the tedium I brought in maps and showed Grace where the continents were. I pointed out the oceans, the mountains, the different countries. We read news clippings and magazine articles, seed catalogs, instruction booklets, and recipes. Grace's attention lagged. She nodded politely as I explained, and struggled dutifully through the readings, but I got the feeling that she was doing this for my benefit, not hers. She was always glad to get back to the words: to sounding them out, learning the meanings, memorizing the spelling. Then you could feel the force of her attention as she translated the word from the markings on the page to the sound in her mouth, or as she sketched the letters onto the paper.

I asked Grace if she wanted a writing project.

Yes.

What did she want to write? A letter to her daughter, who worked as a nurse in Seattle?

She shook her head.

A birthday card to her grandson?

Nope.

Did she want to write a news story about some pivotal event in her life? Grace pressed her lips together and looked at me like she'd just wait for this particular bout of madness to pass.

Well, then. What did she want to write? A smile split her face open like I'd finally, finally asked something she wanted to hear.

"Poems," she said.

That's when I finally began to get it. The strange way Grace had always used the paper, breaking the sentences in half and starting on the next line, leaving white space, sometimes just a word or two to a line. Wasting paper! The way she'd perk up when I explained consonant blends and the ways vowels changed their sounds when they paired with other letters. Her delight when she learned certain words: RIVER, TWILIGHT, MOON, WIND. All this time she'd been listening with a poet's ear, looking for a language that matched the music in her heart. After all, she had listened to language all her life. To her language was sound, not sight. Once she started, she couldn't stop. The

poetry was already in her head, but it was a nuisance to get it out. She struggled impatiently with the words, working her mouth as she wrestled with the pencil, held back by fingers that couldn't keep pace with the rhythms in her head. But she stuck with it and the poems grew, line by line. They had the same pared-down power as the Bible verses we read. She didn't waste any time on frills, cheap emotion, or pretty phrases. She'd waited her whole life to write poetry and there was no time to waste. She wrote about two things: the countryside where she'd grown up, and her relationship with God. There was no clear line where one ended and the other began.

Then one morning I had a phone call from Grace's daughter. Grace wouldn't be at her lesson the next day. She had suffered a stroke.

Despite Grace's age, the news took me completely by surprise. I realized I had no way of reaching her. Though we'd spent almost a year together, I'd never met anyone in her family, visited her house, or invited her to mine. Our meetings had been friendly but businesslike, focused only on our work. So I waited. I was struggling with my own fiction writing at the time, and barely making a living writing advertising copy for cookie jars, baby strollers, office supplies, and luxury vacation packages. Months went by. Then out of the blue, the same daughter called again to say that Grace was better, that she was ready to carry on with her lessons.

I was nervous waiting for her at the library. I didn't know what to expect, whether she'd look or act different. But Grace looked the same. Her perfectly ironed dress and her hair pulled back, her same slow and steady way of walking. She let me lay my hand over hers when she sat down beside me. She thanked me when I told her how glad I was to see her.

I thought she might need a little brush-up, that we might have to go over a few things to refresh her mind. I asked her to read a little from one of the books we'd already mastered. Grace stared at the page a long time before she raised her head and looked at me, a puzzled expression on her face. I prompted her with the first few words, reminded her of which story it was. When she continued to stare at the page I pointed to the letters, asked her to sound them out. A queasy feeling rocked my stomach. I asked her to spell the word, to point to the first letter, to name it. Grace just looked at me and raised her eyebrows. She even gave me a little smile.

She had forgotten everything. Everything. The letter A and all the letters that came after it. What's a vowel and what's a consonant. When two vowels go walking, the first does the talking. She had forgotten every word she learned, even favorites like ROCK, WIND, RAIN, and SKY. The only thing she remembered was that she wanted to write poetry.

We started over.

Learning was harder for Grace the second time round, but her need to write was more

urgent. Her mind had become porous, incapable of holding onto anything for more than a few minutes. We drilled for weeks on the first few letters of the alphabet, but sometimes it was like the lesson hadn't even happened. We did exactly the same thing the next week. I began to dread our Tuesday mornings. It was too painful and, frankly, too tedious to go through the alphabet all over again. Since the stroke, Grace's hand was uncoordinated and weak. Her writing was barely legible. I wrote words in a yellow highlighter so that she could trace them in pencil. Over and over. We went through stacks of paper I salvaged from my freelance jobs: one side filled with her labored struggles to form the letters, the other with my ads for shopping malls, banks, and leather jackets. Grace was dogged. Once in awhile she sighed with exasperation or clenched the pencil like she wanted to squeeze it into submission. But usually she just worked. One letter, one sound at a time. At the end of the lesson we still read a passage from her Bible and when we were finished she gave me the same mild smile and told me she'd see me next week. I began to wonder what she had to say that was so important. What was worth that much effort? Her progress was painfully slow and my patience was wearing thin. Maybe there was something wrong with her because who in her right mind would persevere so stubbornly with so little payoff? I schemed about ways to tell her I'd have to end our lessons: that I was taking a full time job, that I was moving away, that my mother was sick and I had to devote all my time to taking care of her. I planned speeches that I promised myself I'd deliver before we began our next lesson. But Grace's expression always stopped me dead. There was iron in her calmness, something steely in the placid way she looked at me. I bit my tongue and got on with the lesson.

I found that if I wrote the letters with my finger on the palm of Grace's hand while she repeated it, she was more likely to remember. She closed her eyes and tipped her head to the side like she was listening as her skin sucked in the letters. It was hard work. I called out letters and asked her to tell me the sounds they made. She watched my face as she pursed her lips to see if her answer was going to be the right one. We made it through the alphabet. We started on words again: IT, THE, BOY. Then we moved to simple sentences: SHE READS THE BOOK. HE WALKED HOME. Sometimes my praise was so lavish the homeless men raised their heads to see what the fuss was about.

Grace went back to the poetry she'd written before her stroke. She traced the letters with her finger. My heart ached. How I wanted to quit! Words evaded her. She struggled, trying to dredge up the phrases she wanted from her memory. I wondered how I, who wanted to be a writer and had so many words at my disposal, could have so little to say when Grace—who had so much to say—had such trouble finding the tools to say it. She finally solved the problem. "You write," she said, passing the pencil. "I'll tell you what to say."

We spent our last sessions that way. The words came easier when she didn't have to struggle with the letters. She fixed her eyes on the high ceiling like she could see the hills and rivers of Georgia exactly as they'd been when she was a girl. I simply listened and

wrote. I began to understand that Grace's desire to write poetry, her sense of purpose about it, lived in a different part of her brain than the section that had been wiped clear by the stroke. That other part, the part that some people might call the soul, was untouched—as strong and fresh as ever.

Just when Grace was starting to get her footing back, she had another stroke. She didn't come back after that. I saw her one more time before she died, at a ceremony for the students who had graduated from the literacy program. A large group gathered in one of the tall-windowed rooms. Grace was there with her daughters, sons, grandchildren, and neighbors. Except for the wheelchair where she sat, she looked exactly the same. Her hand was warm and her grip was strong when she grasped my hand. Her daughter pushed her up to the front of the ring of people, where she'd have a good view of the podium.

The woman who ran the program had compiled a book of students' writing. Everyone got a copy. I had submitted almost all of Grace's poetry because it was too hard for me to choose just a few. The poems were all one poem, I discovered, the song of Grace's heart. Let someone else decide which ones to include. Reading them all at once, it dawned on me that beneath Grace's silence, behind her mild smile and stubborn ways was a fiercely happy person, one who had worked hard and struggled all her life and who now enjoyed a joyous relationship with her Creator. She knew exactly who she was and where she belonged. When I opened the book, I was stunned to see that the collection was more a showcase for Grace's poetry than a representative sampling of everyone's work. While each student had one or at most two pieces in the book—usually just a couple of paragraphs—Grace's poems spread over page after page. It was almost embarrassing, but at the same time it made sense. Grace was unstoppable. One by one, students came to the podium to read their pieces. A young mother told how, for the first time, she was able to help her kids with their homework. Another young woman read about the new feeling of self-worth she got from filling out a job application. A thirty-something guy read a paragraph about how good it felt to get on the bus with a newspaper under his arm. An older man in his fifties confessed that, until this program, his wife was the only person in the world who knew he couldn't read. Each person's story was heartfelt and the pride he or she felt in reading from the printed page was evident. It was very moving and the applause was thunderous.

But no one was prepared for Grace.

She didn't read her own poems. The woman who ran the program stepped up to the podium and simply began reading. It was one of my favorite poems, about a rock in the river where Grace's mother had washed the family's clothes. A sudden, listening silence filled the room. I felt the distinct presence of each and every person there, felt their concentration, as intense as my own. In that instant I understood the power of Grace's commitment, of her devotion. She didn't question where she was going or how she was going to get there. She didn't stop to measure how much progress she'd made or how far

she still had to go. She didn't ask if her effort was worth it or when the payoff would come. She simply took the first step and kept going, moment by moment, never taking no for an answer. Her devotion was spiritual in its persistence, and she served her purpose like she served God, without asking why. She simply trusted that the words would come, that sooner or later they would find their way to the light. When the poem was finished, no one clapped. We looked around at each other. Everyone was crying, except Grace. She sat in the wheelchair with her hands folded in her lap and a slight smile on her face. Then, as the applause broke out, she nodded toward the woman who had read as if she agreed with her, as if she were satisfied. Finally she looked around at everyone, acknowledging us, and for that moment everything was just as it should be.

Leslie Larson grew up in San Diego, California, and attended the University of California, San Diego, where she earned a degree in English Literature. She has spent the past twenty-odd years in the San Francisco Bay Area where she works as a freelance writer—writing everything from book reviews to television spots, newsletters, print ads, and feature stories. For the past decade she has been a senior writer at the University of California Press. During all those years she was also writing fiction and has just completed her second novel. Her work has appeared in The Women's Review of Books*,* East Bay Express*, and* Faultline*, among other publications.*

Leslie was in her twenties when she met Grace Hills, the subject of her essay. They were brought together by Project Read, an adult literacy program run by the San Francisco Public Library. Leslie is a passionate advocate for literacy. She has worked her entire adult life for small publishers and has tutored reading in adult literacy programs as well as in the Oakland public schools.

Crying Forever

By Struan Stevenson

Kizat Kuzembayev stands proudly to attention as we enter his tiny cancer ward in the hospital in Semipalatinsk. Medals are pinned to his dressing gown indicating his status as an important war hero. He is 79 years old and suffering from terminal stomach cancer. In front of two other elderly cancer patients who share his room, he explains how he served with a reconnaissance unit in Danzig during W.W.II, receiving the Order of Glory, The Order of the Red Star and The Great Patriot's War medal in recognition of his bravery. These were the highest decorations for ordinary soldiers in the Soviet army. But in 1953, he was one of 42 healthy young men selected by the Soviet military regime as human guinea pigs. The small group was taken to the village of Karaul in the remote steppe of East Kazakhstan. Local villagers had been evacuated and Mr Kuzembayev and his

colleagues were ordered to leave the shelter of the village houses in which they were billeted, to watch an atomic explosion from a nearby hill, only 30 miles from the test site.

Mr Kuzembayev recalls the nuclear blast in vivid detail. He saw the sky turn red as if a huge fire had engulfed the landscape from horizon to horizon. As the ground trembled beneath his feet and the hellish roar of the atomic weapon swamped Karaul, he watched the fiery sky turn black, then grey, with piercing white and red spirals of flame shooting skywards, while the writhing stalk of the monstrous mushroom cloud unfolded. Later, KGB officers told his group that they would now have "no worries from the USA," as the Soviets had perfected their own atom bomb. Mr Kuzembayev feels fortunate to have lived to see his 80th year. He is the only surviving member of this group of nuclear guinea pigs. The other 41 each died of cancer.

From 1949 until 1990, the Soviet Union used the Semipalatinsk region of East Kazakhstan as a nuclear testing site. Hidden from the world, this top-secret site the size of France was subjected to 607 nuclear explosions, including 26 aboveground tests, 124 atmospheric tests and 457 underground. Cynically, the military scientists would wait until the wind was blowing in the direction of the remote Kazakh villages before detonating their nuclear devices. KGB doctors would then closely study the effects of nuclear radiation on their own population.

After widespread protests by the Kazakh population, President Gorbachev ordered a moratorium on all further tests in 1990. When the Soviet Union finally collapsed in December 1991, the departing battalions of troops and secret police who had guarded the 'Polygon' in East Kazakhstan, left a legacy of devastation and sickness. The 1.5 million population of the Polygon were subjected to the equivalent of 20,000 Hiroshima bombs. Seepage from the underground tests has polluted watercourses and streams. Farmland has been heavily irradiated. Radioactive contamination has entered the food chain.

Now cancers run at five times the national average. Cancers of the throat, lungs and breasts are particularly common. Twelve-year-old girls have developed mammary cancer. Birth defects are three times the national average. Babies and farm animals are born with terrible deformities. Children are mentally retarded and Downs Syndrome is common. Virtually all children suffer from anaemia. Many of the young men are impotent. Many of the young women are afraid to become pregnant in case they give birth to defective babies. Psychological disorders are rife. Suicides are widespread, especially among young men and even, alarmingly among children. Fourteen children and teenagers committed suicide in Karaul village alone last year, including an eleven year old boy and a twelve year old girl. Average life expectancy is 52, compared to 59 outside the Polygon.

In 1974, the United States and Soviet Union signed the Threshold Test Ban Treaty limiting the yield of underground nuclear tests to 150 kilotons. Two years later, in 1976,

the two countries signed the Peaceful Nuclear Explosions Treaty, which limited the yield of such underground nuclear explosions to 150 kilotons. However, ratification of both Treaties was delayed due to a lack of effective verification procedures. A comprehensive moratorium was only finally agreed at a summit meeting between Reagan and Gorbachev in 1990. In the intervening years, the Soviets had cynically continued to test atomic weapons, claiming that they were carrying out peaceful underground explosions in the Polygon to construct a lake, in order to supply fish to the local population.

Thus the Atomic Lake was born. This massive radioactive reservoir was blasted out of the low-lying mountain range, which crosses the steppe in the region of Semipalatinsk. The Soviets even tried to introduce fish to the highly radioactive waters, encouraging local Kazakh villagers to catch and eat their deadly harvest. Now there is growing evidence that cracks and fissures in the geological strata of the Polygon have allowed plutonium, strontium and americium into the River Irtysh, which flows from China, through the Polygon and on through Siberia to the Kara Sea and eventually the Arctic Ocean. The Soviet nuclear legacy may yet become a world catastrophe.

In the village of Znamenka, the local doctor introduces us to a group of patients. Znamenka was one of the villages worst affected by the nuclear tests and many of the inhabitants are ill. Cancers are rife. A group of elderly women recall witnessing the first atomic explosions and seeing the mushroom clouds. They were told to stack bedding and furniture against their doors and windows to protect them from the shock waves, then to stand outside, away from any buildings, to watch the explosions. A man of 25 is led towards us. His mother grips his hand tightly. His head is almost entirely covered by a cancerous tumour, covering his eyes so that he can no longer see. Disconcertingly he says “Ciao” and then we learn that 5 years ago he was sent to Italy to have the tumour surgically removed, paid for by Japanese donors. Sadly, it began to grown again last year and his mother fears it will slowly kill him. She is only 57 years old, but looks like a woman of 80, the struggle to survive etched on her deeply tanned face.

Nearby, a mother holds her young daughter who was born with a cleft palate and harelip. The child clutches a cuddly Loch Ness Monster given to her by ‘Cold Feet’ star - Kimberley Joseph - and tries to smile through her awful deformity. The doctor says that the cost of flying the child and her mother to the West for surgery is well beyond their means. We meet other patients with mental retardation, cancers and deformities – the common currency of the Polygon. After speeches from the village elders I give the local head teacher $250 and a large crate of sweatshirts and caps from the international sportswear company NIKE. I explain that this is for the local children and yet, in the face of such appalling conditions, it seems wholly inadequate.

On across the endless Kazakh steppe our convoy trundles, leaving clouds of radioactive dust in our wake. Occasionally wild horses can be seen drinking from polluted lakes. Kazakh herdsmen on horseback tend their flocks of goats and sheep in the searing heat.

Soon we reach the village of Sarzhal. This village was only 10 miles from ground zero when the first nuclear tests were carried out. Later, the Soviet authorities moved it to 25 miles from the epicentre. Illness and disease have cut a swathe through the local population.

In the library, the village elders vent their fury at the Kazakh government's failure to provide adequate help. One tall gentleman, wearing a traditional Kazakh embroidered cap, roars his disgust, fingers jabbing the air. He shouts that the government will not be happy until they are all dead and the problem has disappeared forever. He points through the window at the direction, from which the nuclear holocaust came and recalls the horror of the bomb blasts.

Another man of 80 comes to the lectern. He is a decorated war veteran who served his country at the Battle of Stalingrad. In a dignified and quiet voice he explains that only two years ago he was a happily married grandfather with ten children and grandchildren. Now, 24 months later, his wife is dead from cancer, 8 of his children and grand children have died from cancer and of his 2 remaining grandchildren, his eldest grand-daughter passed her business studies diploma in Semipalatinsk only last year, then committed suicide, overwhelmed by the tragedy engulfing her family. He says that he was forced to witness the first thermo-nuclear test. A middle-aged woman begins to sob quietly at the back of the hall. An elderly man wipes tears from his cheeks. I turn to look at Kimberley who is biting her lips, tears coursing down her face. "How can we live on a pension of 8000 tenge ($55) a month?" he asks, referring to the special pension given to victims of the nuclear tests. On cue, the sky suddenly darkens and the library trembles as thunder roars across the steppe, almost as if the nuclear tests have begun again. A torrential downpour rattles on the corrugated roof, echoing the tears flowing inside.

In the village of Kainar, among the foothills of a low mountain range, villagers in national Kazakh costume have gathered outside a yurta, or nomadic tent, to welcome our group. Salty chunks of dried, curdled yoghurt are offered together with large wooden bowls filled with soured mare's milk. A sheep has been killed in our honour and I am asked to slice meet from the roasted head which sits forlornly on a wide dish, horns attached. Traditionally, the ears must be cut off first, as the greatest delicacy and offered to the most honoured guest. Kimberley gracefully declines. Then slivers of meat from around the mouth and nostrils are cut and served in turn to each guest crouched at the low table. Endless toasts are offered washed down with mare's milk or vodka. The wise, choose vodka! Soon the rest of the roasted sheep arrives, pieces of carved meat lying on alternate layers of thick yellow fat. Equally fatty horsemeat follows. The Kazakh villagers must survive temperatures of –40 degrees in winter and fat plays a large part in their daily diet. A lack of refrigeration to deal with the searing heat of summer means that milk and yoghurt must be soured and salted to survive. However, radiation has penetrated every layer of the food chain. The water supply is polluted, milk and meat are irradiated and vegetables absorb radiation from the soil.

The cemetery just outside Kainar is almost bigger than the village itself. Grave after grave bears the pictures of young men and women, victims of cancer or suicide. The inscriptions are poignant. One young woman died at the age of 20. Her name was Orazken Malkarbay. On her tomb is written “She did not reach her 21st Spring and left us suddenly. ‘Crying forever’. Her Father.” ‘Suddenly’ is a Kazakh euphemism for suicide, our guide explains.

The village hall in Kainar is filled to overflowing. More than 500 people turn out to greet us and tell us of their suffering. Again we hand over gifts from NIKE and the local Akim (mayor) responds by presenting Kimberley with a horse. By now we are three hours behind schedule. Sixteen scientists from the National Nuclear Research Centre in Kurchatov are waiting for us at the Atomic Lake. They have brought protective clothing and gallons of water to wash us down after our visit. However, our guide has a better idea. He has agreed to a suggestion from a villager that we should take a shortcut across the steppe, cutting our journey time to the Atomic Lake in half. We set off in a convoy of vehicles across the grass-covered plains, dust billowing behind us. The journey by road should have taken just under 2 hours. After 4 hours bumping across the prairie we realise we are lost. Soon we spot a small ridge rising from the plain and make our way towards it, hoping to get a better view of our surroundings from the summit. The ridge has a broken fence surrounding it, which should have sounded some alarms for us, but it is only when I get out of our Landcruiser and walk to the top of the ridge that the full horror of our situation dawns on me. I am staring into an atomic bomb crater! We have inadvertently stumbled across one of the nuclear bomb test sites, which are lethally dangerous and strictly prohibited to all access. Dr Marat Sandybaev comes running up waving his Geiger counter. “It’s registering 160 roentgens” he shouts, “we have to get out of here quickly.”

We set off again at high speed, bouncing across the uneven terrain. After an hour we stop for a comfort break when suddenly we notice smoke billowing from underneath the Landcruiser. Prairie grass has wound itself tightly around the drive shaft and ignited against the hot exhaust. Our driver dives under the vehicle with a cloth. I throw bottles of water to him. The flames are licking dangerously close to the fuel pipe and already the tall grass beneath the car has caught fire. For five minutes the driver fights the blaze, finally emerging blackened with smoke, his right hand severely scorched. He has almost certainly saved our lives.

Around 9.00pm we find a Kazakh herdsman on horseback and ask him for directions. He tells us to follow a distant line of broken poles, which once brought power across the steppe to the nuclear test sites. After another hour we find the crumbling township which once housed the Soviet military guards and KGB personnel. Our Geiger counter still records abnormally high levels of radioactivity. It is past midnight before we finally discover an asphalt road.

Our final village visit in the Polygon is to Karaul. In the medical centre we are ushered into the room of a beautiful 14-year old girl called Aigul. She stands as we enter. She is wearing a trendy tee shirt with 'love 7' emblazoned on the front and a pair of flared jeans. She has incredibly sad eyes. The chief doctor explains that, like all other children in the area, Aigul has chronic anaemia. However, they have been unable to get her blood back to normal and she now has chronic hepatitis, kidney failure and the onset of scoliosis – the condition where the spine can no longer bear the weight of the head and begins to bend painfully. Aigul listens to our expressions of sympathy, her sad eyes telling us that she only yearns to be like any other teenage girl, away from this place of pain and suffering.

Karaul is in the Abay district of East Kazakhstan, named after the great Kazakh poet and humanitarian Abay Kunanbaev. It was Abay who translated the works of Robert Burns and Robert Luis Stevenson into Kazakh. It seems to be the ultimate irony that Stalin should chose the home of this national icon, who wrote about love and humanity, as the site of his nuclear tests. Abay wrote "If grief comes, resist, don't give up!" His words must have given great courage to the people of Kazakhstan who rose up and challenged the might of the Soviet Empire, demanding a halt to the nuclear tests. For too long the nuclear testing programme in Semipalatinsk was a closely guarded secret. For more than 40 years the Soviet military authorities and the KGB kept their nuclear testing programme hidden from the world.

It was Robert Louis Stevenson who said - "The cruellest lies are often told in silence." But the people of Semipalatinsk refused to suffer in silence any longer. It was their bravery and their resistance in confronting the might of the USSR that brought this sickening episode to an end. Now it is the task of everyone to help rebuild this shattered landscape and to provide real help to these victims of the Cold War.

Struan Stevenson is a Member of European Parliament (MEP) – a Conservative Member for Scotland- and a well known political activist and campaigner of many years standing. Struan knocked Labour into third place in the North East Scotland European by-election in November 1998 and then went on to top the Tory Euro Candidates List, winning one of the eight Scottish seats in the European Parliament in the June 1999 Euro elections.

Struan is a well-known broadcaster and author of frequent feature articles in the national press.

Struan is married to Pat, a Senior Producer with BBC Radio and has two sons - Ryan, who graduated in politics from Newcastle University and works for NewsBase.com in Edinburgh and Gregor, who is studying English and Film Studies at Glasgow University.

Fixing Haiti

By Randall Frame

I shake my head upon thinking about how I ended up on this muddy road—if one could even call it a road—on the outskirts of Haiti's capital city in the dark of night. The moon, though not quite full, is more than enough to light my path. But when it hides behind the clouds, I have no choice but to stop, for only a few scattered stars and a handful of campfires that dot the hillsides surrounding Port-au-Prince prevent total blackness.

What a difference a week makes. Seven days previously I'd been sitting in the comfort of the living room of my four-bedroom home in suburban Pittsburgh, anticipating what promised to be an interesting trip—my first—to a country distinguished mainly by its status as the poorest nation in the Western hemisphere. I was part of a team of journalists and business leaders invited by a charitable organization to witness Haiti's poverty, injustice, lawlessness—some would say its hopelessness—from up close.

Friends who had been to the so-called Third World had warned me that I would be changed, perhaps even disoriented, unable to fend off the emotional and psychological effects of culture shock. I humored them, outwardly acknowledging the accuracy of their predictions. But inwardly, I shook my head. I was, after all, a reporter—a professional who, while not denying his humanity, had been trained to maintain his distance, his objectivity. The truth is that as I examined the itinerary, my biggest concern was whether the return flight would get me home in time to watch my beloved Pittsburgh Steelers play on Sunday night.

For the first four days at least, my assessment of how my emotions would handle Haiti proved on target. This is not to say the experience was easy. It was not. I won't soon forget the images of skinny dogs and even skinnier people ravaging the same garbage heaps looking for potentially edible scraps. Of naked children who lived in rudimentary tin shacks, whose toys were limited to rocks and whose back yards consisted of mud two inches deep, sometimes more after a heavy rain. Of long lines of people waiting patiently for nothing more than a bowl of rice and beans and a cup of clean water. Elderly looking men and women curled up along the roadsides, sleeping on the hard ground, bony arms their only pillow. Medical clinics that resembled American hospitals of a century or more ago. Crying children with nobody running to meet them.

But this was not a time for emotion. This was a time for problem solving. As a typically pragmatic American, my whole orientation toward what I was witnessing and learning was geared toward how to "fix it." And I was not alone. Each night when our delegation returned to the hotel to process the day's events, the discussion quickly turned to fixing Haiti.

To do so would not be easy, we acknowledged. Education seemed a logical place to start. After all, how can a country get anywhere if nearly half its adult population can neither read nor write? But we can't expect children (or adults) to learn on empty stomachs. And no one can afford the luxury of going to school if finding enough food to make it through the day is virtually a full-time job.

So how can we fix this food problem? Arable land is scarce as a result of deforestation and soil erosion. Some people in the countryside are able to grow fruits, vegetables, and grains. But the road system is so obsolete that by the time they get their goods to market, they are spoiled. Maybe building infrastructures is answer. Then again, what would it matter if people could successfully transport their products if no one has any money to buy them? And nobody has any money because there are no jobs. We'd visited one charitable organization whose goal was to keep Haitian teenagers out of trouble by teaching them carpentry. But our host acknowledged that his ministry's main purpose was to give these young people some small measure of self-respect. Few, if any, of them would ever be able to find work period, let alone as carpenters.

Building Haiti's economy—maybe that was the place to start. But it seemed no matter where we started, we kept returning to keeping people alive and healthy. And they can't grow their own food—or raise chickens or become dairy farmers—when they have no land and no possibility of ever owning land, most of which is possessed by a relative handful of the country's elite who, by Haiti's standards, are quite wealthy. All of this is not even to mention political and justice systems rife with bias and corruption and a health care "system" that is inaccessible to the overwhelming majority.

Undeterred, our little group of entrepreneurial Americans, in the comfort of our hotel meeting room, went to work each night. As far as we were concerned, there was no problem that could not be solved, though it would take time. Some cited models of projects that had worked in other parts of the developing world to bring, for example, both clean water and jobs to small communities. Others cited advances in biotechnology that would enable people to grow diverse crops on relatively small plots of land. We discussed also the role the U.S. government could play in improving conditions in Haiti.

As we unveiled our plans and proposals, I made it a point to observe our 40ish looking tour guide, Madam Pierre. I was a bit disappointed at her lack of enthusiasm. Though she nodded in apparent affirmation at our grasp of the situation, her silence suggested she was less than excited with our developing vision.

This didn't stop us from pressing on. Our wide-ranging perspectives and ideas for fixing Haiti were united by a common philosophy, one that emphasized the practical—things that would actually work. We applied an American business mentality to the challenge, placing a premium on such words as "efficiency" and "sustainable." We were not after quick fixes here—no Band-Aids. We aspired, rather, to permanent solutions.

Though we'd not yet done a single thing, we all came away from these evening gatherings feeling a sense of power and success. Yes, there were problems. But we had answers. Indeed, some of those who gathered in that room each night (myself not included) had access not just to the money but to the human expertise that, if applied intelligently, would likely make an impact on this troubled nation even if it could not completely fix it.

I went to sleep feeling good about myself and also about the future of Haiti. We had come and we had seen Haiti's problems. Next we would conquer them. Plans were in place—or would be soon. In writing about what I had seen—and the solutions that had been devised—I would be doing my part. I had approached my mission objectively and dispassionately: I had proved my friends wrong. I was content, if not proud. I wondered how the Steelers would fare on Sunday.

Then came day five, the day before our scheduled return to the U.S. Our delegation visited a place called La Cay Espwa, which is Haitian Creole for "House of Hope." Within this simple, two-room structure, a group of nuns dedicated their lives each day to the weakest and most vulnerable of all: starving children. Severely malnourished children would be brought to La Cay Espwa, and these nuns would do what they could to nurse them back to health. Mostly what they did, however, was to hold the children in their arms, perhaps stroke their hair. A few rocking chairs, rudimentary in design, were scattered around the room. These faithful women sat and rocked these children. Day after day. All day long.

I surveyed the room, at once intrigued and overwhelmed by the contrast. Over here were these wealthy, influential businesspersons whose elaborate job descriptions went on for pages—memos, employee reviews, seminars, meetings with investors, advertising strategies, and on and on and on. And over here this small group of women, each of whose job description boasted essentially one item: holding children.

One of the nuns, Sister Conchita, approached me carrying a child. She spoke very little English, but as she extended her arms, it was clear she was asking me if I would like to hold the baby. Instinctively I shook my head and raised my hands in protest. I had come to Haiti as a reporter, and reporters are not supposed to get personally involved. But neither did I want to be rude or impolite. If ever I was going to make an exception to my journalistic principles, this seemed a good time for it. I reached for the child. "Her name Maria," the Sister said with broken English and a quiet smile.

I took Maria into my arms, gingerly at first. She seemed so fragile: I could practically see the skeleton beneath her skin. Only her eyes seemed to have escaped the circumstances of her young life. Her eyes were deep brown and as shiny as any healthy child's ought to be. She focused them not on me, but on Sister Conchita. It was clear I was "second string." Perhaps my arms were not as soft or comfortable. Yet she didn't cry. Maybe she was too

weak to protest being held by a stranger. Or perhaps she was just glad to be in anyone's arms. How could I tell?

For the next twenty minutes or so, Madam Pierre and one of the English-speaking nuns talked about the history and the needs of the House of Hope. I wasn't listening. I was too focused on—too captivated by—this child I was holding. I wondered if Maria had brothers or sisters. Parents. Had any of the people in her small village ever even heard of the Steelers?

The time came for us to leave. I wasn't ready. At first I'd not wanted to hold this child; now I found it hard to give her back. As I returned Maria to Sister Conchita's arms, the child, for the first time, turned her eyes to me. Perhaps she was saying "thank you." Maybe "Thank you for giving me back to the 'first string.'" Or maybe "Thank you for holding me." How could I know?

We visited two other sites in the afternoon. I went along in body only. My mind kept going back to La Cay Espwa. Something about that place had jarred me, had upset my mode of thinking. These women were dedicated servants to be sure, their motivation pure as a new day. But their whole approach seemed highly inefficient, impractical, unproductive. These children had little chance of ever being able to help build the country's infrastructures or to become leaders for political change. These persistent Sisters of Mercy could offer a ray of hope to these children, but little more. Theirs was the ultimate Band-Aid approach. They operated out of a total disregard for the big picture. In fact, it seemed to me they focused on the smallest picture possible. If ever there was a lost cause, this was it.

Still, I could not escape the overwhelming feeling that these women had acquired something—some understanding, some realization—that was unknown to me. And I sensed it was something I wanted. Something that I, perhaps, needed. Their circumstances did not keep these women from smiling. Not happy smiles, for there is nothing happy about seeing starving children every day. Their smiles, rather, reflected a sense of peace that is lodged in the depths of the soul, a sense of contentment that comes from understanding fully—and living out completely—one's calling in life.

It dawned on me that I, a trained journalist, had been a bit foolish to think that ours was the first delegation ever to visit this troubled land and to determine how to fix it. Over the last five days, I'd witnessed firsthand the results of the grand plans of those who'd gone before. Those results were not impressive. I realized that these women I'd come so quickly to admire did not have the luxury of looking at the big picture. And I wondered if they—in their simple, single-minded approach—were doing more to "fix Haiti" than anyone from our resource-laden delegation could ever do or even hope to do. I wanted to visit with them again. I wanted to see Maria.

At our nightly debriefing session, Madam Pierre reminded us to be ready to leave the hotel for the airport at 7 a.m. Then she reviewed the events of the day. As before, she had my attention only when talking about the House of Hope. “On average,” she told us, “one in four of the children who arrive at La Cay Espwa will die because they got there too late—too much damage to their internal organs.” She added, “The Sisters can usually tell which ones they are.”

When someone asked how they could tell, Madam Pierre pointed to the obvious signs of starvation: withering away of the body and an almost total lack of energy. In addition, she said, the skin becomes pale and rigid. The hair takes on a reddish hue and begins to fall out. She might as well have been describing Maria. Madam Pierre looked to me, surely aware of what I was thinking. “The child you were holding,” she said, “seemed like a baby because she was only sixteen pounds. She was actually almost three years old.”

Whatever inkling of journalistic objectivity remained in me evaporated quickly. I left the group and returned to my room alone. I peered through my window in the direction of La Cay Espwa, unable to shake the image of Maria’s eyes meeting mine as I gave her away too soon. Perhaps she was saying “thank you,” as I’d considered earlier. But perhaps she was saying, “Could you hold me a little bit more?” How could I tell?

I formed my own, personal plan to do my part in fixing Haiti. I estimated La Cay Espwa was no more than two miles from the hotel. And it was almost a straight shot—just one turn, well marked by a sign on the main road. We had been strictly warned against venturing out on our own. If something were to happen, it could put at risk similar trips in the future. But this was a chance I needed to take.

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And so here I am. As I forge my way through the dark silence, the night becomes surreal. Each time the moon emerges from the clouds, I hustle down the road as fast as I can to make up for the dark times when I can barely move at all. At first in the darkness I’d slid my feet carefully down the road, but now I just stand still for fear of passing the sign pointing to my destination.

I think of all I have seen and heard these last few days—the suffering, the sense of helplessness, the pain of broken dreams, or worse, no dreams at all. I smile, sadly, as I acknowledge my friends were right after all. I am disoriented, completely off kilter, broken. I think of my world back home, and it seems a completely different world. But there is brokenness there, too. There is brokenness everywhere—crushed and confused spirits all around. But mostly I think of Maria, who has somehow become a symbol—a

focal point—both for all that is wrong with the world and for what I can do about it.

I hear footsteps coming up from behind. At first I'm scared, but I assure myself that I am exactly where I ought to be, where I need to be. I find safety in this assurance. As the footsteps get closer, I speak one of the few native expressions I know: "Bon jour." In the darkness, a man returns my greeting, then adds a few words I don't understand.

"La Cay Espwa," I venture.

"La Cay Espwa," comes the reply. Perhaps his eyes are more accustomed to the dark. Or maybe he knows this stretch of road by heart. He takes my hand and, immune to the darkness, leads me along the path. After about five minutes, we stop. As if right on cue, the moon once again lights the night. The sign appears before me. My new friend—my ship in the night—points toward La Cay Espwa—visible from here, a hundred yards or so away—and then proceeds down the road alone. I'm not sure what to think about angels, but he is what I'd imagined them to be.

I run as fast as I can to the House of Hope. I stand at the door and knock. For the first time, it occurs to me that perhaps no one will answer. After dark, who knows what danger a visitor might bring? But soon, the door opens. One of the Sisters, recognizing me from earlier in the day, invites me inside. Immediately I look around. It doesn't take long to find Sister Conchita, sitting on her rocker as before. Holding Maria. It's as if no time has passed.

As I approach Sister Conchita, she stands, sensing exactly why I have returned. She says nothing, but offers me the child. And also her chair. This time there is no protest, no hesitation. I take my seat. A few of the Sisters inquire as to who their late-night visitor might be. But soon the night is silent again. Or nearly so. There remains the weak, rhythmic creaking of an aged rocker that, though old and plain, is fully able to accomplish its mission.

I have arrived at the place where I want to be. And as I live out what I'd earlier in the day envisioned, I am suddenly and fully aware of my weaknesses, my limitations. And aware also of the limitations and shortcomings of humanity, which has somehow failed this child and many others like her.

My four-bedroom house, my physical health and strength, the Steelers—all fade meekly

into irrelevance. I am utterly powerless to determine whether this child, who bears the image of God, will live or die this night. But I do have power—complete power—to make certain that if and when her frail body finally yields, she has felt the security, the comfort, of someone's loving arms. Tonight they are my arms. It's the least I can do for her, and also, perhaps, the most. Her weak but gracious eyes look up to mine. And hold their gaze. And in the sacred silence of this moment, there is no other power I crave, no other purpose I desire.

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Streets of Mud, Streets of Gold

by Fruma Klass

My father loved Fiddler on the Roof. He used to play the tape over and over, remembering the Polish-Ukrainian village he had come from. But he always laughed at the dance numbers. "Singing, yes," he said. "People did sing. But how could you dance in mud?"

The streets of Podhajce were mud, all right, except in the heat of midsummer, when they were baked clay. The town of Podhajce (pronounced Podai'itz by its Jews and Podheitzer by its Christians) was hardly a town at all— it had almost no stores, for instance. The

nearest city was Lvov, and that was days away by horse-drawn wagon. When you needed to buy something, you would wait for market day; occasional peddlers brought salt, cloth, newspapers. But Podhajce did have a church, a huge Russian Orthodox church that the main street led up to. Mostly, my father said, Jewish children avoided the street altogether.

The problem was the potatoes.

“It was whispered,” he said, “that if you went up to the church and said you wanted to become a Christian, they would give you potatoes. Even one potato, baked, maybe, or boiled, hot, with butter and perhaps even a little milk.... You can’t imagine what a potato could mean to children who were starving.” It was hard to resist, but no Jewish child ever took the bait. Probably the whispered tale wasn’t even true.

But they really were starving, not dramatically, like children in famines in Ethiopia, but gradually, steadily, nonstop. When my father was nine, he found a way into a flour mill and stole handfuls of flour, which he ate at once. He was never suspected and he didn’t do it often, but sometimes the hunger was too great. There were always more children in the family, and that meant there was always less to eat.

Although the family was getting larger because of the new children, it was also getting smaller. One or two at a time, the aunts and uncles were leaving Podhajce. They were going to America.

Now, you might wonder (I did) how they could afford to go to America when they couldn’t afford beds, or shoes. My father slept on chairs that were pushed together at night to form a flat surface a child could sleep on. His shoes well, fortunately, most of the children didn’t wear shoes except in the coldest part of winter. They walked through the mud with bare, cold feet. They didn’t dance.

In America, now, the streets were paved with gold. Everyone knew this, though they didn’t believe it, not for a minute. If the streets were gold, they reasoned, someone would have scraped up a little bit of it and sent it to Podhajce, to Galicia, to Poland. The uncles, the aunts who had gone ahead sent no gold; no one did. In fact, no gold ever arrived. Very wealthy people (yes, there were some) might have a tooth, or even two, capped in gold and glittering when they smiled. Otherwise, the only gold they ever saw was in the form of the fat globules that swam on the surface of the chicken soup, the golden soup

they dreamed of. Sometimes, after all, there was chicken soup, even though, as the story put it, if a poor man ate a chicken, one of them was probably sick.

Streets of gold was just a dream. There was a much better reason to go to America.

Long before an American president said the phrase, they knew it was what they wanted, wanted badly enough to set out for an unknown world to find: Freedom from fear. To be free to walk down any street, even one with a church on it; to be free of the village toughs who with the tacit approval of the local government-appointed priests delighted in throwing a boy's skullcap (or a boy, or a man) on the ground and jumping on it (or him); to be free of the all-pervading fear brought by the police, or the army— if they took a man away, he might never be seen again; to be free, finally, of the ever-present terror of the pogrom, a word coined the year of my father's birth for an old activity: the organized massacre of helpless people, specifically Jews. This was the reason they dreamed of golden America, not the simple desire to make a living. (Of course, if you could also make a living…)

Beyond it, one more reason, not usually talked about but there nevertheless: the yearning for something of a larger life, a chance to learn and to go as far as their own talents and skills could take them. And a chance for their children to go even farther.

Years before the new word pogrom for the old activity, the extended family was struggling to find ways to get to America. They succeeded. "That's why your mother was born in America," my father said. My parents were first cousins, but they didn't meet until a year or so before they married. "By the time I got off the boat in nineteen-twenty," my father told me, "some of the family was here already, and in different cities."

How did they do it? What gave them the power to make this golden dream a reality?

They started with a meeting, a family meeting.

The time is 1903. The Kishinev pogroms have just taken place, supported and encouraged by a government that hates Jews. The family's sense of urgency is acute. They know that pogroms are infectious, and it is just a matter of time before one hits in Podhajce. They know how vulnerable they are— poor people in a flimsy wooden hut, with nowhere to run. They know that if—no, when—a pogrom hits Podhajce, they would be very lucky to survive. And they know that you can't count on luck.

Of course, all the participants in that meeting have since died, and I know only what I was told. My father, who told me about it, was an infant in 1903, so he couldn't have simply remembered. But the history was important, so it was told to him, and by him to me, and I can envision it almost as if I had been there myself.

The meeting would have been at night, because during the day they were all scrabbling at trying to make a living. It would have been in the home of the family's patriarch, my great-grandfather. (His beard would still have been black then; he was not yet fifty.) And it would have been in the kitchen, the only room in the small house that could hold them all.

A couple of candles burn in plates on the table—or maybe just one candle; it's not the Sabbath, and candles cost money. The room is rather dark, and close. They sit around the table, the patriarch and his six children. (There is no matriarch; in this world, women seldom survive long enough to grow old.) The oldest child, the one who will become my grandfather, is twenty-six; he is with his wife and baby (my father). The youngest is ten.

The question they are discussing is a terribly simple one: "How to get to America before the pogrom hits Podhajce." And it is instantly obvious that there is no money for the family to go to America. By dint of extraordinary scrimping and saving, they might be able to come up with enough to pay the fare of one person—that's all! just one person!—but never all of them, not even two of them. So the decision before them is a deceptively simple one: Which one person? Which one of them should they send to America to struggle and save and send back the money to bring the next one?

The one they send must be the one who can be most trusted to swim and not to sink in the strange waters of a new land and a new language. The one they send must be the one most likely to find a job with prospects, not just a dead-end subsistence job. And above all, the one they send must be capable of living on bare pennies so as to save up enough to bring a second one to America, and quickly. Then the two of them could pool their resources to bring a third, and a fourth.

There they sit in that dim hovel, straining to look at one another's faces. Beyond their voices, there are no other sounds except the usual sounds of the night—the wind blows a branch against a wall, an owl hoots. The stuffy room is warm with their bodies. Who is the one who will rescue them all?

And they select—they select Fani, the fourth of the six children. She is no more than fifteen in 1903, and it's impossible for us today to imagine entrusting all those lives to an adolescent. She has two older brothers—how come they don't choose one of them? She even has an older sister, but the family doesn't select any of those. No, it's Fani, all right. She is the one who will go to America with the heavy responsibility of bringing over the rest of the family. She is the one they trust. The decision seems more than a little bizarre even today and certainly by the standards of the time, and more than a little frightening. But they were right.

In 1905, the year the Tsar's government published the bogus but virulent Protocols of the Elders of Zion, Fani came to America, alone. She was barely seventeen. She traveled steerage, squashed in amongst hundreds of other immigrants in a slow, evil-smelling ship with no food other than whatever the shipping line provided. It wasn't much for any of the steerage passengers, but for those who maintained kashrus, eating only kosher food, that meant just black bread and a reach into "a barrel of herrings." She never talked about that voyage, except to describe her first sight of the Statue of Liberty, then still glowing copper, in New York Harbor. "Oh, how we cried," she said. "Tears of joy."

Almost at once she found a job. It was not the usual immigrant-girl job, in a sweatshop, although representatives of the larger sweatshops waited at Ellis Island for the new fish. And she didn't succumb to the blandishments of the well-dressed, soft-spoken men who recruited for what was then called the "white slave trade" or, more obliquely, "Buenos Aires." This extraordinary girl found a job as a photographer's assistant, and learned English fast. And she started saving pennies for the next family member, a brother.

More than that. Within a year she was married, a marriage that was to last until her husband's death at the age of ninety-five. (She lived to ninety-eight.) Her first child was born in 1907. And her hoarded pennies brought one brother from Podhajce in 1909, about the time her second child (the little girl who would become my mother) was born, and another brother in 1912.

Just about the time that they were ready to bring the rest of the family, World War I broke out and immigration stopped.

The Great War brought new difficulties to the family in Podhajce. Their particular corner of Poland changed hands several times; at one point it belonged to Russia, at another point to Austria-Hungary. The two older sons were drafted into opposing armies. My

grandfather-to-be was terrified of inadvertently shooting his brother, and he devised a simple stratagem to avoid the front. He broke things—fingers, arms, legs.... It worked. He was left with an ungainly limp, but he never was sent to the front, and the brothers never faced the possibility of killing each other.

The worst part of the war for them was when two bombs fell on the house. Most of my father's younger siblings were killed, leaving just two sisters alive. As soon as the war ended, they began once more to try to get to America.

By this time enough passage money had been saved for the whole family, especially since there were no small children. They came in 1920, barely beating the clang! of the gates of immigration closing to Eastern and Southern Europeans. My father remembered that trip, and entering the new country. He was sixteen years old. "There were all kinds of people," he said. "All colors, all different kinds of clothes...it was wonderful."

All of them agreed. America was wonderful. You could apply to become a citizen—there were no corrupt magistrates to be bribed. No one was permitted to rob you, to knock you down, to trample on you—there was justice, genuine justice in this golden land. There were libraries, marvelous libraries full of books you could read free. There were night-school classes, also free, where you could learn English. All you had to do was get some kind of bare-rock job, live as a boarder in someone else's flat, work hard, and save your money (they were used to that) and in a couple of years—five, ten, twenty—you could be doing something important, something useful to the world. One relative started with a pushcart on Delancy Street and moved up to his own dry-goods store; my father began as a sweeper in a furniture store and eventually became a fur cutter and then a union business agent.

Their children became doctors, lawyers, teachers; they included a theoretical mathematician, a couple of optometrists, a commercial artist, a department-store buyer, some sociologists, an accountant, a librarian, and a few rabbis, as well as musicians, mail carriers, and salesmen of everything from shoes to X-ray machines. And in each generation, some of them went to serve in America's armies. As any of them would say, it was a small payment on the debt they owed America.

Because of their intensity of purpose, and the power it brought them, the old man and his six children got from Podhajce to America. They grew to thirty-one in the first generation. In America's freedom and security, they grew to over a hundred in the second

generation. Now, a hundred years after they anxiously sent all their hopes across the ocean on the shoulders of one frail seventeen-year-old girl, the family probably numbers several hundred; it is impossible to keep track of them all.

At the end of Fiddler on the Roof, when the people are forced to leave their little town of Anatevka, my father always got a little angry. “What’s the matter with these people?” he would demand. “Why are they sad?” Then he would cry out to the characters in the movie: “You shouldn’t be sad, you should be joyful! Don’t you know you are going to the land of freedom, the land of justice? You are going to America, to golden America!”

“My parents were first cousins,” Fruma Klass says, “and I moved in family like a fish moves in water.” Born in Boston, raised in New York, and a graduate of The Bronx High School of Science, Fruma has been a lab technician, a medical editor, and a teacher of writing at Penn State. She has been married to Phil Klass, who writes science fiction under the pen name of William Tenn, since 1957.

Fruma is a freelance copyeditor (for the income) and a writer of fiction (for God, she says). Fruma's first story, “Before the Rainbow,” appeared in the anthology “Synergy 3,” in 1988. Its sequel, “After the Rainbow,” won a Writers of the Future second prize and appears in “Writers of the Future Vol. XII“ (1996). Her story “Jennifer’s Turn” appeared in “Gathering the Bones” (Tor Books, 2003). Her most recent story is “Two More for Tolstoi,” due out in “Synergy 5” in Fall 2004. She is currently at work on a novel.

The Bathroom Cleaner

By Elizabeth Orndorff

Her youngest grandson, the one who changed oils at Mammoth Garage on the main street, he thought she was old-school, that she was not with it, but she really did not know what she was supposed to be with. She told him that, but he was such a hot-head and got so angry with her, just like his daddy used to, that she let him be. He didn’t know everything like he thought he did. But he would get so fired up, sometimes it hurt. Sometimes he would throw out a curse at her like a rotten tomato, aim it right at her and hit her good with it. A nasty curse like he shouldn’t have known how to say, he was so young. Bad enough you cleaned for white folks, he would holler, now you got to clean for niggers, too?

She told herself that she had to allow for that, because he was not old enough to learn the things she knew, things that the Lord held your face right down into for so long that you had to learn. It seemed to be the Lord's way, generally, and He was a real good teacher, especially in the hard things. It was the hard things that her grandson didn't know about. He thought that getting angry would solve all his troubles. It didn't solve anything that she could see, but make a lot more unhappy people in this world.

But her grandson would say, We ain't angry enough. He would say, We got to be a whole lot angrier than we been because we going nowhere fast. What did he know about going nowhere fast? He was so young, her baby. You be angry, she told him, you got to have a reason to be angry. A real good reason, one that will stand up on its own two legs, and walk away, if need be. Just walk away. But her grandson did not believe that was right, to walk away. He wanted to fight it out, all the time. Sometimes he even tried to fight with her, but she wouldn't let him. Someday, she said, the Lord will speak to your heart and take that fire away, and put something better in its place. But when she said that to him he was hateful to her all over again.

He didn't like her job. Yes, she had a job all right. It wasn't a real job, not like his, and it didn't take much of her time, but it was a job. She was proud of the work she did. It took her a long time to become proud of it, to see it for what it meant rather than just what it was. In the beginning she drew her work-energy from the hate and anger that filled her up to almost overflowing. She did not want to ever tell her grandson about that. The hate and the fire did give her strength for a time.

Her job came to her from the Benevolent Sisters Club No. 1, where she had been a member since she turned eighteen, the same year that the big century turned over, way back so far she could hardly remember a time when she wasn't a Benevolent Sister. The Sisters were about Love, that is what they did, that was their sworn reason for being, to do Love things where they could find them. Her grandson had a hard time with that. He seemed not to know about any kind of love except for what he had with his little girlfriend.

But the Sisters were different. They said their Love was for all God's children wherever they were. They even tried to love the white people whenever they could. But mostly they started by loving each other and the rest of the folks at the Baptist church out the rural route four. So the church brothers and sisters became their ministry, their home, their Loves. It was that simple. And there was plenty to keep them busy with the Love.

Some folks thought that the Love has got to be a high and mighty thing, like what the angels do for the Lord God in Heaven. All fancy and electric and puffed up to be important. But she and the Sisters knew better. They had lived long enough to know that Big Works of Love is just made up of a bushel of little works, one on top of another, and the Big Works were nowhere without the little works. Some folks were blessed to do just

the Big Works. That was their job that the Lord gave them. For the rest of us, she would tell her grandson when he stayed long enough to listen to her, for the rest of us the Lord has given us the little things to be doing. Lots and lots of little works in every single minute of the day, some so tiny and lowdown that you might miss them, and then you are lost because they never come the same way again.

The Sisters specialized in the little works of love, the smaller and more lowdown the better. That was because they looked at Jesus and saw what he did. He was kind to riff-raff. In fact, that seemed to them to be a good part of the Gospel message, and worthy of their attention. This is what made her grandson so angry. That she was riff-raff to him. That she was not more high and mighty. That every day, rain or shine, she cleaned the toilet down at the beauty shop on the corner of Vine and High. That was her job for the Benevolent Sisters Club No. 1.

The Sisters say that they "maintain the restroom" at Mamie's Beauty Salon. They have been maintaining the restroom for seventeen years, since 1937, so that colored folks can have a place to use the bathroom when they are downtown. But she is the one who does the work. She has maintained until her knuckles are raw with Dutch Cleanser and she has permanent tile marks on her knees and she is closely acquainted with the bathroom habits of almost every colored person in the city. She can tell that Dempsey Gorder who lost his last good eye in a poker game has probably got prostate trouble because he has trouble making water. She knows that Maybella Johnson has got sugar, just like her mother did. The whole Huxton family lives off the patch of asparagus they have growing in their front yard in the summer. She knows who's been eating too much fatback and corn and beets and spinach. She knows who drinks too much. She knows who's on the rag and when. She has never decided if knowing the people who use this bathroom makes it harder to clean, or easier.

She collected old toothbrushes from the Sisters and had her own bucket and scouring pad, the Dutch Cleanser, rags, a special toilet brush with a long handle, and a black rubber plunger because some folks ask too much of that old toilet. She kept a jar of vinegar and water and some old newspapers to clean the mirror and the faucets. She even put some Modess in a paper sack with For Women Only written on it in black ink, the top folded down tight. These things she hid in a wooden crate under the sink. She kept a fresh supply of tissue stacked on the handle of the plunger and every day she brought in a clean and pressed towel for the roller bar on the back of the door. She had been doing this for seventeen years. She was the only one to ever maintain the bathroom.

She smiled at the corn-colored stain at the base of the toilet. It looked a little like a giraffe the way it stretched its grit-specked neck between two octagon tiles. She could smell the faint sweetness of sugar that she could never seem to wash away with her bleach and toothbrush. She smiled at the thought of the old man from the newsstand down the street, distressed and ashamed that he needed to use the toilet in the women's beauty shop, and

use it so frequently because of his troubles.

She pushed her splayed blue toothbrush around the base of the toilet, always starting at the middle of the front, counterclockwise, forty-eight tiles, one for each state. Every day she cleaned the toilet she took a trip around the United States of America just to pass the time in her head. The first tile, the one front and center, was her own state, Kentucky. Next was North Carolina, where her mama was from. Then came Georgia (favorite aunts) and West Virginia (first husband, the good one). She found a connection to every tile in the country, even if some of them were questionable. Wyoming, the last tile next to Kentucky, was the scene of a favorite Western movie, although she couldn't remember its title. Sagebrush something.

The toilet itself was the worst job, and in the early days she would often vomit into it first before setting down to cleaning it. She carried a little bottle of clove oil in her apron pocket, and on days when the stink was so bad she couldn't bear it, she would dab the burning oil inside each nostril. Once, when her grandson was a teenager, he came into the shop to give her a message and found her on her knees in front of the toilet, for she always cleaned with the door left open. She watched his eyes fly open in rage as he spit out the words he had for her, so harsh they made her flinch. Then he had turned and left, and in all these years he had never come back, even though he could have found her there any morning, except Sunday.

She had decided that he was too modern, that was his trouble. He was so way ahead of himself that he didn't know how to see what he saw. He had no truck with the reasons behind the way things happened. It was enough for him that they just were.

She looked down at her knees and saw the octagon spider web etched in her dry, brown skin. Almost like a snakeskin, or alligator, or a giraffe. She smiled at herself and ground the blue toothbrush into the cleanser paste in her hand before applying it to the poor yellow giraffe from Wyoming. Another one done.

When she had been cleaning the bathroom for about two years she brought in a sign to hang over the toilet. She did this for the men. She lettered out a Bible verse of her own selection and taped it to the wall. She changed it every Saturday. When she got a nice response to the Bible verses she began writing small sayings and proverbs, sometimes words to a hymn or a little poem from the Sunday School booklet. Mamie never said anything to her, so she kept on doing it.

The white pedestal sink with its watery rust stains was almost a joy to clean. She could stand up and stretch her legs. She could fill her lungs with the smell of bleach and vinegar instead of urine and bowels, and the sparkling nickel of the faucets always cheered her, she didn't know why. The huge mirror over the sink was the one incongruity in the small bathroom. It reflected its beauty shop origins in the cupids and flowers carved into its gilt

gesso frame, and she wondered if it bothered the men who went here. That's probably why she started putting the Bible verses up, just for them.

She often studied her face in the big mirror while her right hand, without conscious thought, moved the vinegar-soaked newspaper over its surface. She only liked to look at herself because she so easily saw her mother's face looking back at her. People used to say they were more like twin sisters instead of mother and daughter. It was a compliment they both accepted. She knew her mother's face better than her own, for hadn't she stared into it for more than fifty years? Hadn't she stroked the lined cheeks and kissed her eyes so many times she couldn't remember? That's what she wanted to tell her grandson about. She wanted to tell him so many things, but he wouldn't stop his own thoughts enough to listen. He despised her so.

For all her working life she had fed her children and supported her husbands and kept her house respectable with the money she made from cleaning the houses of white ladies. So did all her friends and their friends and their sisters and mothers and aunties. There was plenty of work to go around. She never paid much attention to it. It was just work. It didn't mean something other than what it was. You didn't have to love it to do it, to take the money, to spend it on things you did love. That much her grandson understood.

She shook her head slowly and looked again into her mother's eyes. She saw their fullness and dark sadness, and she could feel the warmth of her mother's thin fingers as they grasped for her hand that horrible day seventeen years ago. She heard again the low moans that began deep inside her mama as they hurried their steps along the sidewalk, past forbidding whites-only storefronts with clean and private bathrooms, brushing by the shoulders and bags and strollers of fast-looking people who did not see them at all, praying for a place before it was too late. Then her mother beginning to cry, right there on the sidewalk, because she felt alone, and her daughter could not make them disappear and could not help her any longer.

Now she ran her fingers under the warm water faucet as she did every cleaning day. She could not bear to see her mother cry. So she did this for her mother. It was the best she could do to take up her mother's pain, to imagine the warm streams running down her legs as she doubled over in anguish on the main street, held in her daughter's arms, as her bowels loosened onto the bright, sunny sidewalk, the busy people stepping around them, keeping their shoes clean.

No, these things her grandson would never understand. This kind of love he was not yet blessed to know. That out of pain and degradation could spring a fire of purpose that went so far beyond anger and rhetoric, that carried with it a passion fueled with the kindling carried by a servant, a slave, a bathroom cleaner.

She rinsed out her rags and brushes and put a fresh roll on the toilet-paper bar. Then she

stowed all her supplies in the wooden crate and checked to see if the little brown sack needed more napkins. She smoothed her hand over the roller towel, the green striped one with the red roses in the corners, and cast an eye over her bathroom. Her mama's bathroom. It smelled good now. She turned out the light and pulled the door shut. It would have been nice to speak a word or two to the ladies, but Mamie had customers in the chairs, and they were chattering like birds. Mamie did not look up from the wet head she was working on, and no one saw her walk through the shop.

When she got to the street door she turned and smiled, and said, as she always did, Clean again! From under a pink plastic drape at the shampoo sink, an anonymous hand waved in acknowledgement. Yes, clean again, she nodded.

She pulled the heavy door open and went out onto the sunny, bright sidewalk and entered the crush of hurrying people, who might have, if they were paying any sort of attention, overheard the little colored woman telling her mother about her lovely day at work.

Liz Orndorff has spent most of her professional life on university campuses and with advertising agencies, including positions as Director of Public Relations and Instructor in Journalism at Palm Beach Atlantic College in West Palm Beach; as a Copywriter/ Creative Director at two Atlanta ad agencies; as Editor of University Publications at Emory University in Atlanta; as Editor, Extension Service, University of Kentucky; Editor, University Publications, Ohio State University; Director of Public Relations, Westminster College in Pennsylvania ; and as Graduate Assistant Instructor in Journalism, University of Kentucky.

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She grew up in Lexington, KY, then Athens, GA, where her father was a professor at the University of Kentucky and the University of Georgia.

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Liz's current activities include: Adult Sunday School teacher and Deacon, The Presbyterian Church of Danville, KY.; Trustee, Boyle County Public Library; former Board member and current play director, West T. Hill Community Theatre; Coordinator, Meals on Wheels Program.

She is interested in reading, theatre fiction writing (finished two novels and 16 short

stories), teaching, and travel.

The Natural Order and the Human Mind

By Stephen Pimentel

From the evolution of galaxies to the development of the smallest flower, nature exhibits exquisitely intricate and complex patterns of order. Throughout history, humanity has been amazed and fascinated by these patterns. The progress of science has only deepened our awareness of the order of nature by extending our ability to observe natural phenomena and systematically describe their elegant harmony. Many scientists and philosophers of science see manifestations of purpose in the natural order, beginning with the laws that govern the smallest subatomic particles and reaching to the highest forms of conscious life.

Although the topic of purpose in nature is now considered controversial, such purpose was once widely recognized and affirmed by the most sophisticated and critical thinkers. The greatest of the Greek philosophers, from Plato and Aristotle to Plotinus, considered the evidence of purpose in nature to be compelling and clear. The Stoics, for example, spoke of a logos or "reason" that embodied order and purpose within the cosmos. In general, these philosophers were willing to reason boldly from an observed effect to an inferred cause, even when the cause hypothesized was not itself observable.

Their confidence in such reasoning grew out of their strong belief that nature is not only ordered, but that its order is fundamentally intelligible, so that it can be effectively understood by the human mind. The physical processes observed in nature were believed to be not only consistent but ultimately rational in character. Therefore, the human investigator, employing rational tools such as mathematics, should be able to uncover the secrets of these processes and allow their inner workings to be clearly grasped. The pervasive order and intelligibility of nature was further taken to exhibit purpose at various levels. The entities observed in nature act not only in a predictable and consistent manner but so as to integrate harmoniously into a larger whole.

However, since the Enlightenment, there has arisen a contrary strand of thought that is deeply suspicious of the idea of purpose. This philosophy, sometimes known as "positivism," does not deny the order of the physical universe, but simply takes this order as a "brute fact" that stands in no need of further explanation. The order of nature may be rationally intelligible and explicable through the tools of science and mathematics, but for the positivist it makes no sense to ask "why" this is so. According to this perspective, the universe "just is" as we encounter it. The task of science is restricted to producing ever more complete and precise descriptions of empirical phenomena. However, inferences concerning unobserved theoretical entities and questions pertaining to "why" the world is

as we observe it are both dismissed as “unscientific.” Positivism simply forbids one to ask why the laws of nature are those that we discover rather than some others.

The Retreat of Positivism

Yet, the advances of physics in the past century have made the stance of positivism increasingly difficult to maintain. As physics has explored phenomena at ever smaller scales of distance that are ever more difficult to detect, it has moved further and further away from the everyday experience of human beings. When working in regimes that cannot be easily observed, physics becomes increasingly reliant upon the human ability to reason from observed effects to unobserved causes. Through such reasoning, theoretical entities characterized by mathematical relations are often hypothesized to account for observed effects, even though the entities themselves have not been observed.

The early history of modern particle physics offers dramatic examples of such reasoning. For example, in 1930, Wolfgang Pauli sought to explain an anomaly associated with “nuclear beta decay” by postulating the existence of an undetected particle. In 1933, Enrico Fermi wrote a paper concerning the particle, which he called the neutrino, and submitted the paper to the journal Nature. From one point of view, Pauli and Fermi were reasoning straightforwardly from observed effect to an undetected cause. Yet, this mode of inference offended the canons of positivism, and so the editors of Nature rejected Fermi’s paper as too speculative and remote from reality. The neutrino remained unobserved until 1956, when it was detected using the Savannah River reactor.

Just as the restrictions of positivism have proven untenable in regard to theoretical entities such as subatomic particles, so they appear questionable in regard to the discernment of purpose. The stimulus for the consideration of purpose lies in the nature of the scientific enterprise itself. Science seeks to identify the laws by which the natural processes of our universe evolve in time, and it is these very laws that serve as the primary indicators of purpose. The laws discovered by science have allowed the complex, multilayered order found in the universe, ultimately including life itself, to emerge over time from the relative homogeneity of the universe’s early state. These laws thus manifest an astounding creativity whose potential continues to unfold. It is the very operation of these laws, and not their contravention or even supplementation by any external force, that produces the subtle and amazing order of nature. Moreover, the order of our universe is closely calibrated to the particular laws that produce it. Physical laws chosen at random would, in an overwhelming majority of cases, lead to a universe completely lacking in the kind of order we observe. It therefore strains credibility to suggest that we ought simply to “take for granted” either the laws or their marvelous outcome.

Order in Physical Laws

A fundamental example of order in physical laws is found in the notion of symmetry. Symmetry is an intuitive concept familiar to us in the form of regular shapes, like that of

the snowflake. However, symmetry can also be precisely characterized through the branch of mathematics known as group theory, which allows us to describe types and degrees of symmetry. A central discovery of modern physics has been the manner in which various laws exhibit particular mathematical symmetries. Furthermore, as physicists relate the various laws to each other, a peculiar and important relationship emerges. As we move to physical laws at "deeper" or more fundamental levels of organization, we find higher degrees of symmetry. The phenomena at more "shallow" or easily observed levels of organization have lower degrees of symmetry due to the relation of "spontaneous symmetry breaking." Yet, the higher degrees of symmetry found at the deeper levels of organization, while exhibiting an intricate order, are in no way logically necessary.

The pattern discovered in regard to symmetry holds true of the order in nature more generally. As the sources of order are analyzed in terms of physical laws at various levels of organization, order is never seen to emerge from a lack of order. Rather, the order at each observed level of organization is found to unfold from a greater order at a deeper level. Thus, the scientific process explains order by mathematically relating it to a more profound order. The deepest levels of order, such as those that may be revealed by a future theory of quantum gravity, are the least readily observed. As the scientific process advances, progressively greater degrees of order are exposed. From the perspective of twenty-first century physics, the universe appears far more intricately ordered and profoundly rational than it did to Plato or Aristotle.

The Contingency of Physical Laws

What then is the significance of this order? To explore further the implications of natural order, we must begin to confront the very questions that positivism forbids us to ask. Why are the laws of physics what they are, rather than otherwise? These laws are surely not logically necessary, as are purely mathematical theorems. Even when physicists eventually arrive at a fundamental physical theory, such as a theory of quantum gravity, there is no reason to believe that this theory will be logically necessary. In other words, it will always be logically possible for the universe to have been otherwise. Physical laws that are not logically necessary may precisely describe order, but they do not "explain away" that order in any way that would obviate the question of purpose. Such laws possess no status that would prevent us from asking questions about their further significance. When such questions are squarely posed in regard to fundamental laws, with their intricate harmony and elegance, purpose seems to become manifested.

Moreover, the physical laws that have already been discovered seem to be "fine-tuned' to produce a universe in a narrow regime that allows the emergence of novel structures through a process of self-organization. This self-organization is manifested first at the astrophysical level, in the structure of stars and galaxies, before we even consider the emergence of life. To permit such self-organization, the laws must achieve a delicate

balance between an utterly chaotic and disorganized universe and one that is completely static and uninteresting. The fine-tuning of our physical laws to produce such an order weighs heavily against the credibility of treating those laws as "brute facts." Rather, the fact that our universe appears to lie so perfectly in the favored range seems indicative of purpose.

The advocates of positivism sometimes object that the notion of purpose adds no "empirical content" to the known physical laws. However, this objection misconstrues the idea of purpose, treating it as if it were an extra force above and beyond those already accounted for. Purpose is not supposed to have empirical content apart from the physical laws in which it is manifest. On the contrary, it is the empirical content of the laws themselves that persuasively leads us to posit purpose.

Although the idea of purpose may not alter the empirical content of physical laws, it can nevertheless greatly affect our understanding of the significance of life and its relation to the rest of nature. While we might not be able to deduce an "ultimate" purpose for the universe from the evidence of nature alone, there is no reason for skepticism about obtaining at least partial knowledge of this kind. One candidate for a purpose of the natural order would seem to lie in the emergence of life itself.

Purpose and the Emergence of Life

There is no evidence that life arose in contravention of any physical law. Indeed, the astounding emergence of life entirely in accordance with natural processes reveals the special character of those processes. One might imagine that the emergence of life was a kind of freak accident, an enormously improbable event that somehow nevertheless occurred. Analysis of the essential physical and chemical processes suggests that such is not the case. Rather, the emergence of life toward the end of nature's long process of self-organization appears to be sufficiently probable to consider it part of the universe's purpose.

We can initially consider the laws of physics themselves. According to the so-called "anthropic principles," the very possibility of life is highly dependent on the exact value of the constants that govern the fundamental forces of nature. If the values of the constants were to differ by even a few percent, life as we know it could not exist. This sensitivity of the constants can be interpreted as a sort of "fine-tuning" in support of life even at the level of fundamental physics.

Consideration of organic chemistry points in the same direction. When we examine the distribution throughout the universe of the carbon-based compounds that form the basic constituents of life, they are found to be sufficiently plentiful and widespread for life to arise in many places. While this fact does not show that life must arise or explain how it arose, it does at least establish that the basic conditions needed for life are not rare. One

fascinating scientific study that could significantly help to determine life's frequency of occurrence is the Search for Extra-Terrestrial Intelligence (SETI) project. If life, and indeed intelligent life, were to be found elsewhere in the universe, it would provide evidence of the propensity of the natural order to give rise to life and thus reinforce the hypothesis of life as one purpose of that order. Hence, those who are interested in the hypothesis of natural purpose ought to give SETI their enthusiastic support.

Moving from organic chemistry to the next higher level, we come to biology proper. An important new perspective comes from viewing biology in the light of modern computational science, including the branch known as information theory. The cell, whether that of a single-cell or multiple-cell organism, can best be understood as a highly sophisticated system that carries out a variety of information processing tasks.

Moreover, there is a precise sense in which the cell can be considered to act as a "digital" rather than an "analog" computer. Analog computers are hard-wired to perform some particular task through the physical design of their hardware. They have no separate software to speak of. Digital computers, on the other hand, have separate hardware and software layers. Rather than carry out a particular task, the hardware layer is designed for the more general activity of processing information that is symbolically encoded. This more sophisticated arrangement allows for the tasks carried out by the system to be controlled by the software layer, rather than hard-wired into the system's physical structure. In other words, the digital computer is essentially a processor of information.

In artificial digital computers, the software and data are ultimately represented in the form of binary digits. Viewing the cell as a kind of natural digital computer, its software is encoded in its genes. Although the genes clearly depend on the underlying biochemistry of the cell for their "instructions" to be properly "executed," the information that they encode is logically distinct from that biochemistry. The independence of the genetic "software" from its biochemical "hardware" is perhaps best illustrated by the process of cell division, in which the software causes a whole new hardware unit to be replicated for itself.

The genetic encoding of such complex information poses a major challenge to the study of the origin of life. Not only do genes encode a high degree of information from the perspective of information theory, but this information must be very specific in order to carry out the proper biological functions. A central question for scientific investigation is to understand better the processes that lead to such specific structures that bear a high degree of information.

One promising approach to this problem comes from the computational study of "genetic algorithms," which are computational methods that incorporate the concept of natural selection. Genetic algorithms show that natural selection acts as a search method through a "space" of possible configurations. As a result, natural selection performs a kind of

“information concentration” that allows a system locally to increase its information content by drawing energy from its global environment. In man-made genetic algorithms, the human designer supplies the “fitness function” by which potential solutions are evaluated. In contrast, the fitness function for organic systems is determined by the working of natural laws. The exact manner in which this determination takes place at various levels of organization remains a major question for investigation. This question is particularly difficult at levels below that of RNA. Discovering the processes by which amino acids came to be assembled into RNA may require a better understanding of the informational content of physical systems, perhaps even one that takes into account the informational effects of quantum mechanics.

Conclusion: Rationality and Purpose

Whatever the details of the processes by which life emerged, and whatever forms of information processing they may have involved, we may be certain that these processes did, in fact, give rise to myriad forms of life in our world. Even more remarkably, they have resulted in rational beings capable of reflection upon that very world. Humanity systematically probes the natural order to determine the laws by which that order operate and perhaps discover its purpose. It is surely a profound attribute of nature that its laws support a self-organizing development that eventually produced rational beings who turn their attention to the natural order and all that flows from it. This attribute of nature suggests that rational beings are themselves part of the purpose of the universe and, conversely, that part of the purpose of rational beings is to understand the workings of the universe. These twin purposes are mutually reflective, and their multifaceted interplay is a fascinating topic for study. If humanity finds its own purpose, in part, in seeking the purpose of the surrounding world, then we would expect science to play an integral part in the life of humanity, contributing deeply to the fulfilment of human purpose. Human beings are able to employ their rational powers to model the very processes that brought humanity about.

This perspective on the respective purposes of the universe and humanity also has strong implications for human culture. We have a pressing need in our day for a cultural outlook that both gives us a sense of purpose at a personal level and is fully integrated with our advancing scientific knowledge of nature. Too often, thinkers have attempted to secure a sense of purpose by supplementing nature with a “God of the gaps,” who is supposed to fill in where our scientific explanations are lacking. Philosophers and theologians could more fruitfully contribute to the search for purpose by taking the astounding powers of nature itself as their starting point for further reflection.

The pursuit of an integrated vision of human and natural purpose constitutes a genuinely noble vocation or calling that sets before us a profound task and offers a wonderful fulfilment. To achieve this vision, we must begin by studying the evidence of purpose in nature using the most sophisticated tools and techniques of science. We will also require

the best efforts of philosophers and theologians to integrate this evidence into patterns meaningful for our lives and interpret its significance for purpose in humanity. Those who dedicate their lives to the pursuit of this vision will prove to be exemplars of the purpose-driven life.

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The Skating Rink

by John Casteel

A successful, happy, honorable, even exceptional, human being could do far worse than to leave this world with a legacy as good as the one left by my friend, Henry Minitar. This despite the fact that Henry was a small (no more than 5 feet, 3 inches tall, perhaps 145 pounds), homely, physically and mentally challenged man who never received a high school diploma; never made more than a few thousand dollars in any year of his life; never had an important job, although, as you will see, Henry's experience may lead some of us to redefine our definition of the word "important"; never married; never had so much as a driver's license; never owned anything except the clothes on his back; and rarely, if ever, left the remote county in which he was born, grew up, lived and died. Still, years after his death, Henry and his legend remain well-known and revered within the small geographical confines through which his life passed. For the forty-plus years he was the caretaker of the local skating rink, virtually everyone raised in this ruggedly hilly, heavily tree-covered and desolate plot of northern Michigan knew, and grew to love, Henry.

There are probably few places on Earth more appropriate than Michigan's upper peninsula for a man to live whose very being is destined to become inextricably bound to

snow and ice. The peninsula is formed by three surrounding Great Lakes: the frigid, awe-inspiring, sometimes frightening Lake Superior to the north and the majestic Lake Michigan and brooding Lake Huron to the south. The whole peninsula is well north of the 45th parallel meaning that it is all closer to the North Pole than to the equator. This northern location plus the massive amounts of surrounding water combine to produce long, harsh and dramatic winters across the peninsula and especially in those areas on the north side that run along the southern shore of Lake Superior. That is the location of Muskrat Bay, Henry's, and my, hometown. Nearly every year, the first snow and below freezing temperatures arrive in October and then linger into May. Snowfall amounts for individual days commonly exceed one foot, reach eighteen inches frequently and approach or exceed two feet several times each year. It is not uncommon to have a score or more days in a row with measurable amounts of snowfall and the hearty people who reside here don't consider anything less than four inches to be "measurable."

Like much of the peninsula, Muskrat Bay's heyday came and went decades ago. Its population, once as high as 23,000 during the heyday of the "ore rush", leveled off at around 3,000 in the late '40's and has remained in that vicinity ever since. Almost every family lives a paycheck-to-paycheck existence, eking out a living in the small paper factory that the town attracted during the its long, slow decline, working for the government maintaining the parks and roads, or working in the retail operations necessary in every town: the supermarket, hardware, gas stations, clothing stores and few remaining restaurants. Nobody has much money left for fun or "frivolous" activities so what recreation that exists is required to be of a type that incurs little or no cost. For the adults, this means primarily hunting and fishing for outdoor activities; pinochle and board games for indoors, Monopoly and Life being particular favorites.

The town's youth, however, have two other primary types of recreation, both outdoor. In the summer, swimming is a constant activity, not in Lake Superior which even the heartiest descendants of the Fins who originally settled the area find to be unacceptably bone-chilling, but in the nearby Eagle's Nest Lake whose sandy shores and comparatively warm waters invite natives and visitors alike. The predominant activity, this being the "winter wonderland" after all, predictably became ice skating. It has all the assets required in this peculiar setting. It is inexpensive; a pair of skates and warm socks being the only equipment needed. It has a long season, nearly always commencing before Thanksgiving, the traditional American holiday celebrated on the fourth Thursday of November, and lasting through March and occasionally into April. It is a healthy activity; good exercise and nearly everyone can do it with only a little practice. It was through skating, or more precisely through the skating rink, that I came to really know and love Henry Minitar and through which he established his enduring and endearing legacy.

Every year for as long as anyone can remember, the city would prepare its skating rink, usually in early to mid-November. By then, there was almost always a sufficient amount of snow in the city square's park to scrape around to form the borders of the rink. The

snow would be shoveled around the edges forming a rectangle approximately one-hundred fifty by two-hundred feet. The town's lone water-pumping fire engine would bring a full load of water and slowly and carefully saturate the snow which would, within a few hours, form an ice barrier that would define the rink for the rest of the skating season. Then the whole rink would be flooded, allowed to freeze, flooded again, allowed to freeze and so on, until an ice thickness of approximately 4 inches had been established, a process that took two days, give or take a few hours depending on the temperature of the surrounding air. The final stage was to attach a smaller hose with a fine spray attachment and mist the whole surface in order to finish with a glass-smooth, slippery surface. Beginning with the 1954 flooding and continuing through the season that began in 1995, the completion of that first misting would mark the point at which responsibility for maintaining the icy surface, except for the monthly re-misting, would fall exclusively to Henry.

During the previous skating season, Henry, then 16 years old, had decided he wanted to learn how to skate. A simple thing for most people, skating was a daunting challenge for Henry, somewhat illustrated by the fact that he had never tried it until he was 16. Most children in this area were skating by the time they were three or four and were proficient within two to three years after that. Henry showed up with his new skates the day after Christmas, 1953. Even though she had doubts, Henry's mother, with whom he lived throughout his whole life, yielded to Henry's wishes and bought the skates, the only present Henry had wanted or had received that Christmas. Henry came walking in the same way he always walked. He didn't really shuffle but he walked bent slightly at the waist, leaning forward and taking short, quick steps that always gave the impression he was slightly out of control and was about to stumble over. His head faced slightly down and his eyes appeared to fixate on a spot about twenty-five feet in front of him. It was quite obvious that balance was not Henry's strong suit, although no one ever remembers him actually falling while he was walking. Henry's always clear, blue eyes sparkled a little more than usual that day and his mouth, always adorned with a small, pleasant smile was wider and noticeably more joyous. His brand new skates, laces tied together, were slung over his shoulder as he marched purposely into the warming cabin at the east end of the rink, the first time Henry had ever crossed the ice and entered the cabin. To Henry, this was his big chance to finally be normal, to join the generations of area children whose passage from child to adult always included countless hours and days skating on this rink, some playing an abbreviated form of hockey, some racing each other, some simply skating round and round and round in seemingly endless circles.
Sadly, though ultimately propitiously, it was not to be. Henry sat down next to me (I was 10 at the time), removed his boots and began to put on his skates.

" I'm going to skate, Jamie," he said, smiling in an even broader fashion. He spoke in his normal slow way, with a noticeable lisp that made "skate" sound somewhat like "shkate." In longer conversation with Henry, there were always difficult to understand words and his companions had to consider the context to determine what he might be saying, a

practice at which people who spoke frequently with Henry became very good.
“Good for you, Henry,” I replied. “I’ll show you how.”

Henry’s awkward fingers carefully laced and tied his skates, a process that would have taken me far less time even then. I waited patiently because, even though I did not yet know Henry well, I liked him and was impressed with his peaceful demeanor and kind actions toward everyone with whom he came into contact, especially children smaller and younger than he. When he finally finished he raised himself up from the hard, worn bench and began to walk on his skates across the bare wood floor to the exit door. At least part of the problem which would interfere with Henry’s ability to skate was immediately apparent. I, and the rest of the kids heading back out to the ice, walked directly over our skates, easily balancing on the blades. Henry, on the other hand, walked on the inside edge of the soles of his skates, his ankles bent inward as the sides of the blades bent toward the floor until the soles edges contacted the floor and formed two unstable platforms on which Henry walked toward the door. The problem exploded when we reached the ice. The wood floor had at least provided sufficient resistance to keep Henry’s legs together as he walked across it. The ice did no such thing. Henry stepped off the single step that separated the cabin from the ice, left leg first. The instant his blade touched the ice, his ankle caved again, the blade flattened, and the sole edge hit the ice and neither blade nor sole “caught” the ice, and both just kept sliding. His left leg slid forward until his calf nearly touched the ice. His right leg remained anchored to the wooden step. Henry came as close as he physically could to doing the splits, then fell over backward, laying flat on the unforgiving ice.

Henry had not hurt himself badly, though his left leg and both sides of his groin were strained and sore. I and a couple of other young skaters helped Henry to his knees from where he crawled back into the cabin, struggled up to the bench, removed his skates and put on his boots. That one unfortunate incident had shattered his eagerness to skate, and never again did Henry try to skate and never again did anyone see Henry with those brand new skates.

On such unforeseeable incidents do legends and legacies begin. When we left the cabin, the park supervisor, who had witnessed Henry’s failed attempt at skating, was standing on the ice, apparently waiting for us. When Henry saw him, his always bent head bent further toward his chest, his shame at his pitiful skating attempt overwhelming him. But the supervisor had a purpose entirely different from the one Henry was imagining. He walked toward us, stopping and kneeling directly in front of Henry. He put his hands on Henry’s shoulders and looked directly into Henry’s dry but sad eyes.

“ Henry,” he said, “Would you like to help me clear the snow off the ice?”

Henry's head straightened as he returned the man's steady gaze. An odd look crossed his face, one I could not quite identify. It looked like a mixture of confusion and hope and emerging delight. Then that broad smile that had been displayed on Henry's face only minutes, but in some sense a lifetime, before returned.
"Yes," said Henry, in that very precise, drawn-out way he always used to affirm his intentions but with an obvious additional touch of gratitude.

Tom, the supervisor, rose to his feet and put his arm around Henry's shoulder. The two men (It seems to me, looking back through decades, that Henry had passed from child to man at that very instant.) began the long walk back across the ice to the shed on the other side where the old Ford tractor with the five-foot snow blade was stored.

For the rest of that skating season Henry rode that tractor with Tom, virtually every day. Tom taught Henry everything about its use, and Henry proved to be a willing student, doing things over and over again until his fragile brain retained them. He learned how to start the tractor, a small thing but one that still took Henry a couple of days worth of attempts to master. He learned to depress the clutch, shift into the lowest gear and then to simultaneously and gradually release the clutch and depress the throttle. This was a particularly painful learning because the clutch/throttle activity required a coordination of his feet that was excruciatingly difficult for Henry. He did it repeatedly, grinding gears and stalling the engine, Tom patiently coaching at his side, until he finally could comfortably accomplish it, a process that took a significant part of the rest of the season. He learned to maneuver the tractor across the icy terrain, an activity that was far more difficult than it otherwise would be because the tractor could not use any traction devises, like tire chains or studs, in order to prevent damage to the pristine surface. For this same reason, the snow could not be allowed to accumulate to more than six inches or so because the traction the tires could deliver was insufficient to push snow weighing more than that. All of which meant that the snow would be removed several times a day during those frequent days that the snow fall exceeded six inches or a foot or two. He learned to keep a ledger of how many hours he drove the tractor so he knew when to notify the county mechanics that it needed an oil change or tune-up. He learned to push the snow evenly in all directions so that it formed a uniform, ever growing border around the rink and did not pile up in one area and infringe on the skating surface. By the end of that season, near spring of 1954, Henry had cleared the ice himself, with no help from Tom, probably more than fifty times.

In autumn of 1954, Tom, knowing that Henry no longer attended school, the local school no longer possessing the capability to teach someone with Henry's special needs, asked Henry, after confirming with his mother that it was alright, if he would like a job ("A REAL JOB!" Henry thought excitedly upon hearing the query). It would pay $.65 an hour, (a wage which would incrementally increase until it reached $5.25 during Henry's last season) and Henry would be solely responsible for making sure that the ice never remained snow covered for long. Tom was confident, having witnessed Henry's progress during the previous season, that Henry could perform all the tasks required. He did have some concern about whether or not Henry could handle the responsibility of doing this job with very little supervision, making the right decisions about when to show up and when to remove the snow. Little was the concern merited. For that winter, and the forty-one that followed, Henry showed up every single day at 7:30am, usually walking the ¾ miles home for lunch with his mother, then coming back and staying until 9:00pm when the rink closed. He did this from the rink's November opening until the spring thaw. There were only two times that anyone remembers when Henry failed to show up and keep that ice free of snow. One, for two days, was when his mother was suffering with pneumonia and Henry stayed home to comfort her and take care of her every need. The second, when Henry was gone for nearly two weeks, was caused by Henry dropping a heavy log, intended for the warming cabin's stove, on his left foot breaking the middle toe and making it too painful for Henry to depress and manage the tractor's clutch. Henry, by the way, outlasted that tractor and the county bought him a new, smaller, more modern John Deere model which he used for his final twenty years beginning in 1975.
I skated every day I could, which was most winter days, from that winter, when I was 11 until the spring of '61 when I was 17. Henry and I became fast friends. I would follow Henry around, he on his tractor and me on my skates, whenever it snowed enough to require clearing. Rarely did the snow ever get more than 2 to 3 inches deep on the ice surface, so diligent was Henry at his vocation. Other times we would sit in the warming cabin and play kids games, like finger wrestling and "I Spy." Henry's favorite game in the warming house was arm wrestling an activity that Henry legitimately won until I was about 14 at which time I began to let him win, so Henry could say that he "always" won. I observed Henry's interaction with everyone. He was intuitively masterful with all kids, but especially with the young learners. That one inelegant fall of his implanted a never-ending sympathy within Henry for the learners who stepped on the ice and immediately splayed to the ground. Henry would watch as their parents helped them back up, only to see them fall again. Then Henry would go and encourage each child, calling them by name and saying "You can do this!" to each one as they struggled back to their feet after

their most recent fall. Legions of kids who passed through this initiation remember Henry shouting with glee the first time they made a few successful strides on their perilous new skates. Legions of parents remember Henry hugging their child when he or she returned after their first successful voyage. More than a few parents remember hugging Henry, tears of joy in his eyes for the success of their child. More than a few of those remember tears of love in their own eyes, tears summoned by their admiration and appreciation for this broken little man who somehow, miraculously, inspired every child with whom he came into contact to keep trying until they ultimately succeeded. Later on, my own four children were among those that Henry inspired. They all became expert skaters and each remembers those first few strides that ended with a hug from Henry and tears in their father's eyes.
Henry was, without doubt, the happiest, most fulfilled person I have ever known, a belief shared by nearly everyone who spent enough time with Henry to get to know him.

The skating rink gave meaning to Henry's life and inspired in him a discipline to his task which could be favorably compared to any highly successful person in any field. His rewards were bountiful in the form of admiration and affection from generations of children and their parents. And, his memory has only become more and more revered with the years that have passed since that sad day in 1996 when Henry went to sleep and did not wake up, shortly after that skating season had ended.

There is no need anymore for anyone to remove the snow from the ice at Muskrat Bay's skating rink. You see, one of the young skaters who was not much more than a toddler when Henry had inspired him to keep getting up each time he fell, had become more than just an expert skater. He had left Muskrat Bay in his adolescence and had moved, first to Sault Sainte Marie, Ontario and then to Minneapolis to play advanced junior hockey. He then moved on to the National Hockey League and became one of the league's highest scoring right wings. His skill and fame brought fortune and his fortune he decided to share with his hometown, Muskrat Bay. Upon learning of Henry's death, he donated $2 million to the community, money designated to build a nice, but modest, indoor skating rink. The site, the same site where the outdoor rink had been located for decades, was donated by the city. About half the labor was donated by the local people. The Henry Minitar Memorial Community Center quickly became known as "The H." Inside, beneath a photograph of Henry riding his Ford tractor during a mid-60's winter squall, is a plaque bearing the following inscription:

“ In memory of Henry Minitar: friend, inspiration and unofficial, beloved patron saint of Muskrat Bay.”

What Ever Happened to Chris Olsen?

by Carol Franks

> Every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main. If a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe is the less, as well as if a promontory were, as well as if a manor of thy friend’s or of thine own were. Any man’s death diminishes me because I am involved in mankind; and therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee.

John Donne (Meditation 17, 1624)

Chris Olsen is dead. He didn’t want to die. I don’t know if he thought much about his purpose in life, but he has made me aware again of my own.

On January 9, 2004, Portland, Oregon, was encrusted in an icy snow so hard that no one, no matter how large, could break through it to walk. Somehow an ambulance backed into the east side of the apartment complex, where I have lived for over a decade. I couldn’t see who was being loaded into the back, but when the ambulance drove away, the siren wasn’t blaring and the lights weren’t flashing. That meant that there was no hurry. The passenger was dead.

I don’t know my neighbors very well. The apartments are low budget and nondescript. Let me illustrate what I mean by nondescript. Two or three years after I moved in, I came home one night, cold sober, and pulled into the apartment complex to the west of mine. I parked my car in what I thought was my space—in front of a juniper hedge. I went to a door that I thought was mine, put the key in the deadbolt, and tried to open the door. My key didn’t work. At that moment, I noticed that the apartment number—same style, same positioning—wasn’t mine. I pulled my key from the deadbolt and fled.

As I fled, I heard the apartment door open, and a young man’s voice barked at me

through the darkness, “Who are you?!”
I froze. In the United States, many city dwellers have guns for just such occasions.

“You’re never going to believe this,” I began, “but I live in the apartment to the east and . . .”

He laughed. “I’ve put my key in your deadbolt, too.”

That’s what I mean by nondescript. In such apartments, turnover is high. Only two or three of my neighbors have been here as long as I. My purpose in life has nothing to do with acquiring better housing. Mine suffices.

On January 10, I learned that the dead neighbor was Chris Olsen, a man in his early fifties who had, in fact, lived in the apartment complex longer than I. Over the years, Chris and I had chatted by our mailboxes from time to time, mostly about weather and cats (a mutual love), but sometimes about bigger things—his allergies and heart trouble, my father’s death, his night work at a printing office. He never mentioned family, just whatever cat had moved in on him at the time, always a savvy street cat, who could teach me to follow it to Chris’s door to ring the doorbell so Chris would let it in. His cats were always smart—survivors.

I speculated that the couple who lived next to me and asked Chris to baby-sit their toddler were somehow related to him. Chris ate lots of meals there, and the little boy adored Chris, addressing him as Uncle Chris. After Chris died, I was surprised to learn that the people next door were good neighbors to Chris, nothing more. Just good neighbors. Better than I.

Chris was an odd man, perhaps what people used to call a savant—someone with noticeable patches of brightness and dullness. He took pride in living on his own, paying his rent on time, being kind to children and other neighbors, and caring for whatever half-feral cat that had claimed him at the time. He was computer savvy and had worked at the same job for over twelve years. He didn’t have a driver’s license, but he could read. Sometimes, as he looked through his mail, he read to me. I think he wanted to show me that he could read. A few times he read something to me and asked me what it meant. We chatted amicably about his junk mail.

Chris must have walked or bussed to work, though I never saw him leave or come home. Sometimes, I saw him shambling like a large toddler to the Plaid Pantry, a twenty-four-hour convenience store two blocks west of the apartments. Chris wasn’t noticeably large, perhaps 5’ 9” and 190 pounds—boxy, but not obese, but his movement spoke of marginal motor skills.

At one of our mailbox chats, I learned that he had once been mugged and robbed on his

way to the convenience store; another time, his apartment had been broken into and his computer stolen. In the spirit of small talk, I told him about the window peeper I'd had—and my 1985 Toyota that had been stolen in 1995. Generally, we had little crime in our complex, but no one was affluent. Chris and I never talked about poverty. And we never talked about God or religion. Or purpose. Chris had that emotional intelligence and recognizable goodness that made children and stray cats love him. I respected him.

On the other hand, Chris was, by anyone's standards, odd. One late-fall day, five years or so before his death, I had the sad duty of going to his apartment door to tell him that his current cat, a long-haired, tuxedo tom that Chris had named Pooter, had been struck by a car on Division Street, which ran east and west in front of our apartments, and was lying dead under the junipers. I tried to be tactful, but Chris's grief was instant and deep. Despite the fall chill, Chris shuffled barefoot in his short, blue terrycloth robe across the parking lot to the junipers to fetch Pooter. As he walked, stunned, he talked, "Oh no. Oh no. Oh no. Maybe it's not Pooter. Maybe it's some other cat. Oh no. Maybe he's not dead. Oh no. Oh no. Oh no." I was sorry I hadn't simply disposed of Pooter's body.

As Chris bowed over Pooter, the blue robe crept too high in back and fell open in front, fully exposing his genitals to me and to a few onlookers who had gathered. Chris petted Pooter's black-and-white fur and let his tears drip onto the stiffening cat. The man that I had guessed was related to Chris joined us. "Close your robe and stand up, Chris," he growled.

Chis stood, clutching his cat to his heart, and somehow managed to close his robe. His grief had made him oblivious to a small matter like public nudity, a nudity that was, to those who knew him, asexual. He carried the dead cat into his apartment and closed the door behind him.

A few days later, Chris thanked me for letting him know about Pooter, and he insisted on showing me a memorial he had erected in his apartment. On his printer, he had produced a large photo, poster-sized, of Pooter. The poster was on the wall above a long, narrow table. The table held a variety of small incense burners, a crucifix, and a white ceramic bowl, probably Pooter's dish. There was also a large boot box on the table. I didn't ask Chris what was in it. I couldn't smell anything dead, and Chris's apartment was clean, if cluttered. My eyes held briefly on the crucifix. Perhaps St. Francis would take care of Chris's cat. "Pooter would like this," I said. Chris smiled serenely.

At other times, when my apartment was too hot, I'd open my secluded front door so the air would move. Many times over the years, I'd be startled to turn toward my door only to see Chris—inside my apartment—crouched on his hands and knees, wearing his faded blue jeans and worn tee-shirt, his thick glasses sliding down his nose, looking under my daybed for my cat Jeremiah—just to say hello to her. Generally, because I wasn't expecting to see a middle-aged man crouched on my floor, I'd holler, "Jesus!"

“I’m sorry,” Chris would always say. “I didn’t mean to scare you.” He always meant it, genuinely. But, sometimes only days later, he’d startle a “Jesus!” out of me again.

Chris was like that: simple with patches of brightness.

In November of 2003, two months or so before he died, Chris had come into hard times. After over twelve years of steady work, he had been laid off. Despite the term “laid off,” Chris knew the lay-off was permanent. At our mailboxes, Chris told me the bad news. He added, “I’ve lost my health insurance, too.”

I understood. Like Chris, I could be laid off. Like him, I take pride in supporting myself, in doing my job well. Some 15 years ago, as I entered the Department of English where I teach, the department chair told me, in passing, that he had gone through the adjunct teaching applications and 75 people were waiting for my position. He didn’t mean anything by his statement. He just saw me and, on impulse, said it, because he thought I might be interested. I know I’m fungible; that is, at some level, I’m just like any other quarter that goes into the pay phone. I have been an adjunct at my current job for twenty-three years, a teacher for thirty-four. Still, I feel unsure of my employment future. I think that Chris had felt surer of his. Like Chris, I’ve lived, from time to time, without health insurance; unlike Chris, I don’t have a long-term, pre-existing health problem that makes employers shy of hiring me. If I ever become seriously ill, I don’t believe my employers will renew my teaching contract. As many writers have suggested, including Benjamin Cheever (Selling Ben Cheever, 2002), “Job security [in the United States] is a thing of the past.” When our jobs go, our health insurance goes. Chris needed his heart medication.

“Are you eligible for the Oregon Health Plan?” I asked. I thought perhaps he didn’t know about the option; in 1994, Oregon’s Governor John Kitzhaber (M.D.) pioneered the first state health care system in the country, part of his effort to cover some of the forty-five million Americans without health coverage (American Academy of Family Physicians, 2000).

“Not until the end of January. I’m cutting back on my heart medicine, so it should last me until then.” Chris was one of those waiting for eligibility.

“Does your new cat trigger your asthma?” I was somewhat acquainted with his little gray tom, a flea-bitten and unneutered street cat, who had already trained me to ring Chris’s doorbell.

“No,” Chris said, “cats are about the only thing I’m not allergic to.”

I should have pushed the issue, but, at that time, I still thought the man who told Chris to close his robe was family. And I knew that the man’s wife was a pediatric nurse. I

recalled seeing Chris leave their home with leftover food, probably food that he shared with his cat.

For lots of reasons, the current theory of neighbors caring for neighbors is flawed. People need public assistant—food, clothing, shelter, and work that doesn't cost them their pride, something the Roosevelts understood. Chris had pride; he'd earned it. He'd been a steady employee and tenant as long as I'd known him. He was civil and polite, gentle with children and with his pets. Chris could no more afford to support the stray that depended on him than his neighbors could afford to pay for the medication and food he needed. While the wheels of the health-care process were grinding along, Chris was dying.

After Thanksgiving, turkeys went on sale at the local supermarket. For less than seven dollars, I bought a 21-pound turkey, baked it, trimmed an ounce or two off one side, and told Chris that Jeremiah and I were "turkeyed out." "Could you and your kitty," I asked him, "use a fresh baked turkey?"

"We sure could."

My gift felt puny. Not enough to cover his needs. Here's another problem with the current political policy of replacing social services with neighborly charity: the wealthier one is, the less likely one is to be inconvenienced by a neighbor's neediness. If someone in a wealthy neighborhood goes belly up, that family discreetly disappears into a poorer neighborhood. In short, the least capable of lending financial assistance shoulder the greatest part of public assistance. Even had I known that Chris was only weeks from a fatal heart attack, I couldn't have bought his medicine for him. The most I could do was to provide a bit of food. Chris was unwilling to declare to his neighbors the depth of his need. He had pride. English has lots of words for those who ask for charity: free loaders, spongers, down-and-outers, beggars. As people fall farther, losing their homes and moving under bridges, the names become harsher: indigents, bums, ne'er-do-wells. We have not enough words for public assistance, too many words for the people who need it.

In mid-December, Chris returned my roaster, shiny clean. "If you bake another turkey and can't use it all, be sure to think of us."

"I will," I promised.

Before I got to another turkey, a cold front moved into Portland. When I wasn't snowed in, I was in my office, where I had access to a computer, writing. When I write, I am filled with purpose. Sometimes, I worked all night. Since my old cat had died in late July, nothing drew me home except eating, sleeping, and bathing. I forgot about Chris.

On the morning of January 9, from what I have pieced together since, Chris had a heart attack, dialed 911 for an ambulance, and managed to unlock his apartment door. The

ambulance arrived too late to save him. His scruffy cat watched as Chris was put in the ambulance. When the cat got underfoot, trying to stay with Chris, the manager of the apartments put the cat in Chris's apartment and locked it in. In the process, the manager was badly scratched.

On the morning of January 10, a Saturday, I stood by Chris's door and talked to the landlady, who is a retired, first generation German immigrant, and her manager, a young man who works two other jobs. They could find no next of kin, no one to claim Chris's body. Even the couple who had befriended Chris knew nothing of his family. The landlady said that Chris had been unable to pay his rent for the last three months. "I told him not to worry," she said, "that he could make it right when he went back to work. But, of course, he was worried." She had tried to find his family on the Internet, but there were too many "Chris Olsens." She had tried to call his former employer, but the print shop was closed for the weekend. "We'll try to reach them again on Monday,"

The manager added, "I don't know what we're going to do about his belongings. It's like a garbage scow in there. And I'm not tangling with that cat again."

Half-heartedly, I spoke, "I'll take the cat home if you don't need a second pet deposit." I didn't have the hundred dollars.

"That would be great!" the landlady said. "I was going to take it home rather than having it put down, but we have a dog that doesn't care for cats."

None of us knew the cat's name, just its personality. It was a ruffian. The manager said, "I've seen it take down a squirrel."

"Maybe that's why both of its ears are torn," I recalled.

The landlady let me into Chris's apartment. "Garbage scow" was an understatement. Cat urine was only one of many dreadful smells. The floor was covered with clutter too busy to identify. I found the cat in Chris's bedroom. It recognized me and let me carry it to my apartment.

I wasn't quite ready for another cat. By fall, I thought that I might have money for another pet deposit, neutering, shots, litter, food—in short, luxury items. When I had tried to picture my next cat, I often thought of two kittens—perhaps a white one and a gold one, or maybe an Abyssinian (they like water) or a Siamese (they're keenly intelligent). I hadn't pictured anything like this ragged-eared tom. He was the antithesis of my last cat, an urbanite, a spoiled calico who used my toilet, drank from a crystal goblet, and disdained anything messy. This fellow was a thug, a street cat who scoffed at a litter box, drank from gutters, and ate like a pig, splattering half-and-half cream (his first luxury item) on my walls and snuffling his food around his dining area. He wasn't quite ready

for a new human; he wasn't quite ready for civilization.

Chris died on Friday, January 9, of a massive coronary. Five days later, the landlady found a nephew in Walport, a short distance from Portland, to claim Chris's body and handle his "estate." As the nephew, a bright, pleasant man, excavated Chris's estate, I talked with him. He and his wife were relieved not to have to take Chris's cat, "We have three already," he said.

Standing at the door, I looked again at the horrible mess of Chris's apartment, the dwelling of a man who had given up trying to fend for himself—and even for his cat. He could give his cat shelter and love, but little food, no litter box, no health care. Still, the cat had been satisfied to stay with Chris under those conditions. And he had tried to get in the ambulance with Chris. The cat knew Chris better than any of us did.

I've since named the cat Hank, and he has installed himself in my heart. Cats can do that fast. On April 1, two to three months after Chris's death, Hank told me something big about Chris. We walked together to the manager's apartment to deliver our rent check. Hank stopped on Chris's doorstep, looked up at me, and paused briefly to see if I would ring the doorbell.

"Chris is gone," I said. "You're my cat now."

Chris's death diminishes us. Chris had kept hope as long as he could. His needs were simple: he needed his job back, so he could pay his rent and electricity, buy food, and take care of his cat. He needed medication for his asthma and his heart. He needed good neighbors. He wanted to live. All of this, he was denied. First came unemployment; then the resulting poverty wore him down. Then his heart gave out.

Recently, I read a book by David K. Shipler, The Working Poor: Invisible in America (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2004). For the last five or six years, Shipler has been looking into the lives or the "working poor" in the U.S. in order to "unravel the tangled strands of cause and effect that led to their individual predicaments." He prefaces his book as follows:

> Most of the people I write about in this book do not have the luxury of rage. They are caught in exhausting struggles. Their wages do not lift them far enough from poverty to improve their lives, and their lives, in turn, hold them back. The term by which they are usually described, "working poor," should be an oxymoron. Nobody who works hard should be poor in America.

Shipler concludes his profile of the lives of the working poor in the United States by observing, "Workers at the edge of poverty are essential to America's prosperity, but their well-being is not treated as an integral part of the whole. . . . It is time to be ashamed." It is, in fact, time to be outraged.

Carol Franks grew up on a farm in the Badlands area of North Dakota. After graduating from the University of North Dakota in 1970, she taught secondary English and German in North Dakota, Minnesota, and Montana until she moved to Portland, Oregon, in 1979. Since then, she has been teaching writing at Portland State University.

Fixing? Helping? Or Serving?

By Dr. Stan Goldberg

“We’re going to ask you to fall in love with people who’ll leave you within months or even weeks. Then we’re going to ask you to do it again and again.”

It was the first day of my volunteer training session at the Zen Hospice Project. The sessions were run by its founder, Frank Ostaseski who’s devoted his life to serving the dying and training people similarly committed to their care. It was an unnerving concept. How would it be possible to allow myself to fall in love with someone, knowing with certainty, they would be leaving me within a very short period of time? As Frank continued talking, I wondered if I would have permitted myself to fall in love with my wife of 35 years if I knew she would die within weeks or months after our first meeting. Most likely, I would have pulled back, in spite of the intense feeling I had knowing her for only a few hours. I wouldn’t have allowed myself to enter a relationship that would result in the loss I knew would be coming. But here was someone asking me to do it, not once, but repeatedly. Before I had a chance to come to terms with his first statement, he uttered a second and more difficult one.

“There’s a distinction between "fixing," "helping," and "serving."

In my mind, I didn’t see any difference. I viewed all three as identical. As a speech-language pathologist I thought I had been doing these three things simultaneously for the past 25 years.

“When you fix, you assume something is broken. When you help, you see the person as weak. But when you serve, you see the person as intrinsically whole. You create a relationship in which both parties gain. The purpose of hospice is to serve.”

While the distinctions were deceptively simple, they are fundamental to understanding intensions. I realized for my entire professional career, I was a “fixer” and “helper.” Someone who could look at a problem a child had and either find a solution or minimize its effects. I now was being asked to place a defining characteristic of my identify on a

shelf and assume a new role, a “server.” Instead of continuing explaining with words, Frank pulled out a stack of 100 black and white photographs of people who died in hospice over the past year.

“I’d like you to intently look at each one before passing them to the person on your right. Everyone here has already died, but imagine they’re still alive. Just think about your reactions to what you’re seeing. Then we’ll talk.”

As we looked at the beautiful photographs of people who were in the process of dying, my first reaction was to do everything in my power to help them. At about the 50th photograph, I realized there was nothing here to fix. In spite of my knowledge and experience, their condition would only progress, ending in death. Everyone would still die in spite of all my efforts, in spite of anyone’s efforts. Nobody would have been able to fix or help. All that was possible was to serve. I was beginning to have a theoretical understanding of “service.” But I’ve come to believe that theory is the lowest level of understanding. The next up involves the concept’s application. I saw that often during our training. I was able to watch experienced volunteers serving the dying. But the highest level of understanding is when you’re engaged in what you thought you knew either through theory or observation. I didn’t have to wait long for that to happen. It occurred during my first week as a volunteer.

“There are so many of you,” she wrote on the small erasable slate outlined with yellow plastic flowers.

“I know,” I said. “We multiply like bunnies.”

Cindy was referring to the number of volunteers at the Guest House. She tried to laugh, but only the right side of her face and lips moved in a slight upward direction. The surgeon had removed her cancerous pharynx and tongue, and created a stoma, which is an opening in the front of her throat to breathe. Neither food nor water could be taken by mouth, since it would enter her lungs and immediately suffocate her. To prevent it from happening before the planned reconstructive surgery was performed, her mouth was wired closed and food, water, and medicine were administered through a tube directly into her stomach. Unfortunately, the tumor spread rapidly and surrounded the carotid artery. Reconstruction wasn’t possible and her prognosis was poor. For two years, Anna, her mother, was with her constantly, taking care of every need. As her condition worsened, she could no longer care for her 57-year-old daughter in their one bedroom apartment. They came to the Guest House to spend their last weeks together.

The Guest House is a restored Victorian home in San Francisco with space for five residents who are not expected to live for more than six months. The actual stay rarely exceeds two, with many leaving us within weeks of arriving. Located on a residential street, there is no indication anything remarkable is going on inside. There are no signs,

and to enter, you ring a doorbell as you would with most homes. For each five-hour sift, two volunteers and an attendant, either a Certified Nurse's Aide or a Home Health-Care Worker, are upstairs with the residents. Sometimes an additional volunteer is downstairs cooking. Since most volunteers do one weekly shift, there were about 40 who cover the house weekly between 8:00am and 10:00pm every day.

During the first two weeks, Cindy was still alert enough to communicate by using her slate and gestures. There were many things she didn't need to say. Often a look was sufficient. A movement of her head towards Anna meant she would like to talk with me without her mother present.

"Anna, why don't you take a break? You can have a nice cup of tea downstairs. Cindy and I will be fine together."

"Are you sure?" Anna said looking anxiously towards Cindy.

Cindy gestured towards her mother, as if shooing a child out of a room. She left and Cindy just shook her head. By the third week, it was difficult to write.

"Lonely when I'm gone," she wrote.

"I know. We're all doing whatever we can to prepare her. I think the social worker is trying to find a support group when you leave."

She just shook her head and laid it back on her pillow while straightening her blanket. Cindy was meticulous about her appearance, even as she approached death. When I came the following week for my Thursday shift, I learned she had refused to take any more nourishment or water. She said it made her nauseous. In hospice, the wishes of the residents are paramount, whether it involves something we think is trivial, like the placement of flowers in their room, or something serious such as refusing food. For the volunteers and staff it was irrelevant why she chose not to receive nutrients. Choices are respected.

After she was no longer eating and grew weaker, her need for modesty became a problem. During the first two weeks of her stay at the house, when clothes or bed linens needed to be changed, Cindy would allow only female volunteers to be present. Initially, it wasn't a problem, since if only male volunteers were available, she was able to support herself in bed or move with minimal help to a chair or commode. As her weight dropped to less than 80 pounds and muscles atrophied, it became difficult for her to move or remain in a position for the attendant alone to clean or change her. Anna often wouldn't have the strength to assist. As Cindy's health continued to deteriorate and our friendship increased, modesty was replaced by practicality. There came a time when there were no female volunteers on my shift and the attendant asked for my assistance in changing

Cindy.

“It’s ok Cindy, don’t be embarrassed, look who it is,” Anna kept repeating.

She turned and smiled at me. She didn’t need any reassurance. We had become friends and confidants over the past few weeks. Most of our conversations involved gestures and nods. Neither of us was embarrassed the first time I helped in cleaning her body. Afterwards, it was just another thing we did together, no different then having a conversation or me sitting quietly at her bedside holding her hand. Most of the time I would hold her while the attendant cleaned. These were very intimate moments, where she was utterly helpless. During the last week of her life, the bedsores on her back became extremely painful. When changing her shirt, I supported her as she sat on the edge of the bed. After everything was completed, she refused to lie back down. Squeezing my hand firmly, she indicated with her head she wanted to continue sitting.

I had been standing at the edge of the bed gently holding up her back with my hand, avoiding touching the sores near the base of her spine. I decided to sit close so my entire arm could support her.

“Is that ok?” I asked.

She slowly nodded her head with her eyes closed. Although I thought it would be fine even before I asked, I never assume anything with residents. Each is unique in their needs. There is no such thing as uniformity in dying. What pleases one resident angers or causes pain to another. I usually was right when interpreting Cindy’s needs since I was spending most of my time at the House with her and Anna. In addition to my regular shift, at least once a week I would spend the night sitting next to her so Anna could rest. As I held her, I noticed she began leaning on me. As I felt my right side support her entire body, the words and music of Bill Withers song “Lean on Me” formed in my mind.

Sometimes in our lives, we all have pain, we all have sorrow.
But if we are wise, we know that there’s always tomorrow.
Lean on me, when you’re not strong and I’ll be your friend.
I’ll help you carry on, for it won’t be long ‘til I’m gonna need
someone to lean on.

Gradually I went from supporting to cradling. I couldn’t tell when our positions changed, but it was a difference noticed by both her mother and the attendant. No one spoke. My left hand held hers. As the pain increased, so did the strength of her grip.
Please swallow your pride, if you have things you need to borrow.
For no one can fill those needs that you won’t let show.
Just call on me brother when you need a hand.
We all need somebody to lean on.

As I cradled her body with my right arm, her tension began to diminish. As it did, her grip also changed. It became soft and almost caressing. Occasionally, she would release her grip and lovingly move her fingers over mine. I felt honored serving her and being allowed to share such a profound experience near the end of her life.
If there is a load you have to bear that you can't carry,
I'm right up the road, I'll share your load if you just call on me.
Call me if you need a friend.
Call me.

As I sat with her, I didn't see a person whose body was ravished by cancer. I felt I was in the presence of a complete individual who graciously was allowing me to share a profound experience. She was letting go of everything and relying on my presence to get her through intense physical pain and the uncertainty of the journey she would soon begin. She stayed in my arms for over 30 minutes, with me occasionally stoking her forehead and gently rocking her. In some ways it reminded me of the times when my son and daughter were infants and I would hold them while they slept. For them, helplessness was the beginning of their lives. For Cindy, who was two years younger than me, it signaled the end.

When I try to explain that every day I leave the Guest House I feel I've received more than I gave, most people think I'm being unduly modest.

"It's a mitzvah (blessing) what you do," my Jewish friend would say.

"We're very proud of you," my family repeatedly tells me.

"You've been a blessing to us," families of the dying say through tears.

Most people who don't do it, view serving as a sacrifice. Something altruistic and totally giving. Nothing can be further from the truth. Few understand that serving someone as they approach death is incredibly rewarding. It's like having an endless supply of water being poured into a small bucket. There is no way it can contain the cascade. When I leave a resident's room, I often remember one the classic Monty Python sketches were a man is stuffing himself with whatever food is placed in front of him. As his gluttony increases, so does the size of his body. It becomes enormous. When he lies back in his chair, covered with food he couldn't put into his mouth, a voice is heard from off-stage.

"Wouldn't you like a little mint?"

"No," the man groans, "I'll burst."

"Ah, come on, just one little mint," the voice pleads.

“Well o.k.,” the man responds. “Just one.”

A hand places the mint in the man’s mouth. As he’s savoring it, he literary explodes. I often feel that way when I’m serving a resident. I’m unable to contain everything that’s given to me. But just like the gluttonous man, I can’t resist additional mints. Those who I serve become my teachers, providing me with lessons about living that are transforming. Every time I leave a resident’s room I leave with a greater understanding of life and my place within it. The same feeling occurs regardless if I was feeding, talking, changing bed linens, cleaning their body, listening, or just quietly sitting at the bedside.

When I sat with Cindy the next week, she would occasionally open her eyes and make hand movements towards the end of her bed. I had no idea what they meant. Before I left I kissed her on the forehead, saying goodbye for what I knew was the last time.

“I’m going to miss you very much. You’ve meant a lot to me and everyone else in the house. Thank you for what you’ve taught me. I love you and we’ll watch over Anna. Have a good journey.”

I didn’t know if she heard me. There was no visible sign she did. But I’ve been told people, who are near death and appear to be unaware of their surroundings, are able to hear and understand what is being said to them. I was no longer concerned with Frank’s statement that he was going to ask us to fall in love with people who would leave us within weeks or months. After serving Cindy, I knew I would do it again and again. Two days after I saw Cindy all of the volunteers received the following email.

Cindy died peacefully this morning, pronounced at 8:15 am.
Anna was at her side and Irma was also there at 7:30 when she took her last breath. Tom, the volunteer with HBB who has been visiting daily, had been here most of the evening and part of the night. Judy from HBB stopped in around 1am to check on Cindy and give support to Anna.

Cindy did not want to have the ceremonial bath done, so Hanna and Carrie bathed and dressed her in the clothes that Anna had set out. We surrounded her with candles and the flowers from her room. Cindy has a "Mona Lisa" smile on her face!

The mortuary will be here around 10:30 this morning, as Cindy’s wish was to be picked up immediately. All are welcome to join us in honoring her leaving at that time.

Thanks, again, for all the support and love you have given Cindy and Anna.

Blessings, Laurie

Serving gives purpose to life. Yes, it benefits others. But it's unique among all other human activities in what it does to those who practice it. In spite of what you give, you receive significantly more. I helped Cindy in the dying process, but in return, without asking, she taught me the importance of letting go of what no longer works. Being involved in her death brought me to that third level of understanding. Every resident I've served has been my teacher. Lessons are never requested. They just occur. If I listen carefully, I receive them. Metaphorically, they say "Listen, this is important." Often, they have the subtly of a sledgehammer. Some I immediately understand. Others, I'm still struggling with. But all move me forward in my understanding of life.

For many people, these lessons are rare occurrences. For those involved in service, they happen everyday. Serving a person results in a stripping away of agendas and egos. Pema Chodron said that having an ego was like a very fat person trying to get through a very narrow door. It's possible, but painful. Serving our residents is an egoless event, as I imagine it is in all other forms of service. Things that are peripheral to being human dissolve into their needs and fears. I remember a question I asked Frank.

"How do you know what's the right thing to say or do? With my clients, if I say something wrong or even stupid, I know I can fix it next week. But with the dying, there may not be a next week."

Without any hesitation he said, "You've been doing these things your entire life. Not just as a therapist, but as a human being. If you're present, you'll know the right thing to do, you'll just know."

He was right. The defensive layers of armor which for years insulated me from both pain and compassion fell away. And the most amazing thing is I can't understand how I became a more authentic human being with so little effort. Something happened to me as I served. I liken it to a caterpillar metamorphosing into a butterfly. She doesn't choose to change, it just happens. Becoming a better human being isn't difficult. In fact, I didn't even have to try. All I did was to serve. I think the transformation had to do with how the residents treated me. Emptying a urinal or listening to someone's fear of dying brought an equal amount of gratitude. To be so loved and appreciated by someone you're serving changes the soul.

When I serve I view everyone as intrinsically whole. As someone who is no different then me. As someone who deserves every bit of compassion and happiness I wish for myself. That's the beauty of service. I am them and they are me. The idea is embodied in the Tibetan concept of equanimity, where you look into the soul of another human being, and see yourself. In hospice we hope our service leads to a peaceful and dignified death for residents. Sometimes it does, other times it doesn't. But you always grow regardless of the outcome. You grow through your intensions. Whether I place a box of tissues

closer to the weak hands of a resident, clean a commode, or guide a friend along her final journey, my intension is always the same-to serve people as if I was them.

I recently visited my daughter in New York City. As we walked through Greenwich Village on a cold winter day, we came upon a children's pocket park on 6th Avenue and Minetta Lane. Within the park was a small cinder block building that probably housed children's playground items. As we passed by I was impressed by the wonderful scene painted by the children on the building's wall. I kept looking at it as we walked until I noticed a quote by a well-known educator written in a child's hand. It was the author of the quote that caused me to stop. But it was the words that kept me there.

Service is the rent we pay for living. It is the very purpose of life and
Not something you do in your spare time.

As I review what I have gained by serving the dying, and how it has given purpose to my life and changed me, I realize I'm not paying enough rent.

Stan Goldberg is a Professor of Communicative Disorders at San Francisco State University with a Ph.D. in Speech Pathology, a M.A. in Political Theory and a B.A. in Philosophy. For over 25 years he taught, treated children, researched and published in the area of learning problems and change.

Dr. Goldberg has published four technical books, written numerous articles and delivered over 100 lectures and workshops throughout the United States, Latin America and Asia. He has taught over 10,000 people how to help children learn and has treated over 1,000 children directly, or while supervising his graduate students. His work on learning and change has been funded through 12 grants, including one from the United States Office of Education.

Dr. Goldberg has a private practice, with clients ranging in age from two to 75. He specializes in the treatment of speech, language, and learning problems.

He serves at the bedside of the dying as a volunteer at the Zen Hospice Project and as a volunteer home hospice caregiver.

Prolifically published, he has received numerous writing awards, representing poetry, essays, short stories and humor. His latest book, Ready to Learn: How to Help Your Preschooler Succeed will be available in January of 2005 from Oxford University Press, and has been hailed as one of the most innovative books for parents of pre-school

children.

A Prisoner's Purpose

By Kenneth Hartman

Tear gas is more a presence then a smell. It clings to the back of your throat, a chemically induced feather that provokes a coughing fit after each attempt at a breath. It is one of the "less lethal" force options deployed in prison to quell a riot. On one windy, Southern California day, I could see that the last few wisps of tear gas blowing off the yard as the guards finally came back through the gates, the violence essentially over, the oppressive silence of stifled raw emotion pushing down over the several hundred men scattered about in segregated groups. My heart was beating so hard it caused my vision to throb.

The firestorm of riots that had been sweeping across the prison system in California had reached our relatively peaceful meadow. For several years, we had all read about, and heard tales of these conflagrations that had consumed one prison after another, a brush fire blown along by a hot wind of frustration and resentments un-addressed. A decade of "get tough" policies, which meant in practice, brutal conditions, and a systematic dehumanization of prisoners, was bearing its logical consequence. Prisoners, shot through with the reigning ethos of being tantamount to evil, condemned to de facto death sentences in ever worsening conditions, had become what had been projected onto them.

The United States has a legacy of relying on prisons to solve problems. We built the first penitentiaries, and instituted rules so repressive that insanity and suicide were common to the forced penitents. No less astute an observer of America than Alexis de Tocqueville commented, in 1833, "While society in the United States gives the example of the most extended liberty, the prisons of the same country offer the spectacle of the most complete despotism". His insight remains equally valid today. It is an American tradition to resort to bigger and more painful sticks to achieve the ever-elusive goal of a crime-free society.

More than two million people in this country are imprisoned, and several million are under some form of restraint by the government. (A higher proportion than any other country.) A mathematical extension of these numbers, using an average family, results in close to ten percent of society with a connection to the prison system, the jails, and the county probation camps. No society in history has been able to sustain itself with such a massive and bitterly angry underclass. And make no mistake about it, no one who

experiences this system, whether as a prisoner or the loved one or friend of a prisoner, is not angry and bitter. The system, which defines itself as society's protector, as the bulwark against chaos and anarchy, is sowing the seeds of society's destruction.

As the guards applied plastic riot handcuffs to me the morning I watched my world devolve into unmitigated and unrestrained violence, the most overwhelming emotion I felt was sadness. Since the age of 16 I had spent all but a few months of my life a prisoner of the state of California, "state-raised" as guys like me are called. A product of the concrete and steel womb of the criminal justice system, there were some expectations I held. Among these, a basic level of order, predictability, a certainty that chaos would be kept at bay. There were no Atticas, no New Mexico State Prison takeovers in our living memories. California, certainly no beacon of enlightenment, nevertheless, ran a relatively stable operation.

My journey through the adult system began when I killed a man in a drunken, drugged-up fistfight, one hazy night when I was 19 years old. I was sentenced to life without the possibility of parole and transferred into the legendary granite blocks of Folsom State Prison. Before long, I was deep in the mix of drugs and power politics, and the well-regulated violence that characterized the joint. Prisoners divided themselves, with the willing assistance of the system, into ethnically-based armies that engaged in largely ritualized combat, occasionally actually battering one another directly, while living a fantasy existence of ascribed significance.

Into this exceedingly simple life came the great disrupter, the most omnipresent of emotions, love. Through a series of happenstances, I met and fell in love with a beautifully complex and frustratingly passionate girl. One of the dark secrets of bad guys, one we all hate to acknowledge even to ourselves, is that our errant behavior is often motivated by a sneaking suspicion we just aren't lovable. All that studied posturing and smart-ass indifference is really a mask. Coming to feel loved is nothing short of revelatory. Being a bad actor, when you believe at the heart of your being that you are bad, has certain logic. If you are lovable, then your rationale, your excuse, has vanished and you're diminished to an asshole.

In response to the challenge of love, I spent several years and most of my hair trying to make sense of my life in prison, society, and the world. The brutal conclusion to my search was that I was responsible for my actions, my actions were wrong, and I was

obliged to suffer the consequences and seek atonement. Unfortunately, finding venues to perform expiating acts, while serving life without the possibility of parole has proven to be an exceedingly difficult task. I've counseled wayward youth, taught my illiterate peers how to read, and volunteered for every imaginable "good" work offered.

All along the way, I kept running into a stark reality: No matter how much I could accomplish it was but droplets in a sea of misery and failure, a sea that kept getting larger, deeper, and murkier. The very system I lived in, the ground under my feet, was slipping into a fundamental darkness. Butting up against this slide down, I developed a keen awareness, a sense of moral obligation, that coming to understand what was wrong, seeing it clearly and comprehensively and knowing how to reverse the decline, I had to act. To really affect the wider world I had to work to better my world, this world of confinement and failure, of programmatic and expected defeat.

The first ridge I had to scale was the ever-present prison mindset, what is best described as "The Omnivorous Cult of the Lowest Common Denominator". It is, in effect, a surrendering to the worst elements, a way of thinking that devalues progress and optimism, a code of conduct that resents growth and glorifies violence. Prisoners and guards, both sides of the prison experience less adversaries than mirror images of one another, casting their self-loathing onto the other, practice it. I had learned, years before, this cult, like most cults, is based on fear and ignorance; once exposed to the light of reason, all but the most fear-filled and obstinate are willing to abandon it. While adherence to the cult is wide, it is not deep. In the face of a good idea, a better way, the cult quickly withers.

By 1998 as the California prison system was sinking ever deeper into chaos; I became convinced the only solution was to apply what I had learned to fundamentally change this world. A sympathetic lieutenant had promised me he would carry the water for the project, taking it directly to the warden. I began to cautiously discuss the idea of what became the "Honor Program" with both my fellow prisoners and other staff. I was pleasantly surprised to learn that many people, on both sides of the fence, also wanted to see change. There was a palpable sense of frustration, of powerlessness in the face of the onrushing fire of violence and disruption. Change was certainly desired, but no one seemed to grasp how to get it done.

I began to write a proposal that ultimately consumed me for months, during a time when

my personal life was coming apart, and my environment was devolving steadily, growing uglier and more inhospitable to positive thinking. The basic principles were clear from the outset: exclusion of drugs and gangs, a voluntary commitment from each prisoner, a focus on a rewards-based system rather than a punitive, punishment-based system, and a need for a different relationship between staff and prisoners. My reading of prison reform material, studies of how other countries ran more effective and successful prisons, criminology texts, and my experience convinced me that the vast majority of prisoners desire to simply do their own time in as much a state of stability as possible. The remainders are so completely trapped in the negative cult as to be unreachable.

The deeper I traveled into the creation process, the more filled I became with a conviction that through this reform the prison system could be transformed. Instead of being a vast wasteland to which tens of thousands of damaged souls were deposited to rot, it could become a greenhouse, a place of productivity and growth. My conversations about the program became animated with a sense of opportunity and conviction; purpose, in other words.

Work of my campaign spread throughout the prison. Most of the powers-that-be derided the very idea that California maximum-security prisoners could ever act honorably. Sadly, many prisoners felt the same way, so inculcated by the reigning ethos, the dominant ideology of the cult of violence and failure. Like all good ideas that challenge the status quo, this one had a polarizing effect. Nevertheless, supporters appeared from out of the smoke, people I would not have expected, from some of the harshest guards to leaders within the various prison groupings. Ideas came pouring in along with connections to the right people.

The lieutenant who first agreed to support the plan, who had the courage to put his name on a good idea, took the completed proposal directly to the warden, bypassing the “chain of command”. This act was a kind of career suicide for him because it is looked on as a type of betrayal to go around the established order, regardless of whether the intent or the result is good. His peers never forgave him for this, but the program would have been stillborn if not for his belief n doing what is right. The Warden, another oddity, a product of this weakened “care and treatment” arm of the prison system, saw immediately the potential benefits of the Honor Program. There was an aligning of the planets or perhaps the critical mass of concern necessary to motivate change had simply been reached; either way, the ball was put into play.

The howls from the “custody” arm, the uniforms, could be heard throughout the prison. When the Warden handed the task of developing the program off to a Catholic priest there was an almost universal outrage from among the ranks of the guards. The campaign to flush the program began with a direct dismissing of the idea itself. The prisoners would never go for it; the omnivorous cult would burn it down and leave the program a pile of cinders. Of course, the guards who had utilized the cult of violence to maintain their dominance fully expected to simply unleash the angry horde. To their dismay and surprise, enough of the prisoners who had come to see the true nature of their world banded together to create a wall behind which they could stand.

Although the proposal went up to the Warden under the lieutenant’s name, it quickly became common knowledge I was the author. I began to use all the contacts I had developed through my years to counter the forces in opposition. I talked to everyone who would listen. I recruited every strong, intelligent prisoner I could to keep our flock together. Over the couple of years between presenting the initial proposal and the start of implementation, the program and I became inextricably linked. Some people started to refer to me as The Founder. As much as I tried to protest and demur, the voice within me that demanded my continued, stubborn, single-minded pursuit of real change to this world of mine reveled in the recognition.

For too much of my life I had been known only for wrong, for playing a central role in the cult of violence’s one-note act. My reputation revolved around savagery, around destruction and tearing down. I even came to the sad realization that the girl who fell in love with me, and through whom I had first found the impetus to grow out of the confines of this world, she too had been drawn to my negative energy. There is a species of power, illusory but compelling nonetheless, to the darkness of human nature. I bathed in this ugliness so much I reeked of it. When the time came to strive for something better, I still felt the taste for the malevolence, its siren call of primitive emotion and instant gratification. At a different level, deeper, I craved to stand in the light, to be known as one who had helped to bring peace into my world. Thankfully, the latter desires won out.

Implementation of the Honor Program required cleaning out a whole 600-bed facility, of those prisoners too caught up in the prison mindset to seek the chance for a better life. The negative leadership amongst the prisoners quickly realized the program would disempower them. It is much easier to terrorize those who cannot see a way out, a route of escape. By focusing on gangs and drugs, the twin agitators, the program removed both

the force and the grease of the motor driving the turmoil. The guards willingly participated in this stage of the process, enjoying exercising power, not fully cognizant of what they were creating. In a fairly rapid period of time, several months, the facility was transformed into a population of prisoners who wanted to do better, to be better, to live as normal a life as possible. Even though the negative leaders would continue to seek to undermine the program, all their efforts ultimately failed because the power of the idea was simply too great. As I believed, the vast majority of prisoners want to live like human beings to the degree possible in confinement.

Although it would seem only logical that the guards would also prefer to work in a safer and saner environment, for many of them the reverse proved true. The one great unforeseen development of the Honor Program project is how doggedly it has been resisted by so many of the guards; even some of the guards I assumed would be our biggest supporters. I was not surprised that the most retrograde among their ranks would resist anything labeled “honor” associated with prisoners, but I underestimated how many of them would resent prisoners taking control of their own lives. The guards have built a prison mindset no less pervasive and negative than the prisoners’. Within this warped worldview, all the players have assigned roles. Prisoners are always bad, always wrong, and always suspect. Guards are always good, always right, and always justified in their actions, no matter how apparently unethical, due to the evil, incorrect, and devious nature of prisoners.

The guards’ moral issue split them into warring camps; those supportive of the program, the larger but quieter group, and those opposed, the more vocal and determined. I have continued to campaign on behalf of the program, but as positions hardened, it became difficult to reach the other side. I believe the root factor of their resistance is fear. They are terrified their actions will be called into question, or even the very justification for their professional existence. The empire California prison guards created are built on a false premise, that California prisoners cannot and will not conduct themselves in a civilized fashion. At its heart, the Honor Program sets out to prove that premise inaccurate. As the years stretch out behind us, peaceful, productive, and civilized, the earth beneath their feet has been crumbling away.

Six years after conception, and almost four years after implementation, the results have been impressive. There have only been a couple of incidents when the opposition managed to slip some ringers into our midst; no guards assaulted, no mass uprisings or

riots or strikes. (No small feat in a state prison system that is, literally, in a meltdown, with uprisings and riots and strikes happening daily in other prisons.) A flourishing culture of positive energy that includes lowering of racial barriers and a growing sense of ownership. New arrivals are advised by other prisoners that this is a good thing, so don't screw it up. There is even optimism; just a bit, because prisoners tend to be the most pessimistic people in the world. More fundamentally, there is a sense of possibility, of expectation.

The Honor Program has been featured in newspapers and on television. In one long piece on a local channel, I was interviewed and identified as the prisoner who came up with the idea for the program. Shortly after the segment aired, I received mail from admiring members of the public. People want to believe that prisoners, indeed everyone, are capable of good, of affecting the world in a way that results in an advance in the human condition. As sad as it has been to observe the response of too many of the guards, it has been extremely gratifying to see how others of them have risen to the challenge. Several have gone so far as to become our biggest supporters after initially doubting the Honor Program concept. One in particular, a 25-year veteran, raised in a family of guards, has become our most effective and insistent supporter. Such is the nature of an idea, of a plan, of a worthy purpose.

For me, after these years of struggle, and a lot of bruises incurred along the way, pursuing something worthy of sacrifice has altered my sense of myself. I am reminded of the words of Feoder Dostoyevsk's Grand Inquisitor, that the secret to a life well lived is to have something to live for. I have identified my raison d' etre, taking the hard-won knowledge I have earned from a lifetime of imprisonment and putting it to good use; more specifically, reforming the world's largest prison system from within one of its cells. It has been, and will surely continue to be, a hard slog but it must be done. For some reason I am not fully sure of, luck of the draw, fate, providence, it appears to be my task.

Prisons, as institutions, have an atavistic quality. Across the American West they dot the landscape like latter day outposts, surrounded by watchtowers that face inward, designed to keep the modern savages in the compound. Serving life without the possibility of parole in one of these outposts is a terribly dispiriting experience. The most enlightened prison system is still a prison system, a place of separation and despair. Nevertheless, my experience leads me to believe prison can be a place of growth. All but the most defiant

of criminals can be reformed, in the literal sense of the word, into better, more productive and useful human beings. Most radically, I know they want to be reformed; they just don't consciously know it themselves.

My crusade to alter my world, to pick up the flag of fundamental reform and push it to the crest of the hill, has affected thousands of people. Even those who oppose the concept have had their lives changed. The California prison system has a shining example of the possible. The lives of all those connected to this place, directly and indirectly, have been altered for the better. Into this alternate reality of misery and disorder, of exploding canisters of tear gas and acts of desperate meaninglessness, the honor-concept backfire has been set. It is also a challenge to the free world; honor being applied to the discourse regarding the outcasts necessarily implies the presumption of a higher standard of conduct from the rest of society. Such is the nature of purpose, of the power of a purpose-filled existence to affect change. The power of purpose can even overcome the concrete and steel hearts of a prison world.

I was born in 1960 in Boston, Massachusetts, before moving to Long Beach, CA from Brooklyn, NY in 1969. In 1980, in Ramona Park in North Lake Beach, in a drunken, drugged-up fistfight I killed a man. I served time in Soledad, Folsom State Prison and the California Correctional Institution's maximum-security unit before transferring to the state prison in Lancaster. I remain at Lancaster, living in the Honor Program. I am the chairman of the Steering Committee for the Honor Program. I am married, and the father of a wonderful 8-year-old daughter. I am serving life without the possibility of parole. I am a freelance writer, hoping to publish a book of essays I have written regarding the nature of life in prison. I remain committed to making the world I live in a better place.

Listening to Purpose

By Bennett Johnston

Part I: Storytellers

" I can only answer the question, 'What am I to do?' if I can answer the question, 'Of what story or stories do I find myself a part?'"

— Alasdair MacIntyre (as quoted by Robert Fulford)

In the summer of 1926 Walt Sternenberg joined his two brothers on a journey he would never forget: a short trip to the jewelry store in Trenton, New Jersey to buy a bracelet for his mother. He was eight years old. Whether the bracelet was in step with the latest fashions was, of course, happily irrelevant. Love, magic and the outer limits of a modest allowance were the arbiters of taste, and the ingredients of a delicious memory. He tells this story simply, rather quickly, stops, pauses puts his hands on the table and with a quiet, joyful gaze, lets the rest of the memory unwind in silence before us. Friends at the table ask a few questions, "What did she think of the gift?" or "How did the three of you get to the jewelry store?" He smiles a little, to let us know that he hears the questions, but his gaze remains unperturbed, and lingers a few moments longer, then he says: "No, that's it, that's the story I want to tell." It is as if he wants to tell us not to weigh his story down with too many details, that the power of a story is in its essence, and that true power comes from knowing what is essential.

Walt and I are part of a group that meets every Thursday afternoon to play a board game that I have been designing for the past two years. At 90, most of the group is more than double my age; and though the size of our group sometimes varies, there is usually at least a half dozen of us. The game is about sharing memories—storytelling is a central element of the game—and it is a tool for memory enhancement. The workings of memory are especially important to our group—as we age, the inconveniences of forgetting increase, and of course the scourge of Alzheimer's disease is something to dread. So we play the game to stay sharp, and we have a lot of fun; but the most satisfying part of Thursday afternoons is sharing stories.

Since we started over a year ago, our group has shared hundreds of stories, from ordinary everydays, to extraordinary once-in-a-life-times: Last week, for example, Jim told a story about singing in a choir, about the deep satisfaction of singing with friends; and his momentous decision to join the seminary, the struggle of deciding. Valda told a story about watching a parade of marching soldiers who had just returned home from World War I. She was very young, but the memory of so many young men marching with "empty shirt sleeves and pants legs" has never left her. Eileen sang a popular song from the 1930's "that has to be part of the soundtrack of my life". (We all wanted to hear more songs from her "soundtrack", but she is making us wait.) Caroleen shared a story about her fascinating journey to the remote territories of New Guinea, north of Australia, in the 1960's, just after the death of her husband. She signed on as a volunteer school teacher there and stayed for two years.

I have often heard that when we get old, we have nothing left but our memories—as if living is over. Indeed, in modern America, what is the purpose of a person retired, at age 90, without family obligations, and fading health? The easy answers that most of us count

on are no longer available: there are no job titles to hide behind; few friends are left; and the busy-ness of life that often forms a veneer of purpose is taken away.

So much demands our attention when we are younger, we often don't bother with questions of purpose—there are countless details vying for our attention; and as the Information Age gives way to the Too Much Information Age, details just keep piling up. Advertising is literally everywhere: newspapers, magazines, twenty-four hour news channels, talk radio, the internet…it seems impossible that America's founding fathers didn't even have a daily paper! Computers now give us the ability to generate and process nearly infinite masses of data, with astonishing accuracy and detail; but as anyone who has ever had to cope with mountains of junk mail and spam will tell you, more isn't necessarily better; and accuracy doesn't always bring clarity. Clarity can be described as a state of being that allows what is essential and most meaningful to arise. Clarity comes from listening with discernment and patience. Processing data is not the same as listening—we don't listen to data, we interpret and label it like a specimen in a jar.

The only way to know something truly worthwhile about a person is through their stories. If we rely only on personal data—where they live, what they do for work, who their friends are—we may gather some useful information, but we won't learn much more than a census taker or a credit bureau can. Reports analyze and decipher random stuff—stories make sense out of life. Stories capture essence. When we share personal stories, we share part of ourselves. When someone listens to our stories they are listening to who we are.

Attention Deficit Disorder has become a pervasive symptom of the Too Much Information Age; both a dilemma and a metaphor of living in a society too busy and too distracted to listen. There is a word for people who don't listen to each other—they are called strangers. Personal stories create inner connections between people and these inner connections are the necessary glue that ultimately holds communities together. Without shared stories we don't have communities; we merely have collections of proximate strangers, unacknowledged and disengaged.

We have vast untapped resources of meaning and understanding in every senior center and nursing home in America. With our increasing tendency to segregate ourselves by age, we have committed ourselves to a course once unthinkable in civilized society: we are attempting to form communities without common legacies, without the bonds and sense of common destiny that the stories of our elders can provide; and we are thereby preparing a new legacy for future generations with a less steady foundation to stand on. The absence of their stories is an absence of essential perspective—and ultimately an absence of grace.

Part II: America the Distracted

" We define ourselves, our lives, and our well being by what we consume….Consumers

crave brands…that help provide meaning and order in their lives."
— Laurence Vincent, marketing executive

Stories are a basic need that emanates from the heart—it is impossible to feel human without them—for life experiences are narrative experiences; and there is no other way to convey who we are as individuals, or collectively as a community and as a nation. So it marked a tremendous change in American life when—with the ascendancy of television, long commutes and general busy-ness—we started becoming story-consumers, rather than story-tellers. Our story-telling muscles have begun to atrophy; and as our habit of telling stories fades, so to our sense of purpose. This may sound like bad news to most of us, but it has been good news for at least one segment of American society: the advertising industry.

Advertising is now a $117 billion dollar business in the United States, with international corporate consultants, and experts in every mode of business, psychology, and the arts; all dedicated to get you to fall in love with their products and their brands. The sophistication of the enterprise is breathtaking. A new sub-industry within the advertising industry called neuro-marketing uses some of the most advanced technology in brain science: the magnetic resonance imaging machine known as the MRI. A machine that costs about $2.5 million dollars, an MRI is able to detect radio signals from chemicals in the brain and can map collections of neurological synapses that fire around a particular thought, or type of thought. This amazing tool allows scientists to identify particular areas of the brain that are dedicated to different types of experiences and memories. For instance, only certain regions of the brain are used to recall mundane, but important memories such as your vocabulary, numbers and the way that words and numbers go together. A different set of synapses are engaged around our personal life experiences. It turns out that the things which are most intimate, personal and meaningful to us—our stories, our purpose—use unique regions of the brain. When you share a personal story about yourself, you engage this part of your brain; and it is this part of your mind that neuro-marketers are most interested in. They want their stories to be included in your life story.

The new science of advertising is aiming for your personal narrative—the very ground from which purpose grows—which, if not looked after, revered and protected, can be paved over with brand logos, useless information and emptiness. They want you to care so deeply about their products that your inner purpose becomes aligned with theirs—what better way could there be to increase sales?

It is still not completely clear whether these new technologies will work as effectively for advertisers as they hope; and this is not meant as a diatribe against advertising. It is meant instead as a call to awareness. We are constantly exposed to a flood of relatively unimportant information everyday, in the form of advertising, television, radio and other

media programming; but we still have the power to choose where our attention goes. Turn down the volume. Use the mute button. Give time and attention to what is important to you and your loved ones. Work with your own stories and the stories of your community, not commercial fabrications. A purposeful life can never be constructed from the themes of our inadequacies that the advertising industry thrives on.

In our Thursday afternoon group, even the simplest questions provoke unforgettable life stories. I asked Trudy to "tell a story about the smell of something cooking." She sat back in her chair and seemed to focus on something far away. "The smell of lentil soup. February 13, 1945," she said. "I grew up in Berlin. By that time the war was winding down, and I was sent to Dresden, hoping to be in a safer, more peaceful place. It was such a beautiful city…." She paused for a moment. "The city was fire bombed for two days and nights. Everything was reduced to rubble; tens of thousands of people were killed overnight." She stopped again, then, "I was alone and when it was finally over, I wandered out into the rubble. The city was quiet. I could smell lentil soup cooking, somewhere. I followed the smell and found a woman cooking. Strangers were gathered around, without saying a word, we ate together. I can smell that soup still."

Part III: Listening to the Elders

" In order that the court shall understand the frame of mind which leads me to action such as this, it is necessary for me to explain…the factors which influenced me in deciding to act as I did. Many years ago, when I was a boy brought up in my village in the Transkei, I listened to the elders of the tribe telling stories...."

— Nelson Mandela, excerpt from his first court statement after his arrest for leading a non-violent stay-at-home strike in 1961.

Sometimes we stumble into purpose when we least expect it. I didn't intend to spend more than a few afternoons at the senior center. I simply wanted to test the game that I had designed on a group of older adults. I certainly had no idea that Thursday afternoons would become one of the most important and jealously guarded times on my weekly schedule. Like everyone else that I know, I felt too busy and over-extended to imagine such a commitment. Even so, I found myself deeply attracted to the elders. What an honor it is to be with them and to listen to their stories!

They have shown me that, like a story, purpose is always meant to be shared; that purpose is brought to life in community. Those of us who are suffering from a sense of purposelessness almost always feel isolated from the inner connections of authentic community. Among the greatest gifts any of us will ever receive is the personal attention and genuine interest of others. After all, it is hard, perhaps impossible, to find your true voice if no one is listening.

Cultivation is a word akin to listening. It implies devotion and caring. Cultivating soil

means more than simply growing something in it. A good farmer listens to the land with his eyes, hands, mouth and nose—the smell of soil, its look and feel, even the taste—noticing and knowing these things is part of true listening. Cultivation implies an individual effort, rooted in devotion to a larger ideal, with a long view of things, which is why we speak of cultivating the arts or a person. It is a deep knowing that comes from sustained, loving effort. “Love does not dominate, it cultivates.” And just so, love listens.

I have been learning from the elders to cultivate listening. They have taught me that true listening has the power to reveal purpose and that purpose is not necessarily found in what we do, but in how we do what we do and why. I have learned that any task, no matter how mundane or trivial can be filled with purpose. When you are really listening, everything in your life becomes a part of the story you were born to tell—and every part of that story reveals who you truly are.

In the past I acted as if my own stories didn’t matter—that they weren’t good enough, or interesting enough, or that they were somehow just too out of place to bother sharing with others. Probably all of us have known the feeling that, “No one is really interested in what I have to say”, or “What I have to share isn’t all that important”. This pervasive sense of inadequacy is learned; and it is likely that if you believe it about your own stories, others around you believe it about theirs as well. Our “comfort zone” in America is becoming a place where no one listens, and nothing worthwhile is ever said—where the thoughtless commerce of everyday life seems to take up all of our time and is gradually mistaken for what is genuine and most vital
in American culture.

Stories are the true foundation of culture. Societies of purpose are founded on stories of meeting challenges, embracing sacrifices and serving our fellow man. Thankfully, most of these stories are too messy to be packaged for television and corporate advertising which usually rely on mindless entertainment, instant gratification and easy comforts—and encourage us to avoid anything else. The Book of Job, for instance, may have little commercial appeal, but it is an essential story of faith and purpose. The stories of our founding fathers; of Black Elk, Chief Seattle and Crazy Horse; of the civil rights movement and our ancestors who sacrificed everything for our freedom, are among countless stories that orient us as a society of purpose.

The stories our elders share are just as essential. In the sharing of their life experiences, even the simplest story becomes a moment of perfection—it is as if in each story they are saying exactly what needs to be said, in just the right way, at just the right time. These are moments brought to life, opened into fullness and the promise of possibility. These are moments without dead ends, connected to and a part of a larger story that belongs to all of us.

It is here, in these everyday magical moments, that our little group has found purpose—in

stories of real life; in stories that cannot be shrunk to the size of commercial gestures and the thoughtless assumptions of a world stunned by busy-ness. Every time we meet our purpose grows, nourished by our listening, our sharing, and our stories.

I asked Harry to tell a story about a time when he was very cold. He grew up on a farm in Northern Minnesota, so I knew that he would have something to say on the subject. He stooped his shoulders a bit, and crossed his arms, as if to turn his energy inward against the misery of the cold. “I have never been so desperately cold as I was one December night during the Great Depression”, he began. “There was a brutal wind that I will never forget. We didn’t dare go outside; and everything, everywhere was completely frozen. We had a fire, but we needed to stay in bed under a pile of blankets to stay warm.” “Man, that must have been awful,” I said. He looked at me and smiled, “No, not at all, it was one of the best times of my life. My wife and I were together in a lonely little cabin in the middle of nowhere on our honeymoon. I guess we were crazy to be up there so alone in all that cold. We didn’t have any money; but we were in love, and I have never forgotten what I learned then: that nothing is ever as bad as it is good, as long as there is love.”

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Bennett Johnston has been passionately involved in serving, participating in and

exploring the many dimensions of community in America. Mr. Johnston is the inventor of ***GinkGo!****, the memory and storytelling game. He has dedicated much of the past two years to developing the game, reading extensively in the fields of cognitive memory, community participation and story-telling. He is a successful entrepreneur and business consultant focusing on strategic partnering for early stage companies. Since 1992 he has created several businesses and has been an adviser to more than a dozen businesses and non-profit programs in North America and Japan. Mr. Johnston was a candidate for the U.S. House of Representatives in 1992. From 1984 to 1991, he worked for the Trust for Public Land, where he served as National Director of Land Conservation. Mr. Johnston has also worked as a consultant to the Gorbachev Foundation and the State of the World Forum in San Francisco. He is a Director of the Center for Attitudinal Healing, a service organization dedicated to helping individuals and families cope with end-of-life and catastrophic health crises. He is also an active volunteer in the Glide Church Youth Mentoring Program in San Francisco.*

He has been playing the **GinkGo!** *game at the Redwoods Senior Center in Mill Valley, California for more than a year.*

The Day of the Shoes

By Lisa McMann

This day begins like all other January Sundays; swirling snow seeps through cracks in doors, children stir from their benches and, one by one, they pad down the aisle barefoot toward the glowing sign above the double doors. Even though the sign says “EXIT,” the little ones know it means ‘bathroom’. A careless coat zipper clicks against a wooden bench, echoing like a stone dropped in a quiet pool.

In the dark of the morning, the stained-glass windows are shades of black set deep inside grey stone walls. More than an hour will pass before sunrise, but this old church begins to buzz with activity. On the altar, next to a sad assortment of shoes, is a row of makeshift beds holding tiny babies who cry in waves. The pastor lets the people keep the altar lights on when it’s very cold –- the lights dry the shoes and warm the babies. In a Philadelphia winter, it’s cold enough to need the lights on every night.

Pew by pew they awaken, stiff-shouldered inside their coats. Gloria is the first one up. She is in charge when Christopher is gone. She stretches her aching back and reaches up toward the cathedral ceiling where bejeweled chandeliers hang from hardwood rafters, as they have done for a hundred years. Gingerly she walks over cold tile to the narthex windows so she can survey the weather. Resting on the mat in front of the arched oak

door is a thin line of snow, like cocaine on a black glass plate.

Outside, wind gusts drive snow and litter down the sidewalk. Newspapers and plastic bags slap and stick to the rusty schoolyard fence across the street. Shadowy figures, like lumpy bags of trash, sit motionless in the school's doorway.

Gloria shivers and catches her reflection in the glass. She is thin, unsmiling. Her weathered skin, at 29, looks 40. She pulls her tangled hair away from her face to make a ponytail, takes a rubber band from her wrist and snaps it in place. It's time to go.

Gloria shakes her daughters awake. She needs their help. They are not excited to be up; they grumble and shove each other, but Gloria raises her hand and silences them with a look, and they get busy packing their bags and herding stray children.

Gloria takes her duties seriously –- if she messes up, thirty-five people lose shelter. This is her job. It earns her and her girls a guaranteed warm place to sleep and meals from the Sandwich People, who leave packages on the church steps twice a week.

Gloria gathers the adults and older children in a circle before she passes out the bread. She bows her head and they follow suit; some kneel. "Oh God," she says. Someone begins to hum. "God, we thank you for this shelter in your house." Choruses of 'mmm-hmm' follow.

"Ohhh-oh-oh-woahohhhh God," she lifts her voice in song, and several others join her. The beat is provided by cracked hands on a brown bench, the echoes of broken people rise high into the rafters, as dawn breaks on what they will come to know as the day of the shoes.

*

Christopher is on a speaking tour in Michigan today. His car, a 1992 Ford Tempo, runs loud and rough. The roads are slippery with snow. When he arrives at the chapel ten minutes late, the band is wailing. He hurries inside, an odd portrait: scruffy blonde beard, dreadlocks, black frame glasses held together with tape. He wears a heavy wool sweater with holes in the elbows; a green flannel shirt shows through. Someone shoves a production detail sheet in his hands and points out his cue. Christopher gives the tech team a wide grin and a thumbs-up signal.

*

As the homeless folk pack their belongings and wrap their babies tightly, Gloria stands by the door and checks bags and pockets, searching diligently for stolen church items. It would only take one incident to get them evicted, and Gloria is willing to accept the

glares from the few who resent this ritual, if it gives them all one more warm night.

Within an hour the church is empty, save Gloria and her girls. The girls crawl down the aisles, looking for whatever might have been left behind, knowing they won't find anything. When everything you own fits in a bag, you can tell with a glance if something is missing.

Gloria runs the vacuum sweeper through the sanctuary in the dark, her well-trained eyes seeking crumbs of bread, threads, lint. She finds a button and puts it in her pocket. It looks like it belongs to Harald Montraine's coat. She hopes it's not the top one.

The girls wipe down the pews with wet paper towels and Lysol, provided by the church. They work pleasantly now, knowing that the alternative is to be standing outside.

*

Christopher peruses the modern chapel, wondering where to sit. Purple cloth theater seats accompany speakers and electronic equipment, which hang from the catwalk and ceiling. Contemporary paintings of Old Testament Judges adorn the walls. The band is dressed for comfort. He finds an empty seat near the front, takes off his sweater, and blends his voice with the voices of the church. He raises his hands to take the blessings of the day, offered by God to all who ask.

He prays for Gloria and her daughters, and for his homeless friends who share the church pews with him back in Philly. He prays for their feet in broken shoes, knowing that plastic bread bags worn like socks might keep their feet dry, but do nothing for the cold. He prays for inspiration and rejuvenation -- this is his last stop. He is anxious to go home.

Christopher raises his head when the pastor mentions him, and he turns to look at the crowd. His eyes dart from face to face, resting now and then on those who look back at him. He is surprised to see such an eclectic group -– so many teenage and college faces, from preppy to grunge to punk -- hair in all shades of green and blue, facial piercings like nails in drywall. In the back sit the suits and dresses, uncomfortably adorning the bodies of former hippies and Woodstockers, he guesses. They stand out like tuxedos at a beach party, but their high-school aged children splay gangly legs and arms over the pews like they belong.

Back in the sound booth, a techie rolls a scene from To Kill a Mockingbird. Atticus sits with Scout on the porch swing and talks about walking a mile in another person's shoes, wearing the skin of another to understand his perspective. When the movie clip ends, Christopher stands and walks slowly up the steps to the podium, barefoot.

*

Gloria and her girls hit the streets well before the first church volunteers show up. They make their way through the rundown neighborhood, weaving between brown buildings and black-crusted piles of snow. If they can reach the YWCA by 10 a.m., they might get a shower and a break from the cold. It's a three-mile walk.

Gloria's oldest daughter, Martha, is fourteen. She has a yeast infection from too-tight pants and chafing underwear, and God knows what else. The youngest, Penny, is eleven, and started her period for the first time yesterday. This news brings no emotion. It is news alone; it is news inevitable. Gloria cannot stop her girls from growing up. She cannot protect them from men who coddle or fondle or force themselves on little girls, just as she cannot stop the girls from offering themselves to men, open-legged, as she herself did at age thirteen. Now the last of her babies is ripe for carrying babies of her own. Gloria rearranges the church altar in her mind, wondering how she'll fit more infant beds there.

The women lean against the brick wall of the Y as they wait in line to enter. Martha squirms in her jeans, an anguished look on her face, but says nothing. Gloria gives her a sympathetic half-smile and begins loosening the braids in Penny's hair. Selene, the middle daughter, works on Martha's. Selene's own hair is cropped short, her head nearly shaved bald by her drunken father who had custody of Selene two months ago. Selene had come home from school with a lice note, disallowing her to return until she was nit-free. That was enough to set her daddy off, and Selene ran away, back to her homeless home that night.

The line at the Y moves slowly; by noon they have made it inside the building. Gloria fishes two quarters, a dime and three nickels from a pouch inside her shirt. "Pay if you can, what you can," the sign says. She lays the coins in the basket.

There is a nurse in the locker room, a volunteer, once a month. Gloria sends Martha to her for Monistat, and Penny follows to ask about menstrual pads. Gloria grabs four dingy towels and sets up a space for her family. "You go, Selene. Wash out your underwear and toss it to me first, then wash your body," she says. "Drink some water. Don't waste soap."

While the girls take showers, Gloria, dries their underwear with the wall-mounted hand dryer, pushing the silver button every thirty seconds to start it again. She inspects the generous box of feminine products, sets a pad on top of Penny's dry underwear, and thinks about Christopher.

*

Christopher clears his throat and surveys the crowded room from the podium. He sees potential. Current and future bankers, nurses, builders, electricians, factory workers, attorneys, and teachers sit attentively in front of him, taking in his unusual dress, his

dreadlocks, his bare feet. His words are soft and slow as he begins telling them his story.

“I am driven to be homeless,” he says.

“After six years of higher education, a master’s degree in business, and thirteen years as a mortgage officer and president of my own company, I have almost nothing to my name, and I blame God.”

People shift in their seats.

“God ruined me, you see. Ruined my perfect life. I had it all. I fulfilled my dreams, I had money in the bank, I had plans to retire at age 45 and live a life of leisure. My life was perfect.”

Children glance at parents.

“Does that make you uncomfortable? I hope so. Because I want God to ruin your life, too. It’s only then that you can make a real difference in this challenging world.

“At the height of my business career, I thrived on stress, and walked the streets of Philadelphia like I owned them. As I achieved my goals, I praised my amazing self for my tremendous abilities. I was a god to myself.

“And then one beautiful night I decided to walk home after work. As I passed the subway stairs, I saw a street man beating the hell out of a woman. She screamed, staring up at me. ‘Help me! Oh God, help me!’ But I did nothing except walk away. I couldn’t be associated with it.” He pauses. “I didn’t even call the police from my cell phone.”

Christopher looks down, runs his fingers along the smooth edges of the maple podium.

“For weeks I couldn’t sleep. I was overcome with guilt. I kept hearing the woman’s voice in my dreams. ‘Help me! Oh God, help me!’

“I finally realized that I was not God at all. In fact, I was nothing but a coward, living my life with cotton-candy goals. Never once did my past achievements give me true satisfaction. They only spurred me to have more, to be greater, to chase after the next hollow accomplishment. And then what? More of the same. I was a fraud, hiding behind my crutch of success, too stupid and too selfish to risk my reputation helping someone other than myself.” He takes a breath. “Everything...everything I had done with my life to that point became worthless to me.” He shakes his head, remembering.
“ A few months later, in talking with a long-time client and friend, I confessed what I was feeling. He suggested I try something new –- volunteering my time for a worthy cause. I scoffed at the idea. I gave away enough money to charity. I’d done my part. But his

words echoed in my ears. So one day, under the guise of a rich benefactor, I toured a homeless shelter.

“When I walked in the door, the director said hello and handed me a soup ladle.” Christopher grins. “Now, there’s nothing more humbling to a haughty businessman than carrying a soup ladle. ‘We have a volunteer out sick today,’ the director told me. ‘Here’s your chance to get hands-on experience.’ He nearly shoved me to the food line, and I began to ladle soup like an over-achiever, trying to keep up with the endless stream of reaching hands. The people regarded me, standing there in my soup-splashed Armani suit, with curious disdain. And when they ate their food, they did so quietly, heads bowed over bowls.

“After lunch, the director thanked me. ‘We can have all kinds of food on our shelves, but it’s wasted if no one is here to serve it. We can’t do this without people like you -- God will bless you for it.’

“Yeah, right, I thought. God will bless me? I doubted it. ‘How do you know that?’ I asked him.

“‘Well, Christopher . . . how do you feel right now?’ he answered.

“I could only stare at him. Then he shared his story of God’s grace in his life and in the lives of others. His voice rang true and sincere, and the man seemed so content. I walked away with an itch I couldn’t scratch.

“It took years, but slowly, God wrecked me. I began to volunteer weekly, then daily. I quit my job. I gave away a lot of money, keeping just enough to live on. My nieces and nephews are furious.” He smiles.

“I set up funds and programs for the homeless, but it still wasn’t enough. How could I look these people in the eyes, how could I encourage them to help themselves, when I had never experienced what they experienced? We all knew that after a long day in the trenches, I got to go home at night, while they slept in doorways. So God became my Atticus and I was Scout, and we sat on the porch swing together. ‘Go on.’ God nudged me. ‘Try these shoes.’”

Christopher takes a sip of water, catching a drip on his lip with his thumb.

“So I sold my house and made arrangements with a local pastor to lease his church at night as a shelter. And here I am,” he says simply. “Driven and ruined. And, finally, content.”

*

Gloria and the girls hurry through their showers so they can make room for the next women. There is no time, nor free dryer, to dry their hair. They take their new feminine products and carefully put them in Gloria's pack. Martha and Penny wrap scarves around their wet hair, knowing that they will have a layer of ice on their heads by the time they are allowed in the church tonight, where Gloria will spend hours braiding the still-wet locks.

From the Y, they head to the soup kitchen to wait some more. They are near the front today, the doorway itself giving them shelter from the wind. The people in line whisper about the most recent tragedy –- Sycamore Johnny froze to death on the street last night.

"What? WHAT??" Gloria asks them. Her stomach churns when she hears the answer, and she moans. Her daughters glare at her. She had turned Johnny away just last week –- they are at maximum capacity allowed by the church. She leans against the peeling white paint of the soup kitchen's doorway and slides to the ground, paint chips sticking into the back of her coat like thorns.

*

Christopher's captive audience silently urges him on. He describes the old church shelter where he lives, and the people he has come to love. He tells of Gloria and her daughters, and the struggles they face. He tells of Harald Montraine, a 70-year-old war veteran, who will die homeless. He tells of street people who can't see past their next bottle of whiskey, who lie in their own excrement in doorways as their urine-stained pants freeze to icy steps.

His voice becomes urgent as he tells of frozen feet, and of walking in other peoples shoes, like Atticus. He shares stories of people with broken souls and shoes with broken soles. He describes his friends whose grey toes are caked with icy mud, children who squeeze their feet into shoes that are too small.

He cries out his frustration at the hopelessness in finding a job. "How can you get a job when you have no home address or phone number at which to be contacted, no references who will vouch for you, no decent clothes to wear to an interview, and no vehicle to get you there?" He talks about the walking – three miles to get a shower, three miles back to the church – all in horrible, smelly, soaking wet shoes. He speaks of sacrifice. "When my friend Gloria gets shoes, she saves them for her daughters. She uses an old balloon string –- a string she found in a park trash can -- to hold her own shoe together..." He chokes on his words.

The congregation stares as Christopher stands silent before them. He shoves one hand in his pocket and shuffles his naked feet on the harsh, all-purpose carpeting. This room is warm, and he knows Gloria is out on the streets.

Just as he's about to speak again, calling the audience to do something in their own city, for their own people...just as he's about to beg them to toss out their empty dreams and seek to be ruined by a God who is waiting...a boy from the crowd stands up and comes forward. He is a teenager with stringy blue hair, dressed all in black, a dog collar around his neck. He takes off his spray-painted high-tops, sets them on the steps near Christopher, then turns and shuffles back to his seat.

No one moves.

It is mere seconds before another person comes, then another and another. Soon the aisles are filled with people removing their shoes and placing them on the steps. Birkenstocks next to Docksiders, athletic shoes next to cowboy boots, pumps next to snow boots. Christopher stares incredulously at the growing pile.

When the suits and dresses come, the murmur of the crowd goes quiet. All eyes are on a well-known businessman. His black leather shoes look expensive and new. He walks to the front, places them on the steps with the others. Turns and walks back, a strange look on his face, his feet padding down the aisle like a child.

When the service is over, three hundred people become one as they walk to their cars, sock-footed, through the snow in silence.

*

At the stroke of nine, Gloria fishes the church key from her pack and lets her girls inside. She stays outside at the top of the steps to check the people as they approach. She smells their breath, checks their eyes for blood and their arms for tracks. She searches them for contraband. No alcohol, no drugs or paraphernalia, no weapons. With regret, she turns away Sonia, whose breath reeks of cheap rum. Sonia begs and cries, but Gloria stands firm.

"I will look after Luis, if you want," Gloria says to her, evenly. Sonia glares at her through glazed eyes. She glances at her three-year-old son, who is shivering and has green snot running from his nose. Then she shoves the boy toward Gloria and turns away.

"Screw you, Gloria!" Sonia yells as she stumbles down the street. "I ain't no fugging drunk and you know it!"

Gloria watches her go, holding Luis' hand tightly.

"Bye, Mama," he says, softly.

Gloria's throat aches with tears she won't let surface. She gathers the boy in her arms and

takes him inside.

“S’Chister-fer home yet?” Luis asks.

“Soon, baby,” she murmurs. “Soon.”

He lays his head on her shoulder, wiping his nose on her scarf.

*

When all the parishioners are gone, Christopher sorts through shoes. He knows the shoe size of each of his friends back home. He takes only what he needs and leaves the rest. No doubt the local shelters need them too.

He loads the Tempo, wipes the snow from the windshield, and drives to the interstate, heading east. Twelve hours until he’s homeless again.

When you are truly affected by the words of a passionate writer or speaker, the words burrow into your skin. “The Day of the Shoes” was born this way, sitting in the back of my brain for a year. While the essay is fiction, the story was inspired by Shane Claiborne of The Simple Way. I heard him speak; I watched hundreds of people deposit their shoes on steps and walk awkwardly to their cars on a cold day.

I began writing at the age of ten, continued writing throughout high school and college, and graduated with a degree in English. My first fiction publication came in June of 2003, and since then, my stories and articles have nestled themselves in the crooks of literary elbows such as The Citizen, Gator Springs Gazette, Literary Mama, The Journal of Modern Post, Pindeldyboz, Kinetic Travel*; in* The Binnacle *and* NFG Magazine *(both forthcoming); in a book anthology of essays, and numerous other quaint magazines around the U.S. I co-authored a real estate column in a monthly newspaper in 2003, and served as an editor of two online journals.*

Currently I am working on several fiction and non-fiction projects, including a novel with co-author David Hopwood, called The Driftwood Letters of Cricket and Blue.

I am inspired by the wisdom of Madeleine L’Engle, by the raw honesty of Anne Lamott, and by the clever humor of David Sedaris. And I am motivated by the deeds of humble souls, by writers of humble means, and by a guy of humble birth.

Who Will Be Joseph

by Esther North

On the first Sunday of Advent we begin preparations for the annual Christmas pageant. Forewarned, every little girl appears in her most angelic guise, visibly praying that this year she will be singled out for the coveted role of Mary. Most boys don't want to be singled out. They are however quite easily encouraged in packs. We've had as many as five kingly Magis strutting around in golden crowns and flowing velvet cloaks. More reticent boys are bundled into striped bathrobes or fleecy blankets and sent off to abide in the fields. The Angel Gabriel pretends to be reluctant. Mary is selected and not a few teary-eyed angels are fitted for wings. Then, the big question: "Who will be Joseph?" Boys from six through twelve suddenly manifest stone-deafness or try on some behaviour that they hope will disqualify them. No one wants to be Joseph.

It may be nothing more than a self-conscious boy-girl thing but I believe it is something far more universal: no one wants to be Joseph.

Grey old Joseph vested in drab brown, shoved to the back of the stable. Not a figure boy or man aspires to. The world is dismissive of self-denying Joseph. But God's plan for our salvation depended on him. Mary could not have made it on her own. Mary needed a man independent enough to walk with her, whatever the world said, strong enough to shelter and protect her whatever it cost. A man attuned to God's purpose for his life.

My grandfather was such a man and my earliest memories are of him on the prairie farm where my life began.

In fact, I first saw the light of day in a Salvation Army Home for Unwed Mothers. The year was 1937 and a child born out of wedlock was not the casual affair it is today: it was a family's shame and secret.

My mother was the first born to Edward and Maggie. Her porcelain fine skin was washed with whey. Her Christening gown fashioned from her mother's wedding dress. She was destined to become the bearer of her parents' own lost dreams.

Just before Maggie's fourth birthday her mother had died. With no extended family to turn to there was little her father could do but assign her, along with her two year old sister, to the orphanage so that he might go on scratching out a living in a famine-stricken homeland. The girls would never know if their father had given permission for them to be sent, but sent they were with a dozen more children and a handful of nuns, to resettlement on the Canadian Prairies.

In another County of Ireland, a young man twenty years Maggie's senior was telling his

mother of his plans to emigrate. Young and able Irishmen were leaving by the boatloads and the way forward, as Edward saw it, was the possibility of a homestead on the Canadian Prairies. His father, all but broken by the infamous potato famine, had been glad for his son's proposal.

His mother wept and argued, "You have a good job right here."

"It's the only job, Ma, and they've said young Tom can have it. You'll not lose the wages," Ed reasoned.

"Things will get better," his mother said.

"Not in your lifetime, Ma. Not in mine. Before the English starve us out of our land, I'll go of my own choosing."

"What about all that learning in Kilkenny? What about the seminary? What use will your books be if you're ploughing fields away there?"

"Ma, the learning's always for good. I'll be quoting chapter and verse to the cattle. I'll have fields of cattle, Ma."

With that he leapt up and coaxing his mother to her feet, danced her around the kitchen in a jig. Exhausted by his infectious enthusiasm, she released him with a smile that cost her untold love, "Away with you then."

"Before you know it I'll be sending money home," he said. "I'll be sending for you all to come to Canada." In her heart she didn't believe a word of it, but she believed in her son.

The young man from County Carlow had travelled the length and breadth of Ireland, but he had never seen so much land as he travelled through for three days and nights on the train from Montreal to the prairies. Careful with every penny, he bought a team of oxen and a plough to claim his quarter-section homestead. There were too few trees to make a decent log cabin, but Ed was resourceful and seeing the massive square-cut timbers left scattered along the railway line bordering his land, he hitched the oxen up to salvage them and built a small one-room house that would withstand any winter storm.

Distances between settlements were great, but neighbourliness was always near at hand. On a Saturday evening young men could escape their solitary lives at a caeleigh gathering hosted at the one grand home. It was there that, long after he'd given up hope of finding a wife who would love a man of his age and simple life, Edward met Margaret.

His host met him as he rode into the yard and, the horse stabled, urged him towards the house, "Come and meet our new girl, Ed."

Margaret was eighteen and sent into service from the Convent. Her raven hair was tied in a knot at the nape of her neck. Her apron was cinched around the tiniest waistline Ed had ever seen. He was enchanted while his hosts watched with a parental approval. It was, they admitted later, exactly the match they had hoped for.

The nuns educated their girls well in fine manners and the arts of making a home. With Margaret came the homey frills Ed had lived without: curtains and the few pretty dishes that were their wedding gifts. Cream was churned into butter and buttermilk made into biscuits. Bales of sheared sheep's wool were sent off to the mill to be turned into new blankets and skeins of colourful knitting yarn. They spent their long Winter evenings by the fire, Maggie knitting the yarns into warm wool sweaters and socks that Ed declared were 'fit for walking to the North Pole!'

At the first signs of Spring they broke new ground for a bigger garden. When the Summer sun threatened to dry out the soil, Ed hauled water from the deep well. They picked wild strawberries and Saskatoon berries for pies. They picked fresh vegetables from their garden which was growing as well as their child in Maggie's womb.

It was Autumn, when the fields of grain were golden, that their daughter was born. Maggie's heart overflowed with the love of God. For the first time in her memory she had a home and family.

There were only two extravagances worth mentioning in Ed's adult life. The first was the diamond engagement ring he placed on Maggie's finger when he asked her to be his wife. Their children would find it hidden away in a velvet case when it no longer fit on her finger. They lost it, but not before they used the diamond to etch their names on the bedroom window. The second extravagance was the professional photograph taken of their firstborn. Clothed in a dress that Maggie had knit in intricate lacy stitches, their three-month old daughter looks like a pampered, if bald, china doll.

Ed wrote a long letter to send with the photograph. His mother's response was a testament of love and a litany of good advice for her inexperienced daughter-in-law. Soon, he hoped, he would take his wife and daughter home to meet his family. It would never be possible. This exile was permanent.

My grandfather never begrudged the hard work. His love for Maggie and their children never flagged but he railed against God that his family should again be struck by famine. The drought on the prairies filled their mouths and larders with dust. There were no green pastures. The Border Collie herded the cattle from one dry slough patch to another. The chickens remarkably pecked out survival and eggs could be taken to town in trade for staples.

One constant in life on the prairie farm was the train. You could set your clock by its

passing at 9:30 in the morning and again at 4:45. Their imaginations fueled by stories of travel to far away places, the children would dash up the knoll to wait for the afternoon train. At the sound of the whistle they waved enthusiastically to the Engineer, the many passengers who waved back, and especially the Conductor who tossed out the highly prized bundle of newspapers for their father. At Christmastime and often during the years of drought, there would be a second bundle tossed off the train: clothing, food, and treats for the children who used up all their mother's letters crayoning large thank you signs. The whistle would sound a Toot! Toot! Toot! You're welcome.

Ed couldn't believe the headline that screamed across the front page: STOCK MARKET CRASHES. All of North America was plunged into the Great Depression. Could things really get worse? With his distrust of governments, Ed was certain there would be a costly payback for any benefits they might receive. He was convinced that they had to make it on their own.

The family in the big house was looking for a good, reliable girl. Her living would be included and there would be a fair wage to her parents. Maggie and Ed watched with heavy hearts as their fifteen year old daughter left for her first job. They assured each other it would only be for a while. It would be for life.

Their daughter was ill-equipped for life away from home. When the news came that she was pregnant, her parents blamed themselves. She and the boy were too young. There was no question of marriage. They had no prospects. In the manner of the day, the unwed mother-to-be was sent away. She went to a home in the city where her employees were sympathetic friends of the Salvation Army and girls could work their way through the long, lonely months with some self-respect. Everyone planned for the baby to be adopted by a good family. Everyone except Ed.

"She's one of ours," he said, "and we'll raise her. The devil take the gossips and what they might say."

He travelled by train to the Salvation Army Home for Unwed Mothers and took us home. As soon as I could be weaned it was agreed that my mother should return to her job in the city. She would be able to send money home. My grandmother had her own youngest child still in her arms and I was often entrusted to the care of distracted teenage aunts. The aunts were of little interest to me. My grandfather was the centre of my world.

I believe that I learned to walk early, at eight months, so that I could pursue him. If he turned around or reached out his hand we were there: the toddler and the old Border Collie. In his footsteps, by osmosis, I learned that the world was filled with amazements. I still know the healing touch of a dog licking a scraped knee and the breathtaking wet cold of sod freshly turned by the horse-drawn plough.

The pace of a horse suited my Grampa. A man could think. A man could gallop across the prairies and remember that he had been a lad riding thoroughbreds in the Irish races.

When one of the neighbours chugged up on a shiny new John Deere tractor he shouted out a greeting, “Fine machine.”

“It’ll change farming.” The neighbour shouted back.

Grandfather nodded but it seems he didn’t think it would be a change for the better. He never did drive a tractor.

Nor did he drive a car. What good was a car during a Prairie winter?

It may have been a trainman or a sailor, but I believe it was a Gypsy from one of Grandfather’s stories who first thought of replacing an open sled box with a small house for winter travel. Cabooses had windows, a back door, and a stove pipe that sent up signals to let the world know: all is well and warm for this family.

Inside the caboose simple wooden planks provided benches down each side. Storage bins underneath secured the grocery packages and the mail. An old scuttle held firewood specially cut for the miniature space heater. Lulled by the rhythm of the harness bells and the skreek of the runners on frozen snow we travelled in the certainty that the horses knew the way home. We sang our repertoire of songs and listened to each other’s stories, said our night prayers if it was getting past bedtime.

Night time, I thought was the best time to travel. As far as they eye could see the earth was ablaze with diamond-sparkling snow and where the snow left off, the prairie sky was ablaze with stars.

“There’s the Big Dipper,” Grampa would say quietly.

He would point all the constellations: the Big Dipper, Cassiopeia the queen, and the Lyre that had been carried up into the heavens by the Nine Muses. As he retold each story, he drew the mythic shapes on a slate of cold window pane fogged with our breaths.

Grandfather might have been one of the Magi. He was always star gazing. Then again, you might have thought he was a shepherd if you’d seen him rushing to herd the stock into the safety of the stables ahead of a prairie storm.

He never did hurry himself out of the way of a storm. Grampa always stood and studied approaching storms.

“Look!” he would exclaim. “Did you see that sheet of lightening? Watch the colour in

those forks."

"Count now," he'd say. "You can tell how near the storm is by how many counts between the lightening and the thunder."

When I involuntarily trembled, he comforted me with the thought that the Holy Family was lighting lamps and moving the furniture out of the way of leaks in the roof. At the first pelting drops of rain or hail, we ran! We knew about leaks in the roof.

We knew about such simple pleasures as the taste of coarse homemade bread dipped in honey-sweetened, milky tea. We knew about Faeries and the Little People, about the saints and martyrs of Grandma's prayers, and all the mysteries and adventures that came to life in grandfather's stories. We knew about life and death first hand.

Grampa had told me that the foal would be born that night and that I could be present for this birthing. I struggled against sleep as long as possible but it was just before dawn that he came to wake me.

I leapt from my bed. Trousers and sweater tugged over my flannel nightgown. We hurried towards the barn, the light from the oil lantern bobbing in the shadow of his steps. There I watched a miracle happening. It was messy. The straining. The blood. The foal dropping onto the straw. I don't suppose I have ever seen anything more wondrous.

The foal was the colour of coal gleaming and on her forehead a white, white star. The mare watched as her foal took staggering first steps on spindly legs. We laughed.

Grandfather led me outside. He dimmed the lantern light as dawn began to break and we sat wondering at the miracles of birth and the stars fading across the prairie sky.

"Do you think the foal has a star like the star on her forehead?" I wondered.

"Doesn't every living creature have a star," he said.

"Do I have a star?" I asked knowing his answer by heart, wanting to hear it again.

"You most of all," he assured me and folded me inside his sweater against the cold of the dawn and some cold reality of growing up that I didn't yet understand. The wool smelled reassuringly of the stable and the fields.

"Isn't your name Esther," he continued, "and that meaning Star Child?"

" I thought I was Fatherless Child," I said having recently been stung again by school room secrets that are shared in whispers meant to be overheard.

“Not at all,” grandfather chided me. “Every child of God has Himself for a father.”

“I have you, Grampa,” I said.

Abruptly he hoisted himself to his feet and took my hand, “Come,” he said, “Let’s go and see to their first nursing.”

He tucked the wobbly-legged foal in close to the mare. It nuzzled around finding its way then sucked hungrily.

“Isn’t it a wonder,” Grandfather said. I giggled.

Whitman-like my grandfather began, “Dying is much like being born, you know.” Weaving a story around the facts, he told me that he was going to die. Not sometime in the future. Soon.

“No! Don’t say it.” I stopped my ears but his gaze held me until I knew it was true and I wept. He rocked me in his arms until the first wave of anguish passed.

“There now,” he said handing me a big old rag of a handkerchief. “Don’t go baby-back. Wait and see what God is meaning in all of this.”

The comfort of my grandfather was never a cotton-wool coddling kind of comfort, it was a Holy Spirit kind of comfort: strength giving.

For more than a year Grandfather overcame the pain of stomach cancer to prepare himself and us for his death. He made time alone for each member of his family. He listened to our dreams, gave us permission to say whatever had not been said, to say good bye. He blessed each one of us. He said that his life had been one wonderful adventure after another and now he couldn’t wait to see what God had planned for him.

I was twelve when my grandfather died. Fifty years later I made my pilgrimage to Ireland. I knocked on the door of the house where he grew up and imagined his mother weeping as she bade him farewell. I stood under the spreading apple tree that he and his father had planted in the garden. I marvelled at the beauty of the Connemara ponies and valued all the more his gift to me of a dapple-grey Shetland. I imagined that I saw him on the playing field at Kilkenny where the boys still wear the same uniform. I sat in a crowded West Country pub with a peat fire warming us, everyone joining in the songs, and dancing to the music even as they remained seated on long wooden plank benches and crowded into snug booths.

For a while I was a child again in that long ago and far away prairie kitchen where my grandfather was dancing the Irish jig around the pot-bellied stove. His stockinged feet

scarcely touched the floor boards, his body remained stiffly erect, arms at his sides, and his look was straight ahead as though he was looking into another world. Perhaps he was.

The Sunday we begin to rehearse the pageant is the day that I unpack the tokens of my own Christmas rituals and traditions. Out of boxes come ribbons ready to tie fresh cedar to the front door wreath. Three woolly sheep from a church school project, affectionately named Shirley, Goodness and Mercy. Bits and pieces too worn and tattered to display, too precious to throw away. I always unpack the Nativity sets last. I carefully remove layers of tissue paper from the charming folk-art from Costa Rica, the carved marble crèche en ovum, a fragile blown glass that looks like a diamond-etched window pane, a carved wood bas relief.

My favourite Nativity figures are three unpainted clay santons from Provence: Mary kneeling, the baby Jesus in the manager, and Joseph leaning on a walking stick the size of a toothpick. I never pack them away. They remain on the mantle year round.

From time to time I hold the tiny figure of Joseph tightly in the palm of my hand remembering the strength of my grandfather's hand holding mine. As I set him down again to watch over the virgin and child, I wonder about all the women and children who are victims of today's famines, prejudices, and secret sins.

Where are all the men God is calling to step out of the ranks of strutting kings and the flocks of gone-astray sheep to help make families holy again? Who is listening? Who will be Joseph?"

Esther North was born May 22, 1937. She did most of her growing up on a Canadian prairie farm when time was standing still between the end of the Depression and World War II. It was a time of great distances and long winter's nights. A time for story-telling, music, and family prayers. Esther graduated with a teaching degree and taught elementary school for a short time before a temporary copywriting job turned into a twenty-year writing career. She was in her forties when she gave in to God's call, earned her M.A. of Divinity and was ordained in the Anglican Church of Canada where she served as a parish priest until her retirement last year.

Footprints of Purpose

by Diane Pleninger

It is said that everything that exists in the world is a solution to a problem. A pin, a

peony, a poem – each is an answer to the question: how can this or that objective be achieved?

In a high spring meadow in a mountainous western state, an event some millions of years in the designing is about to occur. It is a common enough occurrence in this meadow and other meadows like it, one that has happened almost every spring since the last glacier retreated and the present habitat was established.

The event involves a modest wildflower, the rock cress. Late last summer, this unshowy flower, along with others of its species in this particular meadow, became infected with a rust. A rust is a type of fungus, a member of the great kingdom fungi that has given us such high-end culinary delights as truffles, porcini and chanterelles. But unlike their illustrious mushroom cousins, rusts bring only grief to the dinner table. The rusts of the group called Puccinia, the rust our rock cress now harbors, have for thousands of years blighted and destroyed important agricultural crops like wheat, barley and oats.

Spores of this rust were blown into the meadow last year on a late summer wind. Some of the spores settled and germinated on the rock cress plants. The thready cells of the rust invaded the tissues of the plants and overwintered there. Now spring has arrived, and the enveloping rust is prepared to take the next step in its life cycle.

Our modest rock cress, all unaware of its altered condition, begins its spring by sending up a stem which is intended to terminate in a few small, white flowers. The first sign that something is amiss appears when the stem begins to bolt. Then the rapidly growing stem produces a surplus of leaves. Soon the central stem is twice as tall as a normal rock cress, with twice as many leaves. Finally, a showy yellow rosette forms at the top of the stem. The rosette resembles a flower but it is not a flower. It is a dense cluster of brilliant yellow leaves, what botanists call a pseudoflower. It is covered with a sticky nectar that is highly attractive to bees, butterflies and flies. No sensible insect would pass it by.

The rock cress rosette results from a distortion of growth caused by the fungus. The sweetness in which the rosette is bathed is a sugar produced by the fungal gametes that envelop it. A fungal gamete, a reproductive cell, needs to find another gamete of the appropriate mating type in order to fuse with it and become a fertile spore. The cell of the right mating type may be a meadow away, a plant away or only a millimeter away on the same plant. But there is no way for the two gametes to meet unless an insect carries one to the other. So the gametes go to the trouble of producing sugar for the insects that are

working this spring meadow.

The effect of *Puccinia* rust on rock cress is a compelling example of what scientists call mimicry. The showy yellow “unflower” at the tip of the rock cress stem is identical on the color spectrum to a buttercup or a number of other flowers common to montane and alpine meadows.

Moreover, the pseudoflower is literally awash in nectar. Rather than confining its sweetness to a vase-like nectary, as a true flower would do, the pseudoflower is smeared over its entire surface with nectar. Insects visit, and they stay and stay. They spend more time here than on true flowers. This increases the probability that the fungal gametes will meet suitable mates.

When mating has finally occurred and fungal spores are produced, the pseudoflower performs one more act of make-believe. The yellow leaves turn green and the fungus stops making nectar. This behavior has also been seen to occur in true flowers. It is as if the flower retires from competition to give others a turn in the game.

The natural world abounds with mimicry and with crypsis—forms of disguise. We can point to false eyes on butterfly wings, to the pretense of a broken wing by a bird protecting her nest. To blowfish shape shiftings and chameleon color morphings. To inks and stinks, to spots and stripes, to dapplings of almost infinite variety. These and other strategies take millions of years to develop. They continue to be fine-tuned from modern generation to generation. Either they remain worth doing or they become pointless and may be replaced by other designs.

Striving all the while not to attribute human characteristics to life forms other than the human—trying to be good citizen scientists – we still wonder at the intentionality that appears to underlie these strategies. What could cause an unthinking fungus to reach across a great taxonomic divide and induce a plant to distort its natural form to such great advantage to the intruder? Each scientific explanation leaves us slightly dissatisfied. There must be a deeper explanation, we say. We feel compelled to acknowledge that purpose has visited, and left its footprint.

* * * * *

We know that not all designs and purposes succeed. When we see failures of design

occur in the world— deadly storms, famine and drought, failed concordances, nations at war—we reason that purpose must do its work in a world filled with negative counterforces. Or perhaps we use other language and say that failures of purpose are evidence that purpose has enemies.

If the failure is in the realm of human affairs, we may turn to the language of human frailty to describe what has happened. We dust off our list of the seven deadly sins—lust, gluttony, greed, sloth, wrath, envy and pride—and search for enemies there. We cite inertia, which in human terms includes laziness, lack of compassion and resistance to change. We cite weakness and blame that weakness on decay and deterioration, often of a social nature. When all other explanations fail us, we speak of accident, randomness, disorder, turbulence or chaos.

What we may not remember in times of distress is that the forces that drive failures of design are the same forces as those that support success in design. Both success and failure play under the same set of rules.

Inertia reflects the basic principal that all objects and systems continue as they are— at rest or in motion— until forces act on them to change them. Purpose steps in and makes use of this principal. The object of purpose is to apply energy to advantage and achieve change for the better, as best the better way can be determined.

Decay is the bowstring for the arrow of time. Decay reflects the great physical principal of entropy, by which all things in the universe are engaged in a slow and stately march from differentiation to merger and equilibrium. Change and decay allow us to experience passing time. Without entropy, we could neither perceive nor measure time. Without time, we could neither form nor perform purposeful intentions and acts.

Randomness is the subject of a science called complexity theory. Theorist Edward Lorenz is unknown to most Americans, but the popular saying drawn from his work – that a butterfly stirring the air today in Peking can transform storm systems next month in New York – is widely quoted. What has been called “the butterfly effect” refers not just to the saying but also to the remarkable graphic pattern that emerged from Lorenz’s model of chaos.

Lorenz set up a simple, three-variable model of weather patterns. He plotted its evolution in three-dimensional space. The result was a diagram that resembled the wings of a

butterfly. Many complex systems show the same design. The diagram of the butterfly and the wellknown epigram have become icons of complexity theory. Even chaos brings its own distinctive designs to the table, designs we are only beginning to comprehend.

The more deeply we study the natural world, the more certainly we find pattern and design. The more closely we study the great works of civilizations, the more clearly we see mankind in perpetual pursuit of pattern. We defend against pointlessness. We invite purpose into the room.

* * * * *

Late at night, a man sits in the nearly deserted lounge of an airport concourse, killing the hours of a bad connection on a long, international flight. He is a man of late middle age and no particular distinction, an instructor at a small agricultural college. His hair is thinning; his clothes look to be both well-worn and forgettable. This is as he wishes it. He is a person who does not call attention to himself.

He adjusts his glasses and studies a report. At some point, his resolve fails and he nods and dozes in the half-light of the long room. Recently, he has noticed that he tires easily. He attributes this to aging. He does not know it yet, but he is ill.

The report is written for his use, or the use of whoever succeeds to the task he is going to take on. He is something of a specialist in small-scale agricultural irrigation. He is headed to a poor, dry region of a third world country to help complete an irrigation project. The project director there has resigned and our man, while not the first choice for a replacement, was the first person contacted who was willing to leave his ordinary life behind and rearrange his affairs for several months and very little money.

Money has never been as important to this man as a steady, even plodding sense of going forward to meet his obligations as they arise. His wife is also a teacher, and between them they have secured a modest but adequate retirement. Their daughter is a physician, a young woman of whom they are very proud, although they don't take credit for her accomplishments. Their son is a worry, even a grief to them. Rootless and unstable, he resisted all efforts to direct him into a clear path. Out of touch, he is unaware of his father's travels.

A page on the concourse intercom—one more name in a world of mostly unknown

names—startles him awake. He consults his wristwatch. His next flight is still hours away. He shifts in his seat and considers the fact that this commitment is actually going to cost him more than he makes from it. But the hit on their savings can still be rectified. He smiles wryly, picturing himself in his retirement years, wearing a red apron, dispensing sodas and cigarettes at a mini mart or greeting customers in a big box store. No. Yes, if necessary, but no, that will not likely be necessary. The coin-size growth hiding in a corner of his body keeps its long counsel, contributing no new information at this time.

He could not say precisely why he agreed to accept this assignment. He would demur if praised for his selflessness, his sense of duty, his charitable impulse. He might say something like, “Well, I figure this is my last big trip before I retire and write my book.” Or he might say, “Look at the frequent flyer miles I’m collecting.” We notice that one rationale contradicts the other. But for him, either one will accomplish his purpose, which is to deflect sentimentality. Sentimentality is not his cup of tea.

The truth is that he sees faces when he thinks about projects like this one. He sees bare feet, and ropy, brown arms, and flies buzzing around dusty, unwashed heads. This is the form human need takes in his mind. People in fields. Fields that need water. Water that livens and feeds and cleanses. Water has been his purpose in life, water and the people who need it.

* * * * *

What is the design of design? How does one describe pattern? Symmetry, harmony, repetition, order, equilibrium—these are important attributes of design. But surprise and the unexpected are also necessary and dynamic qualities in design. The pleasures of pattern appeal to all the physical senses. A successful design appeals to one additional sense, the sense we variously call the intellectual, spiritual or emotional sense. This is the sense of rightness we experience in the presence of a successful design. This sense of rightness arrives by way of different patterns for different people, according to their understanding of the world. The routes may differ but the result is the same.

It is here, in the individual experience of the right, the good, the satisfying, that purpose begins. Here, among individual choices to move beyond self-interest, is where purpose develops. Here, in the realm of individual decisions and acts, purpose achieves its fundamental greatness. Simple decisions, like the one the man in the airport has made.

Great talent can lift purpose to wide renown and lasting fame. It does so each time a great artist creates a major work. Like-mindedness can lift purpose to immense strength and far-reaching consequences, as it does when same-thinking people join forces in a social or political movement. But purpose strikes hardest and deepest in the realm of the individual, that slender but powerful entity Pascal called a “thinking reed.”

Between rust and rock cress, purpose treads lightly over countless generations. Within the mind of an individual man or woman, an instant’s enlightenment may be all that is needed to conceive a purpose that will last a lifetime.

I was born in 1941 and grew up in Columbus, Ohio, where my sisters and I attended Columbus School for Girls and received grounding in such old-fashioned subjects as Latin, hand-hemming and correct diction. I went to Wellesley College, lived in Italy for a while, and finally graduated from Arizona State University with a degree in English lit. Then I became (oddly) interested in accounting and decided on that as a career. My family moved from Arizona to Alaska in 1977 and I have worked full time in Anchorage as a CPA ever since. Eight years ago I developed (oddly) an interest in mushrooms and have been reading in the field of mycology ever since. I love to lead mushroom walks and give mushroom talks during the summer and I love to write about fungi.

The Stone Bird

by C. Kevin Smith

“Where do you get your ideas?” people would inquire. Often they would be holding one of his sculptures as they spoke, the warm skin of their fingers and palms pressed into the cool rough stone shaped and softened by the artist’s patient hands.

“I’m a nature boy,” he would reply, his answer for nearly a century. In his final years, as he approached ninety, his art had been “discovered”; a documentary about him was shown on public television and now his remote mountain studio saw many visitors, art professionals and collectors and the merely curious, all of them driving up a treacherous switchback dirt road to experience first-hand this man’s strange artistry, which some were calling sacred. His art was indeed stunning, curving stone sculptures of natural animal forms that were genuinely beautiful and pleasing to look at and touch, in a century when so much art would adopt the jagged, wounding spirit of its people’s worst sorrows. The visitors would wrap their hands around his work and stare at it and then at him,

reluctant to put down the object, as though it might contain the answer to some vital question they did not know how to ask. And so they would ask him where he got his ideas, holding onto the artwork tenderly, fearfully, as though it were alive, which to the artist, of course, it was.

On occasion, someone would notice in the work an unexpected detail, some element of the design that did not seem to fit, a curve that in a certain light looked like a gash, a protruding shape that felt out of place. After the artist's death, critics argued over whether these apparent inconsistencies were simply mistakes or part of some larger artistic vision. "He was unschooled, after all," insisted those who did not see his work as part of the ongoing saga of art history, as it was presented in museums and university textbooks. For these people, the sculpted stones of a reclusive outsider had little to do with the high-stakes world of art.

One hot summer day, near the end of his life, a family drove up the steep dusty road to look at the man's sculptures. It was a couple with a young daughter who was so quiet, remote even, her parents had considered consulting a medical professional. Only in the company of animals did the girl seem truly happy, and when her parents read a magazine article about the artist and his stone menagerie they decided to travel the nearly hundred miles from their home to his distant mountaintop. The man was used to visitors and was gracious with all, but he especially enjoyed the company of children. He had never had any children himself, had never married, had never done anything other than be an artist.

The girl was silent as he showed the family some of his work. For years he had sold his sculptures to the few who knew to drive up his road. Now many people wanted to buy his work. In truth, it was all the same to him.

As they were about to leave, the girl pointed to a sculpture that was resting on a windowsill near the front door. He had told the family they were welcome to touch or hold any of the work. "It's there to be enjoyed," he said. Now the girl picked up gingerly the sculpture in the windowsill. With many of his works it was the act of picking it up, of holding it, that revealed what it was, and so it was this time when the girl, uncertain, cradled the object and saw that it was a bird. From a distance, it would not have looked like a bird, perhaps just an oblong stone, polished by wind or water or simply time. In fact, many of his stone carvings looked quite similar to each other, another aspect of his work that bothered some critics. Without thoughtful examination it was not always easy to determine what the object was meant to represent. But as the girl's parents looked at their daughter and at the stone object in her hands, it was clear to everyone that it was a bird. For a while no one spoke. The girl was concentrating all her attention on the sculpture; her mother was noticing that her daughter seemed older than she remembered; the girl's father wanted to ask how much the bird cost, but he was too nervous; the artist's feet were very tired, and he wanted to sit down. But he didn't want to rush the family. He smiled at the girl, leaning heavily on his cane, even though she wasn't looking at him.

Just then, as if in response, she lifted her head up and peered at the artist.

“Why is he crying?” she asked. Her thumb was resting just below a curving indentation in the surface of the dark gray stone that was flecked with silver and white, like the sea on a day that is windy and overcast. She inched the thumb upward until it fit perfectly, as though the artwork were only now complete, with her small thumb pressed into this oddly hollow, sloping space.

“Why is he crying?” she repeated, looking again at the bird.

As a rule, the artist did not think deeply about the past, about his reasons for creating what he did, about what his work might mean, but as she stared at the bird, then at him, back and forth, waiting for his reply, he felt his legs tremble as there came into the room, summoned by her words, the rushing remembered presence of something large and strong and sad. It was his father, as vivid and familiar as the broken bands of sunlight streaming in through the tall, open windows, a fall afternoon, and his father taking him to the dense grove of oak trees near their ranch. There were dead leaves underfoot and the boy, who did not want to be there, could not help but make loud, cracking sounds as he walked. From time to time his father would look down at him, his face creased with irritation, not just at the sound but at the attitude of the boy, who for days had been resisting this long-postponed trip to the thick patch of oaks, where he would hold a gun for the first time in his life and shoot something, anything, dead. His father had explained that it wasn’t a question of wanting to do it or thinking it was right or wrong: it was what one did.

“Men have always killed animals,” the father said. “To survive. It’s a question of survival.”

But the boy did not want to kill animals, did not want to hold a gun. For as long as he could remember he had loved to draw pictures of the animals he would see around the ranch. Once, in a large chunk of granite he could hardly carry, which a heavy rain had revealed in the creek bank near their house, he had seen, as if just underneath its surface, an animal face. He’d brought home the rock in a wheelbarrow and taken his father’s wood chisels and spent hours carving the rock until the face showed clearly, naturally, as if it had always been there. Yet it was the boy who had created it. But his father was furious at his ruined chisels and beat the boy hard, then angrily threw the rock into the creek.

“You are never to do anything like that again,” he said.

When the boy read an article in LIFE magazine about an artist whose paintings were being displayed at a big museum in New York, he announced at dinner that he was going to be an artist when he grew up.

No one spoke for a time, and then his father said that his son would do no such thing. “You’ve got to stop that art nonsense,” he said. “You need to learn an honest trade. Your mother and I won’t be able to support you.” And it was true, year after year they were barely able to hang onto the ranch, money was always scarce, and they ate only what they could grow or butcher themselves.

They stopped at the base of the largest oak tree in the grove, and the father removed the gun from its holster and gave it to the boy. He had already explained many things about the gun, names and numbers, parts and instructions. The boy’s only thought was that the gun felt heavy and awkward and had a smell he did not like, of cold grease and metal, a smell he would for all his life associate with unhappiness and death.

“Stand strong,” his father instructed, “on your good leg.”

The boy looked down and held his breath. After a moment, he let his club foot, the left one, drift to the side, like a dangling branch just barely attached to its tree. When he was younger the boy would ask why he had a leg that was useless, a leg that marked him as separate from every other boy he knew. Why did he have a club foot? It was a question he no longer asked, for he had never gotten the answer he wanted, which was to be told that he wasn’t a mistake. That God hadn’t created him by accident. This was what he feared.

His father showed him where to aim. There were blue jays chattering in the high branches of the trees. “A worthless bird,” his father often said. The boy didn’t think that jays were worthless, he had tried to mix his watercolor paints to get the exact shade of blue of their feathers, a brilliant, shadowy blue that reminded him of the darkening sky of early evening, when the sun was about to set. But now he was not thinking of the bird’s color, he was aiming the heavy gun despite himself, positioning all his limbs as his father had explained, squeezing shut one eye and opening wide the other, pressing his finger against the trigger, all his movements following a sequence as deep and worn and inevitable as some ancient path that always seems to have been there.

The violence of the shot rocked the boy off his balance but his father caught him. And in the fractured second of the bullet’s aftermath they both heard a bird fall from its perch onto the dry brittle leaves below.

“Good job, son,” the father said. “You’re on your way to becoming a man.”

But the boy felt just the same. The gun could not make his bad foot go away, nothing would ever change, nothing at all, except that a bird that had just been alive was now dead. And the boy did not understand the purpose of the bird’s death.

Silently they returned home. The father went into the barn and the boy remained in front

of the house, miserable and unsure what to do next. Without knowing why he began to walk back to the oak grove. When he arrived everything was as it had been when they left, but now the air seemed weighted down, dark gray and low. The dead bird lay just where it had fallen. Its body was wrecked by the bullet, but the boy found that by arranging its feathers and by positioning it in a certain way the dead bird could almost be made to look like it was asleep. Then he looked around the base of the tree and collected dried leaves and broken twigs and with some effort he managed to fashion a coffin for the bird. He had only ever seen one real coffin, that was when his grandmother died. He had this coffin in his mind as he worked, and some of his feelings about her death rose up and pressed against the sides of his throat. She had always smiled whenever he showed her his drawings, had called him her crackerjack.

The boy thought the bird looked at peace now. With his hands he dug a hole in the ground, into the dirt that was dry and pebbly, and for days afterwards his fingernails were densely packed with dark soil that would not wash out. And each time he looked at his hands he felt a kind of secret strength.

On the mountaintop the girl was still holding the artwork, her thumb still pressed as if inside it, just under the fold of its sculpted wing, which lay tight against its heavy stone body.

“Is the bird sad?” the girl asked again, almost to herself now, for the artist had said nothing, had only gripped the windowsill shelf and looked away, and she sensed he would not answer.

For there was too much to tell. When people asked him to explain his art he never knew what to say. Should he tell her how he had lay weeping by the place where he had buried the dead jay? He had lay there until nightfall, calling out to the trees his terrible questions, why did he have to kill the bird and why did he have a club foot and why was his father always so angry with him, why had he called him crippie earlier that day when the boy said he would not touch the gun, and why was his own heart so heavy with feelings he did not understand and could not talk about, for there was no one there to hear his words, only the murmuring trees and the steadiness of the earth and the bird he had killed, and above them all God who, the boy worried, might not hear him, might not even love him, despite what he had been told.

These were things the artist had never spoken of, things even he did not understand, how the bird would yield its small body to the soil and so become part of its changing seasons, how the land his father had toiled upon for years would one day be paved over for new homes for new families from faraway places. What was right, what was wrong? The shape of things was always shifting, what had seemed to the boy to be his father’s hateful spirit he understood later to be the bitter residue of hard work and endless worry. Why had forgiveness come so late, long after his dead father had been buried in the fertile

ground to which he had given so much of his life? And there were other questions and other answers and sometimes they fit together and sometimes they did not. His club foot had kept him out of the war, while among the boys he had grown up with, ordinary boys from neighboring farms who might be kindly or mischievous or smart or mean-spirited, many had died in battle in distant, foreign countries, too young to really be anything. And there were days when he did not understand why they had died, why he was still alive.

But he had managed to create for himself a powerful life, listening not to the fear or anger that surrounded him in his family, and later, in the noisy, rundown neighborhoods where he first lived and struggled alone, but to some stronger voice within that told him he must never stop making art. It would become the pulse of his life, he would transform old stones and old wounds into sculptures that could make the heart soar. “To hold one of his works is to come into contact with some elemental spirit of the earth,” said the narrator of the television documentary.

Gently the girl set down the bird. Her parents nudged each other and turned to the artist to thank him. “I try to make things as beautiful as the world,” he said suddenly, his crippled voice faint with age yet urgent, hoarse still with the memory of his long-vanished father. “It’s all I know to do.” The girl nodded. Later, in her bed that night, she puzzled over what he had said. For the world did not always seem beautiful to her; it was why she treasured the company of animals, they never told lies or said ugly things. She wished she could have taken home with her the stone bird, yet she found, as her mind edged closer to the heavy sweetness of sleep, that by bringing her hands together in the darkness of her room she could feel the bird’s mysterious power, its sadness too, and she was not touching it, it was the stone that was touching her. Then she crossed over into dreams and the bird’s heavy wings slowly opened and it rose from her, bright sunlight reflecting off its stone body in glinting sparks as it flew away. The artist was in her dream. “Take me!” he was crying to the bird, for he did not want to be left alone. “Take me!” The girl went to the old man, who was too frail and too weak to run after the bird, and she took his hand, and this seemed to comfort him. And the following year, when her parents told her they were getting a divorce, the girl, without knowing why, went into the yard and found a small stone, just a plain brown rock, not to throw in anger but to hold onto, a stone that one day, with tools she did not yet possess, she might shape into something beautiful, just as it had been shaped by eternities of patterns and designs, violent and mysterious and ceaselessly alive. For no human life is untouched by any life it encounters, and each of us is forever breaking and building the world in ways more numerous than the stars.

C. Kevin Smith was born in Los Angeles and grew up in Topanga, California. He studied French literature at California State University, Northridge and the University of California, Santa Barbara. For two years he taught English at the University of Bordeaux. In 1995 the French government awarded him a fellowship to spend a year in

Paris conducting research for his doctoral dissertation, which treats the subject of public monuments in Paris and their literary representations. He received a Ph.D in 1996 from Princeton University. After holding teaching positions at the University of Washington (Seattle) and the George Washington University (Washington, D.C.), he decided to leave academia to pursue his lifelong dream of being a writer. In 1999 he moved with his partner Jeff Mallory to Monterey, California, where for two years he wrote reviews and feature articles for the Monterey County Weekly and other publications. He presently lives in Big Sur, where he is working on a novel and with his partner is live-in caretaker for the artist Emile Norman. C. Kevin Smith is also devoted to classical music. He serves on the board of Chamber Music Monterey Bay and is an avid amateur pianist.

The Goodness of Trees

By Doug Wesselmann

I knew the evil of trees.

Trees in triple canopy, mangrove, ironwood and teak, coiled along the Mekong. The trees of the Cuu Long, known as the Nine Dragons, brought death without warning. Trees were for hiding. The forest always heard us coming. The hiss of water on the bow, the roar of the Navy Swift Boat's diesel shouted, "Here we are. Come try to kill us.

They had come, and they had tried. Too many had died.

My time in that dead green place had been guided by a single purpose, to stay alive. When I got back to the world, back to the states, I felt lost without that simple certainty. I wandered looking to find it again, every turn a bigger mistake than the one before. Finally, I decided to go back and face the enemy again. I knew just where to find him. In the trees.

As the highway climbed up into the Ozark Mountains, oak and hickory stretched a living arch above the road. Late April's gothic architecture shaded my car. Dogwoods and redbuds brightened the lower tier and eased my mind a little. Curves revealed towns, then hamlets, then lonely mountain country stores. Places like Comfort, Warm Rock, and Half Hat appeared and disappeared, different villages on a blacktop river -- different trees -- different dangers.

Each turn onto a new road narrowed the way, and the green deepened. When my old Toyota chugged to a stop at the end of the last gravel path, I took a deep breath. When I exhaled, there was a flickering hope that the last stubborn molecule of air from Vietnam would be purged from my lungs and join the breeze in that Missouri glade.

A small painted wooden plank on an aged fence post was the only confirmation that I had reached my destination. A few humble words, neatly written -- The Trappists of Saint Maur --and an arrow pointing to a leaf-covered path shaded by an ancient oak.

Gathering my possessions; one khaki backpack with a few clothes, a toothbrush, and a book by Thomas Merton, I hiked up the path at a pace that matched my need.

My eyes scanned the woods -- every hiding place -- then a clearing and the monastery appeared. Hardly medieval, Saint Maur was a plain, white-framed chapel with three wood shingled wings jutting out like fingers clutching at the limestone edge of the hill's summit, anchoring the simple buildings against the winds of the world.

The Abbott was a stocky man, in his forties, with salt and pepper hair, a strong handshake, and eyes that looked like they belonged to another, simpler age.

"You are Vincent?" he asked.

"Yes, sir."

"Been expecting you. Call me Jerome."

"Yes, sir."

He smiled, leaned back in his chair, and stretched. "You want to join us?"

"Yes." I might have said more, but I knew Trappists didn't talk much.

"Why?"

"I don't know. Maybe I'm trying to find myself."

He laughed and pointed at me. "Why there you are. Sitting right here in my little office. I found you. That was easy. Anything else I can do for you?"

I almost smiled. Jerome's eyes were warm. There was nothing cutting in his little joke. "Maybe I'm looking for God."

"Why? Is He lost?" Jerome laughed again.

"Well, I..."

Jerome leaned forward. "Or are you lost?"

"I guess I am."

Jerome pointed at me again. “Then we’re back where we started.”

I was confused by the direction of the interview. It was not what I had expected.

Jerome’s face turned serious. “Vincent, can you work?”

“Yes. I’m a hard worker.”

“Can you pray?”

I hesitated. “Pray? A long time ago... I prayed a lot when I was in the war.” My voice faded.

“Good enough. That’s what we do here, work and pray. Welcome, Vincent.” Jerome offered me his hand. I took it.

I was a good novice. I worked hard in the fields. We moved rocks and deadwood. There were repairs to be made to the roof. New grape vines arrived in late summer, and I learned how to plant them and prepare the tender stalks for the cold to come. I learned to chant the prayers of the hours.

We gathered in the chapel before dawn and sang Matins, the morning prayer. We sang Prime before we worked and Terce in the midmorning. Our voices blended in Sext at noontime, Nones around three, Vespers in the evening, and Compline before retiring to our cells at night. There was an unearthly beauty in the ancient Gregorian music.

There was little conversation and the plainest of food. The seasons turned, the forest slept, and another spring arrived. A year had passed. I had found quiet. Yet, I began to grow uneasy again.

“Brother Abbot. I am soon to take my final vows but...”

“But?” he said.

“I don’t know if I am ready for such a step. You see...” I searched for the right words, then gave up and simply blurted out the problem. “I don’t know why I’m here.”

“I wondered when you would get to this question,” said Jerome.

“You knew I would ask it?”

“We all do.”

“You wondered why you were here?”

“Of course. We all want to know our purpose. You read Merton don’t you? I’ve seen you with one of his books.”

“Yes.”

“He wondered, too.” Jerome closed his eyes, “Merton said that without purpose, life is like the forest floor. The light fails, and the darkness of the trees overshadows everything. That’s where we all find ourselves eventually, Vincent. In that darkness.”

“Why are you here?”

Jerome examined me as if he were looking in a mirror. “I have a new job for you.”

“A new job?”

“As you know, the monastery supports two hermitages.”

“Yeah, the hermits. I’ve heard. Their cabins are up the east slope deep in the woods. Monks need special permission to be hermits, don’t they?”

“They do. One of the hermits needs some help. We shall send you to him. His name is Father Louis. Do what he asks.”

“But...”

“Just go to him, Vincent. We will talk about your vows when you return.” Jerome’s eyes looked deep into mine. I could see that he meant this to be my decision.

“Yes, sir.”

Jerome’s eyes sparkled. “Good.”

“First, Brother Jerome, answer me. Why are you here?”

Jerome leaned back and stretched. “I’ll answer that when you return.”

There was a pause. I considered pressing the issue. But, for some reason, I let the moment pass. “Yes, sir.”

“You’re still in that jungle, aren’t you, Vincent?”

“Yes.”

“Go to Father Louis,” he said quietly. “Go talk to Father Louis.” Jerome smiled then, as if

he'd made another of his little jokes. "Ask Father Louis your question."

The next morning I was given a sleeping roll and a large rucksack of food and supplies to take with me to the hermitage. I sang the chant at Prime and set off before the April sun had risen above the trees. The dawning light made shadows high in the branches. I felt enemy eyes looking down through the tangle. I wondered if I'd made another mistake coming here. It was a fool's errand.

"I'm a fool!" I shouted to the forest. The shadows retreated.

Father Louis' "cabin" was modest, a rustic lean-to under a limestone outcropping, flanked by twisted oak trees that were nearly as old as the rock they shaded. Sitting in the doorway was an old man with his robe hitched up and tucked into his belt revealing sandal-clad feet and gray cotton work pants. His skin was brown as bark, and his hands were busy whittling away on some overworked hickory.

"Father Louis?"

The old man looked up at me, but he did not answer. His hands kept working the blade on the wood. One last curled piece of hickory fluttered onto the pile by his feet.

"Father Louis?"

He still didn't answer. Father Louis folded his knife carefully, sighed, and stood up slowly, slipping his handiwork into his pocket.

He was a hermit. Conversation was likely to be at a premium. Abbot Jerome had told me to "talk" to Father Louis. "Very funny, Jerome," I muttered.

The old priest turned to look at his cabin. I followed his eyes and noticed that a rotted branch had fallen and damaged the corner of the roof. He turned back to me and pointed at some lumber leaning against a boulder.

"Sure. I can help you fix that."

Father Louis smiled.

We went to work. The job wasn't hard, but required two sets of hands to move the old branch and steady the new lumber as we nailed and patched. The evening was upon us as we finished. Supper was in order. I began to open the rucksack full of supplies that I'd carried from the monastery, but Louis shook his head.

The old man went around behind his cabin and returned after a few minutes with an armful of parsnips that he'd left in the ground through the winter. He started to wash

them in a basin of water and pointed at a dwindling pile of firewood by the door. The message was very clear.

When I got back with my contribution to the woodpile, Louis had a small fire going in his antique potbelly stove. The fire was bright and the parsnips were peeled and boiling. Louis mixed in some spring parsley, salt and pepper, and a few other leaves and roots. I felt rather brave when I ate the concoction, even after he added an unfamiliar species of wild mushroom.

The food was delicious. Father Louis even produced a bottle of wine and carefully filled two mugs.

“In vino veritas,” he said.

“Why Father Louis, you can talk.” I laughed.

He smiled. It was clear that was all he had to say.

“What is the purpose of my life?” I didn’t expect an answer.

He took a deep drink from his mug, stood, and picking up a small lantern, motioned for me to follow him.

His white hair glowed in the moonlight as he led me out into the night. Louis bent down. After a moment or two, he saw what he was looking for, and his bony finger pointed to the forest floor.

There, in the gentle flicker of the Coleman lamp, was a big black beetle.

I looked at the bug and then at Father Louis. “This is your answer?”

Louis nodded. He handed me the lantern. His intention was clear. I sat on the dry leaves next to the beetle. I looked at the black bug chewing on an enormous brown seedpod. When I looked up, Louis was gone.

I watched the insect gnaw away without rest. It was well past midnight when the beetle’s unrelenting work opened the pod with an audible pop. Then the beetle’s mandibles clamped hold of the pod and he dragged off his prize. I followed as the bug’s path led under some dry mulberry bushes, across some roots, and to the mouth of a burrow. Its pinchers worked the individual seeds out of the pod and, one by one, he took them home. But as he pulled one seed from the hard pod, another seed would pop free and roll away down the small mound away from the entrance. There, in the loose dirt scattered by the beetle when he dug his home, were several seeds from the labor of other nights. Some of those seeds were sprouting. New trees.

I shivered. I wasn't cold. Looking back, I think I was afraid of the lesson. "Maybe I'm supposed to break these seed pods open and start a new forest." I picked up a pod like the one the Nightbeetle had chosen. Try as I might I couldn't open it. The banana-shaped pod was as hard as iron. "What a joke." I hurled it high into the treetops and listened to it tumble through the branches out in the darkness. Angry, I wandered back towards my sleeping roll beside Louis' cabin. The night was not kind to my sleep. I dreamt of boats and danger.

I woke up looking straight up into Father Louis' face as he loomed over me.

"Good morning, Father." I sat up and stretched my aching spine. The ground was still winter hard, and my bed had been less than comfortable. My pain was eased by the smell of coffee from the pot on the stove. Louis also provided some wheat berry biscuits with honey.

"Do you pray, Father?"

His eyes twinkled. Louis raised a finger into the air. For a moment I thought he was pointing towards heaven, but his finger turned and dipped into the honey jar. The old hermit pulled it out slowly, letting the nectar drip onto the rough planks of the tabletop. He stuck the coated finger into his mouth, and slowly pulled it free, sucking away every trace of the raw honey. He licked his lips.

"Good prayer." I dipped my finger.

Father Louis stood and walked over to the rucksack full of supplies I had carried up from the monastery the day before. He lifted it and gestured for me to follow him. He led me around the limestone outcrop, past the oak tree, to a small path heading down the far side of the ridge.

"Let me take that pack, Father,"

He only smiled as I took the burden and looked down the narrow path.

"I'm supposed to go down there?"

Louis raised an eyebrow.

"O.K. I'll...ah... just take the pack down there." The trail seemed a little steep. And I wondered where it led.

"Don't be afraid," said the monk.

"Afraid of what?"

Louis took his whittling out of his pocket. He gave out one sentence a day, and I'd just had today's ration.

"O.K., Father. I'll take the pack down there."

I felt his smile behind me as I began the descent. The footing was better than it looked. The path was steep but it kept switching back and forth down the slope, and the dirt was dry broken clay that gave good traction. In an hour I was at the bottom, standing beside a small river. The water was muddy with spring runoff, and the trees were high on each bank. A memory stirred. Trees were tall there. Water was deep.

I remembered another river and another day. I remembered standing on a dike by the Mekong. I remembered a bullet tearing into my thigh. I remembered Gilley, the kid from Montana, picking me up and throwing me onto the Swift boat as the firefight started to heat up. I remembered his words.

"You O.K., Vince? You O.K.?"

I remembered rolling away from him as the pitch of the motor deepened, and we started our escape.

"You O.K., Vince? You O.K.?"

I remembered his face when the bullet hit him. He saved my life. I lived. He died.

I stood there by that Ozark stream with dust in my mouth. The trees were crowding in on me, hiding things. Maybe I saw Gilly's face in the green of the leaves. I stood there until I couldn't stand there any longer. I started walking down that path beside the river.

The path was easy to follow. There were no forks, no choices to make. The path went on until it turned away from the stream and burst out of a grove of decrepit poplars. I found myself in a yard behind a rusty trailer. Patchy grass was littered with rusty beer cans and debris. There, in the middle of the yard, sitting on a broken seesaw, was a skinny little girl in a dirty blue dress.

"You aren't Father Louis."

"I'm Vincent." I didn't know what else to say. The child was not friendly. She had the stance of a dog staying out of kicking range.

"You brought it?"

"You mean this?" I took the rucksack off my back and held it towards her.

In a flash the girl grabbed it and disappeared into the trailer. The flimsy steel storm door slammed shut. That was that.

I waited for a few minutes, but no one came outside. I waited a few more, but the door stayed shut. I turned back to the path. It was long past dark when I got back to Father Louis' hermitage. There was a bowl of rabbit stew and a cup of wine waiting for me on the table. Father Louis was snoring on his cot in the corner. I slept without dreams.

The next morning, after the biscuits and honey, I asked the question.

"Why are you here, Father?"
He looked into my eyes. Then he pulled out his pocketknife and sat down on the stoop to whittle on the hickory.

"I am here for the same purpose that Abbot Jerome is where he is." He eyed his little sculpture and went back to work.

There was nothing I could say.

The walk back to Saint Maur went quickly. I may have hurried a little. Abbot Jerome had promised to answer my question when I returned from my mission to Father Louis. I burst into the small office off the vestibule.

"Welcome back, Vincent. What did you learn?" Jerome leaned back in his battered chair.

"I don't know for sure, Jerome. I learned that even bugs have a purpose. I had a purpose helping Father Louis with his roof and carrying the food down to the family by the stream."

"Ah, so you met them."

" The little girl." I remembered the slamming door.

"And?"

"She didn't thank me."

"Did that bother you?"

"At first, yes. Then..." I was sorting it out as I spoke.

"Then?"

"Then I realized that I was there to give them the food."

“Not to be thanked.” Jerome smiled.

“Exactly. I understood my purpose.” I hadn’t really realized that. But it was true. I knew it the moment I heard my own words.

“And did Father Louis thank you?”

“No. He didn’t need to, either. He hardly spoke to me, yet I felt such friendship.”

“And of course, you asked him why he was there? What his purpose was?” Jerome was almost beaming.

“Yeah. Funny, he told me he was there for the same purpose that you are here... You promised to answer when I returned, Abbot Jerome. Why are you here?”

Jerome stood up. The sound of chanting had begun. The sweet, deep, ancient song of Vespers echoed in the chapel.

The monk paused in the doorway and said, “Did you remember someone you didn’t thank?”

I remembered the river, the crack of bullets, Gilly’s face.

“I didn’t thank Gilly for saving my life.” Tears came to my eyes. I was on the verge of sobbing when I felt Jerome’s hand on my shoulder. His voice was gentle.

“You O.K., Vince? You O.K.?” Jerome spoke the words. The same words I had heard so long ago.

“I’m so sorry, Gilly.” Tears blurred my vision.

“Are you sorry for him? Or, are you sorry for yourself?”

The truth stung. “He saved my life.”

“What was your purpose there, in the war?”

“To stay alive.”

“There was more, I think.”

Jerome was right. “We were supposed to keep our buddies alive... and.”

“And Gilly did that.”

The Vespers chant filled my ears, the deep voices rising...

There is no earthly treasure worthy of a just man's deeds
Save the measure of his heaven and the future in his seeds.

Jerome's hand was warm on mine. "Vincent, he didn't need to be thanked."

I looked up at the Abbot. "I think I know that now." Now I wanted him to answer my question. "What is your purpose, Jerome? Why are you here?"

"I'm here for the same reason Father Louis was there, Vincent."

"Why are you here? Please, tell me." I was afraid he would not answer.

Jerome's eyes were gentle. "I am here for you."

The truth of it flooded my heart and my soul. The beauty of it filled my voice when I finally joined the others in the chant.

I had arrived in spring, and in spring I left the monastery. Jerome agreed. I had found what I needed there in that Ozark forest.

Trees, beetles, and seeds -- monks, frightened children, and friends -- the purpose of my life wasn't hidden at all. I still see it in other people's eyes everyday.

I thought about my simple discovery after the monks jump-started my old Toyota, and I drove away through the blessed trees. Now, years later, whether I am working, playing, kissing my wife or tickling my children, I try to remember it.

"I am here for you."

Whenever I need reminding, I reach in my pocket and it's there -- a Nightbeetle whittled in hickory.

I know the goodness of trees.

Doug Wesselmann has written for newspapers, broadcast advertising, symphony orchestra, and stage. His stories have been performed by the Boston Pops and other orchestras from Jacksonville to Salt Lake City. In September of 2002 he ended a twenty-five year stint in radio and turned his attention to writing fiction. The Goodness Of Trees is an amalgam of wisdom from people he has known, stories he has heard, and his core belief that we all are meant for lives of quiet service to others.

An award-winning writer, at one point he decided to seek a writer's life and simplify a few things. Otis now lives in bucolic Walnut, Iowa (pop.897) with his wife of 27 years - author of The Whole Parent (Perseus) - and an odd kid or two. He writes eight hours a day, everyday, unless the dog is sick, tornadoes threaten, or his neighbor needs help bringing in the corn.

Wesselmann, writing under the pen name "Otis Twelve," had his first novel, On The Albino Farm, shortlisted for the 2003 British Crime Writers Association Debut Dagger Award. The sequel, Sometimes A Prozac Notion, is now complete in draft, and is on the short list for the 2004 British Crime Writers Association Debut Dagger Award. He is represented by Donna Levin at Manus&Associates Literary Agency (New York/Palo Alto).