

A Book of Pieces for Daniele

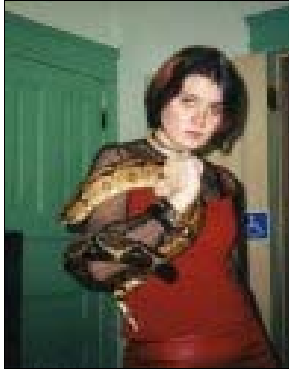
1984-2009



by Mike Finley

This book is a compilation of scrips and scraps of things I wrote about my daughter Daniele during her life, It was hard to assemble because Daniele, once she realized I was writing about her, registered her disapproval. She felt her privacy was being violated, and that I was exploiting her, both of which were true. So over the years I used fake names and secret processes to talk about her.

Wednesday, May 6, 2001



Serpent

There was an unusual commotion in our house Tuesday morning. Daniele's 4-foot boa constrictor, named Crimson, was loose in her bedroom, and a search was underway to find her. She (Crimson) eventually turned up underneath the bed, and it was quite an armful to persuade her to return to her glass case.

Now, ordinarily, the idea of a large constricting snake going squirrely in my teenage daughter's bedroom might be cause for consternation. But not Tuesday. Because Crimson has been ill, and this sudden interest in escaping (combined with heating her first rat in almost six months) was cause for celebration.

Now, you will note my use of pronouns. I was not personally involved in the snake search. I am afraid of Crimson. I have helped Daniele with minor snake ablutions, and each time I have felt how alien the snake seems compared to the dog -- how beyond warmth and wagging and monkeyshines she is.

And when she grips me around the neck and chest and squeezes, as is her wont, I feel the air -- and the life -- going out of me.

It takes me back to my days as a zookeeper, in 1967. I was a high school senior working the summer at a mini-zoo in an amusement park, Jungle Larry's Safari Island at Cedar Point, in Sandusky, Ohio.

Jungle Larry was a kids' show Frank Buck -- I guess he actually knew Frank Buck -- who amassed about 1,000 animals, from lions and elephants to monkeys, at this roadside attraction. My job was to do whatever needed doing -- rake trails, tell visitors about the animals, clean out cages.

I had many odd adventures, but the most traumatic involved feeding our two large snakes, a rock python 20 foot in length and a reticulated python 27 foot in length. These snakes were so huge they spent their days collapsed in a pile of themselves in a glassed-in building we called the snakatorium. If one moved it was to lift a head and test the room temperature with its tongue.

It was clear to me that these creatures were severely depressed, which I could understand. Jungle Larry's zoo was a cross between an old-timey zoo with steel bars and slabs, and a fake jungle, with bamboo and Spanish moss everywhere. The visitors saw the foliage, but the animals were stuck behind bars. They -- the animals -- were all insane -- from boredom, alienation, ill health, or the scent of something nearby that they should either be eating or being eaten by. It was -- unnatural.

Larry made matters worse by playing the theme song from the movie *Born Free* 16 hours a day on the PA system. That dreadful song embedded itself in the nucleotides of all our

bodies' cells. I could not help automatically finish the first line each time: "Born free, and now they're in cages ..."

Anyway, these huge snakes were depressed, and wouldn't eat. Two months would pass between meals, and as they represented a considerable investment -- perhaps \$100,000 in 1967 dollars? -- it was imperative that they be fed. Against their will.

So one night, after the zoo shut down, Larry and his assistant B'wana Walt, and myself and some other guy, undertook to feed two piglets to the two snakes. The pigs came in a crate, and they were sensible enough to be alarmed, squealing and honking at the silent presence in the room.

The plan: cut the pigs' throats, pry open the snake's jaws, and coax the freshly killed bodies into the snakes' digestive channels.

It was my duty to hold the piggies while Walt cut their throats with a bread knife. The little pigs cried piteously as I held them. I will never, ever forget that sound, or the feeling of the warm blood washing over my hands and arms, onto my shirt, where it quickly cooled.

Walt did the dirty work, getting the snakes to unhinge their jaws, wiping the blood on their faces to arouse them, and shoehorning the pigs' heads into their gullets.

What struck me was how out of kilter it was, these \$50,000 snakes who had no zest for life, being force-fed these \$3 creatures who wept desperately to live.

But we did it, and the snakes thrived, after a fashion. A week after eating , they pooped out the pigs' flesh. Several days later they pooped out their mashed skeletons. Every now and then, one of them would move.

So when my daughter acquired Crimson, I had no appetite for it. We discouraged her. We knew nothing about snake health, and it was quite a responsibility. And expense.

Chances are Crimson would grow to be 16-18 feet long, and we would have to reenact the pig feeding ritual once every six weeks. Deep down, I dreaded re-feeling the feelings I felt in the snakatorium 34 years ago.

One time Crimson got loose and was somewhere in the house for an entire week. Rachel and I would go to bed never 100% certain we would wake up in the morning. Daniele mocked us for this, but she was unable to produce the snake. (It was in her underwear drawer.)

What we did not foresee was the snake getting sick. It grew a callus on its nose, a scab that covered its nostrils and infected its mouth and lips. It would not eat. Weeks went by like this, me denying it was in there, and Daniele sleeping in the same room as her, hearing it rasp through its strange mask, struggling to breathe.

We took her to a special vet, who did helpful things like excising the scab and force-feeding her with a tube. At one point I had to hold her while we gave her shots. Lord, you should have felt her coiling away from that needle, attempting to strike us to prevent the mortal stab, and the stung, stiff feeling in her muscle when the needle went in.

Then this past week, we coaxed Crimson to swallow her first food in almost six months - a thawed frozen rat.

So when Crimson started feeling frisky enough to hide under the bed, it represented a glorious comeback. As much as we were capable of, we celebrated her return to health.

She is a person to us now, who has struggled and prevailed.
How can you not love such a snake, just a little warm-blooded
bit?

NOTE: In 2006 Crimson began to fail, and she failed for an entire year. Daniele abandoned her to me to care for her. It was too painful to watch the thing die so slowly. Several times I thought was dead and carried her out to dispose of her – and she came to again in my arms, coiling to draw breath. Finally, one day, she was gone, and we laid Crimson to rest – as a friend.

Christmas 2000



The Blue Bicycle

The snowy woods echoed with the crunch of boots and the snapping of dry wood. "How much longer?" my 8-year old son asked.

"Not long," I said, huffing frosted steam. "We're almost there."

My 12-year old daughter was impatient, too. "What did you say we were looking for?"

"Yes," Rachel said, "what is it exactly?"

"Something you'll never see again," I said. I was in heaven, luring my kids out into the cold to see if they could spot the

remarkable thing. We finally came to a clearing overlooking a small ravine.

We just stood there for a moment, our breath frosting up before us. "It's right here," I announced.

There wasn't a sound except the fluffing of heavy falling snow. Then Jon said, "I see it!"

He pointed up, into the lower reaches of a young cottonwood tree. There, about ten feet from the ground, was a rusted old bicycle. It was not sitting in a branch; rather, the branch had somehow grown around the bicycle. The main bar was entirely enclosed in swarming wood.

"Wow," Daniele said.

I had come across it a few days earlier, out walking the dog. I had actually passed that spot a hundred times and not noticed. But who ever looks up to see a tree embracing a bicycle? You need luck to see these things. And now I felt like Merlin, letting young Arthur peer into a peculiar mystery.

Based on the bike style, the amount of corrosion, and the absence of tire rubber, I guessed that the bicycle had been in the tree for over 40 years. It was entirely rusted except for a narrow path of etched blue enamel just below the handlebars, by the little plate that still said Western Automatic.

The four of us were suddenly giddy with the idea of a bicycle growing in a tree. How did it get there? Did someone lean it against the tree years ago, and the tree slowly reached out and lifted it up, an inch a year, up into the sky?

Or did someone just throw it up there, and the tree grew around it?

Whose bike was it, and would that person remember the bike?

Did the bike think it was flying? Did the tree think it was riding? Did the wind once blow the wheels around, whispering stories of locomotion to the stationery tree?

Everyone agreed, on the way back to the car, that it was a wonderful thing, and we should always keep our eyes keen for other anomalies. They must be everywhere, we reasoned. We just have to train ourselves to see them.

But a funny thing happened. The next time I came to the clearing, in spring, by myself, not only was the bicycle gone -- but the tree was gone. A big wind blowing up the river has no trouble toppling trees rooted in sand. The cottonwood lay accordingly on its side, head down into the ravine, its roots reaching up like withered, imploring hands.

I looked under the tree for the bicycle. I looked around the area, to no avail. The snow was gone, and this year's vegetation was pushing up from the ground -- just high enough to disguise a jutting pedal or tipped wheel rim.

Over the next couple of years I gently obsessed about finding the bicycle, returning to the spot numerous times, to see if I had merely misplaced it.

Occasionally I thought I saw it. But it was just a curl of vine, pretending to be wheel, or the color of rot pretending to be rust.

I had already seen the outrageous sight, gotten credit for showing it to my family -- what more did I want?

My heart always quickened when I came to that space. A bicycle fashioned of iron from the dirt once roamed this city and raced up and down its hills. How many times did its rider trace a thrill from spine to chain? And then it lived in a tree by the river, gazing out at the barges and crows. And now it was returning to the earth.

I felt ... like that archeologist, Schliemann, who found Troy seven cities down, in reverse. What the earth lifted up, the earth was taking back. Everything combined to make it so. Every falling leaf covered it up in the fall. Each fresh clump of snow that blanketed it in winter. Each pelting splash of rain in spring, every summer hiker's footfall -- all buried it deeper in the wood.

And you know, everything buried was living once. Every moment is half of a miracle. And the blue two-wheeler coasts into the living world.

A Jar in Tennessee

A month after the operation, we are out again. Imagine a crisp winter morning. I am walking Beau at Crosby Farm alongside the Mississippi, an undeveloped park with lots of paths cutting through the trees along the shore. A perfect place for a scofflaw to let his dog run wild.

And I have a minicassette recorder in my pocket, a generic blisterpack Sony. They are great for taking notes when driving, or out for a walk somewhere. Sometimes people see you and think you are schizophrenic, talking to your hand, but that is small price to pay, in my mind, for being able to "write" on the fly.

The morning is gorgeous, with crisp new powder everywhere, and white vapor rising from the river. For just a moment, a four-point deer poked his head into a clearing. Beau, being a bit blind, pays him no mind.

My dog begs me to chase him. It's his favorite game, a role reversal because chasing others is the center of his life otherwise. My knee is still sore, but I pound along for a hundred yards or so, bellowing like a dog-eating bear. He adores that.

We take several switchbacks, going deeper into the trees. When we arrive at the riverbank, I feel in my pocket for the recorder. It's gone.

You know how when something is gone you check every pocket eleven times to make sure it's gone? This was that kind of gone. I figure I either dropped it when I made my last note, or it fell out of my pocket during the little jog. So I begin backtracking. The dog wants me to chase him some more, but my mood is darkening and I decline.

The snow is thick, but there are many deer and rabbit and human footprints. A recorder could easily vanish into any of them. I calculate in my mind the loss of the unit -- maybe \$40. Besides, they wear out quickly because you are always dropping them. I look everywhere I walked -- about a two-mile distance -- for the little machine. No luck.

I was nearly reconciled to the loss when I spotted the unit lying on a patch of thin snow. The battery and tape compartments were both sprung open, and the tape and batteries lay splayed out on the snow, as if a squirrel or crow had given some thought to taking them home, and then said, nah.

I popped the machine back together and pushed the play button, still ready for the worst, a dead unit. But instead I heard my own voice. I was talking about Sao Paulo Brazil, which I had visited on business a couple months earlier. On the tape, I was sitting in a bus on a smoggy artery heading out of town, talking to myself about the beggars crouched by the highway signs, and the advertising, with the nearly naked models, and the infinite pastel rows of high-rise apartment buildings.

And now I am standing in a clearing in the forest, 7,000 miles away, hearing my high, sped-up voice. The woods are so quiet that this little machine and its tinny little speaker ring clear through the air. Nearby crows, hearing my recorded chatter and finding it suspicious, take wing and flap away to a safer bough.

If you have ever stood between two mirrors and seen the illusion of infinite regression in them, you have an idea what I was feeling, addressing myself electronically from a place so different and so far away.

And if that was not stunning enough, I flipped the tape over -- I did not want to tape over this interesting travelogue -- and there was my daughter Daniele's voice, talking to a caller on

the phone. I reuse my answering machine tapes in my hand recorder, and this tape was perhaps five years old, when my little girl was eight, back before we got Beau. Now her voice sounds so clear, so young and lovely. I had forgotten what she used to sound like. I knew I couldn't tape this over, either.

Beau, meanwhile, was looking at me with that panting grin dogs wear when they are in their element to the hilt. But the look on his face just now is all wonderment and admiration. He "understands" very little that I do, but this latest trick, picking something up in the woods and having it talk to me in my own voice, takes the cake.

My friends, let me tell you, this is not the end of my story. Beau has a lifetime of adventures ahead of him. Dogs to run with, people to love. At one point he gets to paddle in a canoe, with a life jacket on. Disasters rain down upon our house, and the sun comes up afterward and dries the rain up. Beau catches a bunny, and lets it live. Beau is struck by a car one night -- and it lets him live.

But I choose to end our story here, in the woods, kneeling by the fallen minicassette recorder.

It was the look I saw in Beauregard's eye, the look of a knowing one, a holy of holies at last. He had made the difficult crossing, from a crazy, impulsive, demanding animal to one who saw, and enjoyed, the life we shared.

Wallace Stevens once wrote a simple poem called "A Jar in Tennessee," about coming upon a human artifact on a wild hillside. Placing anything human in the wilderness changes everything, just like in the time travel stories. The consciousness is contagious. Just as owning a dog is a kind of portage, in which your soul enters the dog forever and vice versa -- a miracle.

It's entirely likely, since he is a French poodle, and Stevens is the poet of that breed. And it was such a gorgeous day, with the scent of sand and pine adrift in the air like microfine confetti in the morning breeze.

Going Home

My brain tumor diagnosis in 1999 was very hard on Daniele and Jon. I tried to confront them with the truth of what was happening, to put them somewhat at ease. But it was hard, because I was pretty freaked out about it.

I am only in the hospital room and in a hospital gown for about eleven hours, but I can't communicate how marvelous it feels to be going home. If I was the Pope arriving by jet I would kiss the tarmac. Since Rachel is just giving me a ride home in the minivan, I content myself with patting the pillar on the front porch approvingly.

My head is still sore from the stroke and needs time to mend. But my relationship with my kids also needs work. It has been nearly two weeks since I collapsed in the bed, and both Rachel and I have been very absorbed with me and my problem in that time. Jonathan, 10, is waiting for me at the door when I come in, and he hugs me tenderly. He is a smallish boy, and his hands on my shoulders remind me of his hands when he was a baby, how he would clutch me when I carried him about the house.

It's a nice thing to have a dad who is a writer and therefore always home. You don't go two weeks without seeing him. He becomes something like we used to think of mothers -- as ubiquitous and supportive, happy to be taken for granted. The downside is that he is often writing something, which is somewhat analogous to being in labor, and therefore distracted from your immediate concerns. Oddly, a woman in labor is the

closest thing to most dads -- too busy to tie your shoes just now.

My style of fathering is your basic fun dad approach, combining erudite irony with the hearty Polish papooshka humor I cribbed from Dick. It worked great when the kids looked up to me like a god, before they became a certain age. Now, as true sentience kicks in, they are looking for something more intimate and more equal. I have been Jon's baseball coach on all the teams he's been on, going back to first grade.

Jonathan is the kind of kid who is very hard on himself, thinking he is never any good at anything. The truth is that he is not world-class at anything -- which is true of most all of us. He has enough vision to dream grand dreams, but lacks the superpowers to make them come true. It is a formula for unhappiness. I wish I could tap a wand on Jon's head and make him relax, but he'll have to come to it on his own.

I tap him on the head anyway. "You OK?"

He nods anxiously, and runs upstairs to his computer.

I don't know where my daughter Daniele, 14, is. In the past couple of years she has adopted a nomadic lifestyle, crisscrossing the city on foot or by bus, visiting with a punky cohort of friends. A few of them do bad things, but most do not; they are basically hippies with staples in them, good kids with a yen for anarchy.

Jon looks more like Rachel, but Daniele is all me. We are the sort who can finish one another's sentences, even when they are off to very strange beginnings. Like Jon, she tries to come

across as a little tough, but she is soft as syrup inside, and I know she, too, is worried about her old man.

Yesterday, when I was in the hospital, Daniele came home from school to find a locked house. It seemed like a metaphor for what was happening. A key was hidden on the porch in an old galosh, but she didn't remember. So she wandered through the neighborhood in January weather, her spikes and rings clattering in the cold, until a neighbor coaxed her inside, made her tea and warmed her back up. Daniele finally drifts in late in the evening. We hug tentatively, then she too retires to her lair to restore her powers.

I know what's happening. We are walking on eggshells. No one wants to say the obvious, that we are terrified of losing one another.

The first day I am too fragile to give them a pep talk. But I can see the lost look in their eyes. They don't know what to think. I want to give them a briefing that is reliable, but that also gives them hope. I do not want to scare them worse. Problem is, I'm still too rocked by what I have learned to be very reassuring.

The next day, a Saturday, just before lunch, it happens spontaneously, in the kitchen. I see them milling around, Jon with the tips of his fingers in his pants pockets and his shoulders hunched practically over his head -- the very portrait of tension -- and Daniele with a sorrowful expression arcing across her face.

I stand in the doorway and improvise the talk of a lifetime. Instinctively, I do three things: I keep it simple, I focus on the positives, but I don't sweep the negatives under the rug:

"Listen," I say, "there's stuff I got to tell you. And they aren't bad news. Mostly, they're good news. But you've got to be quiet and hear me out.

"Yes, I have a brain tumor. And I know that's a scary phrase, especially since Papa Dick died of a brain tumor.

"But my tumor's not like Papa Dick's. It's dangerous, but it's not a killer like his. We caught mine earlier. It's smaller. Mine is the size of a small bird, Papa's was like a grapefruit when they found it, and then it kept growing.

"Mine is easier to get at. If they need to go in and cut it out, they won't have to cut through the good stuff to get it. Papa's was buried deep in his brain; mine is right up against the skull.

"Best of all, mine looks like it is slow-growing, while Papa's was like a runaway train.

"The other thing to remember is that our circumstances are different. Papa Dick's tumor was discovered a decade ago. Doctors have learned an awful lot about brain tumors since then. Papa Dick never got an MRI scanner until it was too late.

"And Papa Dick and I are different. Papa was 62. I'm younger, and healthier, and better suited to fight the disease. And I'm smarter. Papa Dick refused to go to the city, where the best specialists and equipment were. We live right in the city, and if I have to, I'll get myself down to the Mayo Clinic, the best hospital in the world, just 80 miles down Highway 35.

"There is every reason to think I will do well with this. I'm a little freaked out just yet, because nothing like this has ever happened to me before. But I'm optimistic, in good humor, and

I have a ton of people rooting and praying for me. And that's not nothing, is it?

"And doggone it, we've got your mom on my side. She's so smart, and she can think through all the things we have trouble understanding. How many people with this kind of problem have a live-in expert to turn to?"

The talk is going great. Daniele is looking right into my eyes, as if I'm giving her information about saving her life, not mine. Jonathan looks more attentive than I've ever seen him.

"Now, look, you guys," I say to them. "I want you to listen real good. I wish to hell I didn't have this thing, and I am a little bit scared about how it's going to play out.

"But my fears have limits. I swear to you that I am not worried about dying and leaving you. The truth is, I could die any day, from a thousand other causes. That's true of all of us. That's the way life is. A can of string beans could fall from a shelf and hit me. And I will die some day. But I am not going to leave you now, not because of this stupid thing in my head.

"What we have to do now is start thinking in the healthiest way we can. That means we pay attention to our thoughts. Don't keep secrets. Don't hold back. If something's on your mind, I want to hear it. No matter how morbid or scary it sounds. If you're giving up on me in your head, I want a chance to talk you out of it.

"This isn't going to be a cool process. It's going to be hard, because we all try hard to be grown-up and unaffected by stuff. But I can't get better and be cool at the same time, so the hell with being cool.

"And I am putting you two in charge of keeping me in line. I'm guessing there will be times when I'm going to be irritable, or bummed out, and sometimes I'm going to feel sorry for myself. I'm empowering you right now to call me on any baloney I try to slice. All you have to do is say, 'Dad, you're doing it,' and I'll know what you mean.

"The only thing you can't do is keep all your feelings to yourself. Because as long as I'm in this family, I make the rules, and the rules of this family are that we share our feelings.

"And be nice to Mama, because she is going to really need our support."

Suddenly I'm done and we are hugging. I couldn't be prouder of them, or of myself.

A few nights ago, alone in the hospital, I cried for three hours straight. But I'm not alone any more, and we have a plan. We're home, together. And one way or another, things are going to be ... all right.

December 6, 1998

A Rose in December

Sometimes the future and the past switch places in our lives. What went before foretells what is to come. And the future smiles back, and explains the past.

My family experienced a tragedy when I was 11 -- my sister Kathy, who was born with a leaky heart valve, passed away. Her life had been tough in many ways. She could never exercise, her baby teeth never fell out, and her skin was grayish from poor circulation -- she was called a "bluebaby," and kids made fun of her for that.

It's a condition that medicine found a simple cure for, to be administered at birth -- a few months after she was born.

Kathy was a girl of great gentleness and sweetness. She was a painter and drawer, and a lover of horses. All my childhood, my job, and my brother Pat's, was to run and fetch things for her, because she did not have the strength.

She was a sophomore in high school when she went into a coma and died. Her death made for a stormy adolescence for me. I stopped going to church, I got into trouble with the law, I became a bit of a hard case.

Now fast-forward into the future, to my 15th high school reunion, in 1982. I returned to my small town with a bad attitude, determined to show people how far I had come -- not financially (I was broke) but in daring and worldliness. I drank with old girlfriends, I kissed my old prom date on the lips. I pissed off their husbands, on purpose.

I had too much to drink, and I saw, at the bar, a big kid I remembered from grade school, Jack Mussina. He was the class psycho, built like an adult even as a kid, with a brutal jawline and a dead look in his eyes.

In sixth, seventh, and eight grades, Mussina made my life miserable, chasing me on the playground, throwing me up against walls, and slapping and pummeling me. He hated me for some reason I didn't understand, and saw me as an appropriate victim. That's what bothered me the most -- I did not want to be a victim of anything.

Taking courage from the liquor, I challenged him. "Mussina, what made you hate me so much in grade school? I wasn't a bad kid. What did I ever do to you?"

Mussina winced. "Hey, man, I'm sorry. I was so crazy in those days. I had all kinds of problems."

But I wouldn't let him off so easy. "OK, but why me? Why did you choose me to pick on?"

He looked at me levelly, and I could tell something still bothered him. "Because you laughed at your sister's funeral."

I flashed backward. I was excruciatingly self-conscious the day of the funeral. I was upset about Kathy, and I didn't want people peering in on our problems. But the funeral was a big event in the town. My whole school, St. Joseph's, was taking time off to attend.

I remember glancing about during the service, looking for reassurance from my classmates that they wouldn't always know me by this moment. That this wouldn't mark me forever. I'm sure I tried to smile.

It was a terrible day.

Back to 1982. "Jack," I told him. "I wasn't laughing. I loved my sister, but it was no one's business but mine. I must have smirked, but you have to know I was dying inside. "

"I know, Mike. I loved her, too."

So that's what it was. When all the other kids called Kathy bluebaby, or warned her about the purple people eater, Mussina was her avenger. He beat up a dozen kids, and some of them must have said something. He showed his devotion the only way he could -- with his fists. When she died, he transferred his enmity to me. Out of love.

Mussina went to Vietnam and was a behavior problem there, spending time in the brig. Now he was better, and counseled other vets with emotional disorders.

And me, after what seemed like a lifetime of being alone, I met and married my best friend Rachel. Rachel, too, went through the mill, losing her father at 16.

It's been an interesting marriage, because we are so gentle with one another, so aware of the old pain. Sometimes it seems like we are brother and sister.

Now fast-forward to the present. My daughter Daniele, whose face so resembles my sister, is now her age, when she died. When I think of my sister's terror at that age, I can't help crying. I have a good one about once a month.

And as I try to prepare Daniele for the long future ahead of her, I am so grateful for her health.

You can not believe how rosy her complexion is, on a crisp December day like today. Or how embarrassed her brilliant color sometimes makes her.

Or how beautiful it looks to me.



Daniele's Boon

The story of how I got Daniele a dog – Beauregard the famous blue poodle.

Parents hate hearing this, but if your only point of reference is pets, children seem an awful lot like them. Both kids and dogs have developmental passages they go through, with corresponding emotional nuances.

Daniele was born in our apartment in Milwaukee, and the moment she tumbled out into my waiting hands, and she looked at me with already open eyes, and let out a mighty, sage sigh - "Ahhhh" - I have been crazy for her. Daniele was the bestest puppy ever.

I worked the first year of Daniele's life, but I would come home at five o'clock and fling the door open, expecting, and getting, the same high levels of hysterical glee that I used to get from my fat old pointer. We lived those early months on a

blanket laid square on our living room floor, surrounded by the toys we bought for her - some of which, like her squeaky cheeseburger, were really dog and cat toys.

Daniele was a bodhisattva baby. She had the round face you associate with all-knowingness. She had poise, and readiness, and humor. She was spectacular, and just like me, she loved animals. Her first word was guh!, which she applied to her stuffed mallard - you will recognize guh as an accepted variant of duck. By the time she was ten months old, she had mastered a long repertoire of animal sounds. If, out driving, I called out "duck," she replied from the backseat, quack-quack! If I said, "laughing snake," she'd answer with "Ssss! Sss! Sss!" God, I adored her.

Daniele grew into a stellar toddler, astonishing elders we presented her to. When we moved back to Minnesota, and I started working at home (freelance writer), I took her out almost every day to the zoo, to a playground, for an adventure in the big wild world. I have a series of four pictures of us, taken in one of those seventy-five cent arcade photo machines, where we are both mugging shamelessly. We seem so happy on the picture strip, so high on one another.

But then, at about the time she began attending preschool, something happened. Though powerful in the company of adults, she was powerless in the company of peers. She spent hours hiding from the other children under tables, crying when things did not go her way. By kindergarten she had begun balking at competitive activities like school Olympics.

Rachel and I were slow to see something was the matter. We considered it a mood, or a developmental pothole. But it was more than that. She began exhibiting phobic behavior, shrieking when she would see a cat or dog, even when the

animal was a block away. It hardly made sense, because this was a child who adored animals.

She became the pariah of her Brownie troop, because the den mother had a tiny dog - a West Highland White - who bothered no one but terrified Daniele. The other children began excluding her from activities and parties. In a few months she had gone from a confident kid to a sad, unsure one. At times she seemed helpless to act on her own behalf.

Friends, this went on for four years - what should have been the brightest years of her life became a very sorry period. By the time she was a fifth grader, she was silent, guilty, anxious, depressed, unable to pay attention, unable to initiate tasks, and foreclosing on every opportunity. "I can't talk to that person." "They would never want to be my friend." Other kids, except her best friend Betsy, excluded her. In her unhappiness Daniele was slipping into minor compulsive behaviors, counting the panels on the car dashboard, counting the tick marks on the clock face, counting everything.

And do you know the strangest thing - when I would ask her, in her misery, what would make her happy again, she answered without hesitating:

"A dog."

The request was like a boon from an Arabian Knights tale, and I was parent-bound to honor it. But it put me in a bind.

First, I could not get her a dog so long as she was afraid of dogs. I would have to intervene somehow and get her beyond her phobic feelings. And I didn't know how to go about that. She was also phobic about being in deep water, and I had tried everything to get her to dunk her head under, even offering her \$20 to hold her nose, stoop down, touch the floor of the swimming pool, and stand up again. She couldn't do it.

Second, I had my own reasons for not wanting a dog. Some were superficial. They're a lot of work. The kids would undoubtedly shirk their part and make me the primary caretaker. Taking care of the animal would eat into my worktime. I'd start popping deadlines, and pretty soon we'd all be out in the cold, thanks to some dog we hadn't even met yet.

But the deeper reason was that I was afraid of the emotional burden of getting another dog. When Casi died I felt not only grief, but guilt. By giving her freedom that was so dangerous, and that she never asked for, I was responsible for her death.

And I was afraid it would happen all over again. I would be hornswoggled by the next dog just as I was hornswoggled by the last. It would quickly become a relationship all out of kilter. And I was a grown man this time, with wife and children and priorities beyond a dog's happiness.

This time around, did I have what it took to put on the emotional brakes, be a superstern owner, and keep the puppy from making a doggie bed out of my heart?

I doubted it.

But first we had to do something about Daniele's phobia. I knew offering her twenty bucks didn't work. Perhaps immersion therapy, in which I threw her into a pit of assorted snarling dogs, and didn't pull her out again until she seemed happy to be there? That didn't seem quite right, either.

It occurred to me that what we had here was a case of father-daughter cowardice. That what each of us was really afraid of was our feelings. We were both hyperemotional people. I was like a kid who wanted to adopt every sad-eyed creature I saw. And Daniele really was a kid, and confronting an animal for her was like standing under a waterfall of her own confusion and excitement. She loved going to the zoo, where steel bars

provided some emotional distance, a shield from the experience. But meeting dogs up close, the emotional shield was gone. The experience was so intense, she froze up in fear.

I hit on a plan. Instead of immersing her in a pit of dogs, what if I created an environment in which she experienced dogs, but I equipped her with a shield to hide behind while she experienced them?

And so we both became volunteer dog-walkers at the Ramsey County Humane Society.

The shelter is located on the edge of Como Park, a pretty city park that includes a conservatory, a kiddie amusement park (closed in the winter), some playing fields and picnic tables, a tiny patch of woods, and a small zoo.

Every Tuesday in the winter of 1992, from November through April, Daniele and I showed up at the shelter, signed in, found our identity badges in a file cabinet, walked through the cages and pens in back, and selected the three dogs that looked like they most needed a walk that day.

We generally spent an hour to ninety minutes walking one dog at a time. When weather permitted, we brought the dogs all the way to the zoo perimeter, and let them glimpse and call to the two wolves that were kept in a large open pen. There is no genetic difference between wolves and dogs, and no matter what breed of dog we had with us - from bulldog to bichon frise - they hailed their feral brothers with cries of recognition, and vice versa.

At first Daniele stood back from the process, walking behind me and the dog by ten steps or so. Our first dog was Fred, a 4-year-old basset hound. His ears were like big drips tumbling from a spigot. Once outside, he became a pulling machine, dragging me through the muddy snow, barely aware of us,

pulling on his leash, nearly inhaling every tree trunk he came to, smelling every smell he could smell, like a condemned man's last act of gluttony.

Which it might have been. Fred was intense, but dear. He was the perfect dog for our first encounter. His soul was completely domesticated - he would gnaw off a leg before biting a human being. But that sorrowful face must surely have warded adopters with young children away. I pictured Fred in a home of his own, making slow circles before lying down to nap, shutting his bloodshot eyes.

Daniele followed from a distance, but I could tell she, too, was lulled into feelings of security by this comfortable old dog. The next dog, she walked a bit closer, and each time she followed with greater interest. By the second week she was walking right behind me. Then beside me. Before the month was up, she was heeling big, ungainly dogs on her own leash.

It was a glorious victory for her, because she loved dogs even when she was terrified of them. She not only overcame her fear, but she learned at an early age that specific fears could be overcome. That's a powerful lesson for someone so young.

Her favorite dog was one we encountered early in our tour of service. He had belonged to an older woman who died, and now he was trying to start all over again. His name was Ricki, a kind of longhaired a Pekinese football, very spirited and proud despite bouncing up and down when he walked like a car fitted with square wheels.

Ricki was the first dog Daniele took on her own. Where Fred dragged you through the snow, Ricki was an instinctive stepper, never falling behind, never allowing the leash to tighten up. He was so happy, even trotting in the rain, his feet moving invisibly under his shaggy coat, water cascading off

him when he sneezed. He was like a robot dog, with a face that looked flattened by a rolling pin.

At home, Daniele drew pictures of Ricki. He was the kind of dog she would have wanted at that age, toylike and funny. You could picture him blissful to be a member of your household, skittering up and down a staircase, excited that his master, a little girl of nine, was home from school.

But we didn't adopt Ricki. Indeed, the third week we showed up, Ricki was gone. We had been told that only one of eight dogs put up for adoption are actually adopted. So when a dog vanished from the kennel, death was a more likely reason than a new life. We tried not to get too involved, but the dogs were so brave, and so grateful for the moments we gave them, it was hard not to take them into your heart.

Another dog that got to us was Rusty, a mix of Irish setter and Lab. Rusty was one of the most beautiful dogs I ever saw. His coat was short, the color of his name, and his legs seemed longer than they needed to be, wonderful for running but somewhat awkward for just getting turned around. In his cage he seemed defeated, but out in the woods he came alive, and his face shone with a sad gratitude. He would stand and hold his chin up in a cold breeze, and you could see he was luxuriating in the air brushing his face. I don't know what his story was, but for such a gorgeous, well-behaved dog to hit such a patch of bad luck seemed very wrong.

That winter we must have walked 75 dogs. There was a big Saint Bernard puppy, solemnly and determined not to be too big. There were Labs of every hue, and setters, and terriers, and the occasional lapdog, who seemed heartbroken and a little deranged, like Blanche Dubois, to have fallen from a high station to this.

Several times we did the unthinkable - we took a dog that did not belong to us, and that we were responsible for, off the leash, and let it run free for just a minute or so. We chose these dogs carefully. Not many prisoners, losing their chains, will voluntarily let them be put on again. But these creatures did, like Christs being led off on leather tethers to Herod. We never lost a dog.

By the end Daniele was walking the dogs all by herself, and I was walking one step behind. There was a spring in her step, and a cheekiness in her voice, a feeling of confidence from doing something that used to scare her. She could make the most ebullient dog heel. Even the German shepherds and Dobermans, the big dogs that seemed to have little sense of humor, didn't scare her. She proved she could handle a dog of her own.

The Melting Windshield

This is a memory of the days when I had my brain tumor diagnosed. Daniele was very disturbed that I was suddenly so vulnerable. I was grossed out by what was happening to me, and I was unable to shield her from my feelings.

Three days after my discharge, I need to pick Daniele up after school and drive her to her counseling session. She is doing follow-up after a bout with depression several years earlier, and she likes Judy, the psychologist. I also know she is very concerned about me, and I hope talking the problem out with Judy will be useful to her.

Problem is, a light rain has begun to fall before I even get to Daniele's school, and the sight of raindrops forming a film on the windshield is doing something strange in my brain. I am having trouble thinking about the different "layers" of visual reality -- the sky around me, the street in front of me, the inside of the car, and the in-between zone where the wipers are slapping the raindrops away.

It all threatens to peel away into separate layers, and my mind is trying to decide which layer to attend to. Unfortunately, my mind seems most interested in the windshield, where actual dangers are minimal. I am hallucinating, and that isn't good. But I am simultaneously experiencing something I have not experienced in perhaps eight years -- an ophthalmic migraine.

An ophthalmic migraine is not a headache, but an event affecting one's vision. It is hard to describe, but it is as if there is a glowing light in the center of your visual field, that wipes out everything you expect to see there. You can still see, if it is a mild event, by rolling your head, Stevie Wonder-style, so that

your peripheral vision takes over, and you "paint" the scene for your brain to interpret.

By the time I pick up Daniele at her school, I am deep into the migraine, and freaking out. My judgment is also going, and I don't know what to do. It's rush hour, it's snowing, I'm hallucinating, my visual field is dwindling, I have the treasure of my life sitting in the front seat beside me, and I have an appointment with a psychologist who will charge me \$100 if I am a no-show -- compared to the \$15 co-pay I owe if I do show up. It is a 5-mile drive to the office. And I am afraid to freak Daniele out by showing her my alarm -- after all, my condition is the reason we're going to the psychologist in the first place.

I take a deep breath, decide that the migraine is not spreading, and that therefore I will not lose more visual field than I have already lost -- maybe 15%. I calmly explain the situation to Daniele and drive very carefully to the appointment, then sit in the vestibule for an hour, wondering what I have done, and wondering what I will do next time this happens -- and it could happen any time.

Rachel's Roast

This was a script that Daniele and I worked up to honor her mom on the event of something – her 50th birthday perhaps. When she was young she participated more in these family performances. As she got older they annoyed her more and she dropped out of them.

Mike: Well, your mom is 50 years old. Maybe now's a good time to reflect on her. . Are there any memories you would like to share? Any special qualities you think make her special?

Daniele: Well, the other day we went to a steakhouse for Jon's birthday. I remember it like it was yesterday. Rachel ordered the vegetable plate, stressing the need for healthy food. But then, when the food came, she ate everyone's ribs..

Mike: Well, that story just shows how economical she is ... why order your own ribs when that's what everyone's getting? Smart woman, your mother.

Daniele: OK, the other day she came into my room and told me it was a pig sty and I better clean it up. After she left I realized she left her coffee cup.

Mike: You see, she isn't stigmatized by the need to be consistent. It's the hobgoblin of small minds, as I'm sure you know. What a marvelous person.

Daniele: Well, what about you? What was she like when you met?

Mike: Oh, that was 25 years ago. She was a precious pearl. It was Thanksgiving, and she came into my house, wrinkled her nose, and asked, "You're cooking meat?"

Daniele: This is the woman who ate my ribs.

Mike: Oh, but don't you see, she's an idealist. She's always on the lookout for a better world.

Daniele: Was she pretty?

Mike: As a cupcake with sprinkles. She had those wonderful freckles, like the spots on a trout. And a smile as big as all outdoors.

Daniele: What else do you remember?

Mike: Well, she talked so dadburn fast. That stands out. Sometimes the words would sort of run together. One time used the phrase "clear and pleasant danger." I know what that is, too.

She's a spiller. First date we went on, she spilled a thermos of mushroom soup on my car upholstery. Another time she covered \$500 of school text books with blueberry yogurt. Just this past week she drizzled klister all over the plasticware for this party. But that's good too -- so often we lose track of a plastic fork or spoon. Not tonight.

And did I mention, she is the only person I have ever known who likes to be tickled. Tickle her feet, she closes her eyes and purrs like a kitty cat. That's a very unique attribute.

Daniele: What is it with her and time?

Mike: Your mother inhabits a unique temporal dimension. I have never known her to be early for anything, not once. I used to resist this, until I realized it was a blessing. When your mother finally shows up, it's like a signal to the rest of us that now we can get started. It kind of holds us together. She's like that.

Daniele: Have you seen her desk? It looks like she's in the early stages of building a fire.

Mike: But that's the best thing. Other people need intricate order in order to find things. Your mother doesn't need that. She knows that whatever she needs, it's in there somewhere. A remarkable woman.

And now we're going to turn this portion of our show over to the party in question. Everyone, put your hands together, and show your love for my child bride -- Dee Dee Frazin.

The Coach's Daughter

The coach loved his daughter dearly, but she never played ball, not even T-ball. Now here she was, ready for college, and unsure what to do.

"So I guess majoring in parks and recreation is out of the question?" he asked as they idled at a red light. That was about all the career counseling he had in him.

"Dad, you know how I feel about sports."

He grunted. "How about teaching then?" He was a teacher, if you counted health.

"I see what it's like for my teachers. They're all dying for someone to show interest, but none of us ever do. I couldn't put up with that."

"Maybe something to do with computers," he said. "We got you that computer."

"I hate computers," the daughter said. "I especially hate mine."

"I don't know," the coach said. "But, it seems to me, there's got to be something you would really like that you aren't thinking of, or are crossing off the list too soon."

He noticed the oversized tokens in the dashboard coin tray. "I took your brother to the batting cages Saturday. He was hitting 'em pretty good."

The daughter rolled her eyes.

"It's a funny thing," the coach went on. "Most experts tell you that if you're a big strong hitter, you stand way back in the batting zone. That way you can extend your arms and get the most muscle on the ball. You hit it with your arms way out like that, the ball's gonna travel."

The daughter looked out the passenger window. It was going to be one of those conversations.

"But that's not such good advice if you're a poor hitter, or you're in a slump, or you're afraid of the ball," he said, mainly to himself. "That's when I tell 'em, 'Put yourself in danger a bit. Get up close to the pitch. Nothing happens if you miss the ball. But up close, anything can happen. You get a dribbler, or you beat one over the infield. Heck, you get hit, that's as good as a single."

The daughter grimaced. Was her father encouraging young kids to step in front of fastballs? "Is there a point to this?" she asked.

"A point, right. Well, OK, so your brother is swinging away. The first few times we went to the cages he's missing everything. But I move him in close, and he starts to make contact -- foul tips, ground balls and stuff.

"Then he does something interesting. He starts getting mad at the pitching machine. Or pitchers generally. Or something. Because he steps back in the box, and extends his arms. Now he's really getting around, and the ball is rocketing off his bat -- bam, bam, bam. And all the time, he's saying stuff like, 'Didn't think I could hit that one, did you?' and 'Just give me what you got.' The ball is flying out of there.

"It was kind of cuckoo," the coach said, "but it worked out okay."

The daughter sighed. "So what you're saying is, I have to put myself in harm's way and commit myself to success for good things to happen?"

The coach shrugged. "It's just a story."

"Right, pops. OK, here's my stop, I gotta go."

"You have a good day in there, little girl" the coach said, giving her the thumb-up sign.

She patted his forearm. "I love you Daddy," she called over her shoulder. And ran up the stairs to school.

(1995)

Things I Meant to Notice

I meant for the longest time to think about the little tasks, about tying the shoes, and fitting the hands into gloves, I saw my big hands negotiating the laces and trying sleeve after sleeve over finger and thumb.

I could have had fun with the sand I dumped out of each sneaker, enough for a beach, enough for a castle and a moat.

I could have written about the look on their faces sometimes, that they saw us not as the oafs who yelled and sighed and lived stupidly above eye level, but shining gods, shining, omnipotent and perfect.

How when they cried in your arms they were praying to you to make it better, to lift the pain from their lives, and you could.

I could have written about the tiredness of the house, the exhaustion of the tabletops, crusted with crud, sponged pointlessly after meals, the flakes and globs spattered on the floor that fill the cracks in the hardwood.

Or the handles on the stroller that were not long enough, so you walked in a crouch, and the white plastic wheels that turned sideways on a whim or a pebble and skidded to a halt.

I could have remembered their bodies between us in bed when they were just babies, the smell of them there, the cramped caution of the dark, the wet exhalation from their noses. The kick of them against blanket, that wakes you and momentarily annoys you, then draws you even closer.

Why did they finally leave our bed, our big pink comforter and the warmth of the family, for beds of their own? There was

space for us all, and another night would have cost them nothing, but they went.

I could have described the last night they woke up frightened and sauntered in barefoot and climbed in between us. They slept again immediately, and we tried, too.

But I know you were thinking, off on your side, that this is the moment, and this was our life, and the white skin of our children dove and fell again beside us, in the bright sun setting, out to sea.

December, 1996

The Finley Family Players

Every year for about ten years we put on a Holiday Play. It was awfully silly, but we all took part.

Good evening everyone and on behalf of the Finley Family Players allow me to wish you all the happiest of holidays.

You are about to witness the exclusive world premiere of an important new play, “The Milliner’s Coxcomb.”

No one has seen this play before. You are privileged to be standing on this spot where the play will be performed for the first time. Ever.

You can tell your grandchildren, I was there. These eyes saw it. I alone survived. Think of that. You. The first.

Of course, there were dress rehearsals and the usual warm-up in New Haven. And because of those pre-sneak previews, I am able to share you these rave notices from the critics:

Alistair Cooke -- “I have never seen a play quite like it. Not anything else, for that matter.”

Fergie the former The Duchess of York -- “I can’t recommend this play too highly.”

Rex Reed -- “If this is the sort of thing you think you might like, then it is conceivable you just might like this sort of thing.”

Roger Ebert -- “I liked it.”

Clive Barnes -- “I’m ready to die now. Eager, in fact.”

Norman Mailer -- “Damn you, Finley, and damn you, Finley Family Flayers. I say damn you.”

Elizabeth Taylor -- “They say all work and no play makes Jack a dull boy, but I’d make an exception for this play.”

Ladies and gentlemen, the critics have spoken. But your verdict is the one that truly matters. And so with no further ado, I give you ... the play ...

THE MILLINER'S COXCOMB

A Postexistential Play in One Half-Act

CHARACTERS

Vladimir ... Daniele

Estragon ... Jon

The Blue Fairy ... Rachel

Narrator ... Two bums, Vladimir and Estragon, out along the highway at dawn, shivering in the cold ...

Vladimir ... Whole world's got its undies in a bundle

Estragon ... You've got your troubles, I've got mine ...

Vladimir ... A pox be on all your chickens

Estragon ... Every last measly one.

Vladimir ... When the going gets rough ...

Estragon ... The rough beast gets going ...

Vladimir ... Going ... [pretends to hit a home run, and watches it sail out of sight]

Estragon ... Gone!

Vladimir ... Economy's flatter than a crêpe

Estragon ... I see a bad moon rising

Vladimir... The best lack all convictions

Estragon ... The worst are full of passionate intensity

Vladimir ... Nothing good on the TV

Estragon ... And ours is broke anyway ...

BOTH ... :::SIGH:::

Vladimir ... I'm thinking ... you know what I'm thinking?

Estragon ... How would I know that? I don't even know what *I'm* thinking.

Vladimir ... I know *exactly* what you mean. You and me ...

Estragon ... Me and you!

Vladimir ... Two peas in a pah-

BOTH ... 'd! [Vladimir fiddles with tie, Estragon scratches top of noggin]

Vladimir ... But this is what I'm thinking. Maybe we should just off ourselves.

Estragon ... What-choo talking 'bout, Willis?

Vladimir ... You know ... [draws line across throat]

Estragon ... We smile with our necks?

Vladimir ... No, no, no [pulls trigger next to ear]

Estragon ... We identify our ears?

Vladimir ... No – now pay attention [elaborately ties noose, puts it around neck, and hangs herself, eyes cross, tongue protrudes]

Estragon ... You read my mind! [produces knotted hangman's noose]

Vladimir ... Of course, we need to ask ourselves: Is this a wise course of action?

Estragon ... That never stopped us before.

Vladimir ... This is how I defend the idea. The universe is absurd, therefore nothing has meaning.

Estragon ... If nothing has meaning, why are we bothering with a rationale?

Vladimir ... I see your point ... not that it matters ...

Estragon ... I was saving this rope for a rainy day. Here's an alternative suggestion ... If we had a loaf of bread we could commit suicide!

Vladimir ... What did you have in mind?

Estragon ... We could lie down on the railroad tracks and let a train run us over.

Vladimir ... What do we need the bread for?

Estragon ... Are you kidding? By the time a train comes through these parts, we could starve.

Estragon & Vladimir ... :::SIGH:::

Vladimir ... OK, I've had enough of this. Give me the rope ... We'll take turns. First, I'll do you ...

Estragon ... Uh huh ...

Vladimir ... Then you'll do me ...

Estragon ... [stares at Vladimir hopelessly, open-mouthed]

Vladimir ... What's the matter now?

Estragon ... It's just that, times like this, I see why you're in charge.

Vladimir ... OK [slips noose around Estragon's neck and tries to lift him]

Estragon ... [gasping] Stop, I can't breathe!

Vladimir ... Would you just for once let me do my job? Honestly, it's been like this from day one, complaints, complaints, complaints!

Estragon ... [grabs rope] It's not working!

Vladimir ... [exasperated] You know, if you could set your ego aside for just a moment and work with me on this ...

Estragon ... [wide-eyed] Why do you always get to be in charge anyway? You're not the boss of me!

Vladimir ... [blinks at audience Oliver Hardy-like] You see what I have to put up with?

Estragon ... [fighting back the tears] And mom always liked you best!

Vladimir ... We had a solution. All systems were go. Then you scrubbed the mission. I can't work like this!

Estragon ... Let me do you first ... it's never too late to develop leadership capabilities!

Vladimir ... I don't trust you!

Estragon ... I hate you! [they struggle to control the rope, back and forth, back and forth ...

Narrator ... Suddenly a blue light shone above them, and the two tramps looked above them, awe-struck ...

Fairy ... Attention Kmart shoppers ... [Vladimir and Estragon look at each other] Attention Kmart shoppers ...

Estragon ... Excuse us, this is an exclusive club idiots only ...

Fairy ... Well, This doesn't look *a bit* like Kansas ...

Vladimir ... Never mind, she'll fit right in ...

Fairy ... I've come in search of a very special boy ... with remarkable powers ... his father was a woodworker ...

Estragon ... [hopefully] Jesus?

Fairy ... [frowning] Pinocchio?

Vladimir ... God, this is sad ...

Estragon ... Ma'am, I don't know what the hell your story is, but we were about to off ourselves, and it's not as easy as we make it sound, and you're proving to be a major impediment ...

Fairy ... I don't mean to be an impediment ... I've come to make your special wish come true ...

Vladimir and Estragon look at each other and shrug

Estragon ... What kind of wish?

Fairy ... silly, a wish is a dream your heart makes ... no, wait I've got that wrong ... a wish is a cure for heartaches ... no, no that's not it either ... a fish is a lure for pancakes?

Vladimir ... Ma'am how long have you been doing this? And please -- be specific.

Fairy ... [waving her wand and smiling faintly] ... since time was but a memory ...

Estragon ... I didn't think so ...

Vladimir ... so what's the deal with the wish? Do we each get one, or do we have to vote on it? We're not very good at voting.

Estragon ... [elbows Vladimir] ... we could wish for a tree branch? [mimes throwing noose over branch and hanging oneself]

Vladimir ... [winks broadly] Gotcha! Ma'am, we're great admirers of nature, therefore, we'd like a nice tree branch, right here.

Estragon ... Ash ... or hickory would do nicely ...

Fairy ... a tree branch ... I've never heard that request before. Would a whole tree do?

Estragon ... Knock yourself out.

Fairy ... Well, then I have a pleasant surprise for you. You see, my dear friends, you've had the power all along to wish for a tree. It was in you all along.

Estragon and Vladimir ... [excited at the prospect of offing themselves, groping their ribs and armpits] Really?! Where?

Estragon ... [pulls a rat from his pocket] Toto too?

Fairy ... Toto too!

Vladimir ... hot damn ... this wishing business is bitching wicked!

Fairy ... Yes, my friends, bitching wicked indeed! But while I have you both together here, a word of advice ...

Estragon ... Now, it's going to be a stout tree, right? A Bush won't do us a damn bit of good.

Vladimir ... And the branch needs to be [measuring Estragon from head to toe] ... at least five foot eleven.

Estragon ... Lower won't work ...

Vladimir ... And higher, and we'll need a ladder, and that's two wishes ...

Estragon ... maybe we could get a consolidation wish, to lump all our other wishes into a single small monthly payment ...

Fairy ... My dear friends ... I come to you today with a message of hope ...

Estragon ... Bob Hope?

Vladimir ... [rubs hand together] the Hope Diamond? Faith, Hope and Charity?

Estragon ... The Olson Triplets! This *is* the best Christmas ever!

Fairy ... [laughs insipidly] No, my funny friends ... hope that the world isn't such a bad place ... hope that things can only get better ... hope that the children of the world will link hands around the world and sing a joyous anthem of cheer ...

Estragon ... You're not from around here ...

Fairy ... Hope that peace and love will conquer fractious despair ... that people will learn to respect one another again, and value the differences between them instead of going to war ...

Vladimir ... That reminds me, I have to call my insurance agent ...

Fairy ... Oh, my little friends ... what good will swinging from a tree do you? Look around you and see how beautiful the world can be ...

Vladimir ... There's bluebirds!

Estragon ... And daffodils!

Vladimir and Estragon notice the audience for the first time ...

Vladimir ... And there's a whole bunch of people right over there ... staring at us ...

Estragon ... Fat lot of privacy we get!

Fairy ... But look at the faces ... see how lovely and loving they all are ... don't you see how good our intentions all are? ... how we are all eager to get to know one another and befriends!

Estragon ... They could write us a letter ...

Vladimir ... Or just see our faces at the post office ...

Estragon ... No need to spy on us like this. What if I was in the bathtub? Criminy!

Judy Garland ... Dear foolish friends, I offer you this tender advice ... Let a smile be your umbrella ...

Estragon ... And you'll get a mouthful of rain

Vladimir ... Been there ...

Estragon ... done that! (they high five)

Fairy ... Being negative is a wish too ... it is a wish for laziness ... a wish for an easy response to every difficulty ...

Estragon ... I wish she'd get to the point ...

Fairy ... Now I want you two to – what’s your expression? – oh, yes [she beams warmly] shut the hell up ... while I sing a song about what is really in our hearts ...

Rachel sings *Somewhere Over the Rainbow* ...

The Three Mosquitoes

When Daniele was in the third grade, we sat down to write a classic picture book story. I told her the trick to writing was to take a story you already knew, and then just change things around. So my role in this was to prompt her. She kicked out all the details herself – like switching mosquitoes for bears/musketeers. It was a good collaboration.

Once upon a time, there was a family of mosquitoes that lived in an upside down tuna fish can next to a red brick under the back porch of a big house.

There was a mama mosquito named Marsha, a daddy mosquito named Hector, and a teeny tiny baby mosquito that everybody just called Buddy. Buddy was one of a litter of 300 other baby mosquitoes who hatched together and swam as tiny transparent larvae in a pool of stagnant water in an old cracked birdbath.

But never mind all that. Today was a beautiful sunny day, and the three mosquitoes planned a picnic.

Mama Mosquito packed a thermos of ice-cold dog blood, a clotcake with blood icing, some jello salad with red and white blood cells, and a big bowl of scabs to munch on.

Papa spread the checkered tablecloth on a dandelion leaf and they all sat down to eat. "Man, am I starved!" he said.

Just then, the sky darkened, and the mosquitoes heard what they thought at first was thunder. Worse yet, a huge round disk came zooming out of the sky and crashed into the grass only inches away from them, sending them and their picnic sprawling.

"Martians, run for your lives," cried Papa Mosquito, hiding under a blade of grass.

"No, Hector, it's those awful creatures we saw last week, by the rhododendron," Mama Mosquito said. So huge, she thought to herself -- and so hideous.

Sure enough, three lumbering figures blotted out the sun. "Follow me, Mama and Buddy," said Papa, as he took to the air. "We've got to make way for these things."

But before they could fly to the safety of the drainspout, they were all hit by a giant wet ball of something yucky and minty-smelling. The three mosquitoes tumbled to earth, trapped in the sticky ball.

"Oh, Hector, what is this horrible stuff?"

"By gum I'd sure like to know," said Papa Mosquito.

Buddy shot up into the air, turned himself around, and began to dive, down, down, down toward the unwelcome invaders.

"No, buddy," Papa said, grabbing Buddy in midair by the proboscis, making Buddy do several somersaults before coming to a stop.

"Why not, Papa?"

"Because we're better than that, son," Papa said. "It's all fine and good for these poor brute creatures to stumble onto our picnic. They don't know any better. They're animals. But we are mosquitoes, and those of us in the order diptera must live up to a higher standard. Understand?"

"Oh, I guess so," said Buddy, snapping his claw. "But they were really asking for it."

Mama mosquito beamed. "I'm so proud of both of you." And they all three huddled in a great big mosquito hug.

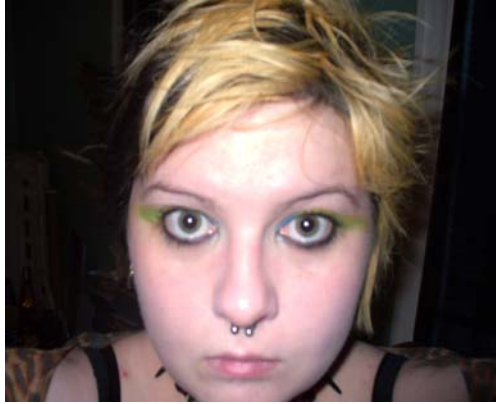
Buddy said, "Say, I know where there's several drops of rancid milk under the swingset. And half a chocolate chip!"

"Now you're talking," Papa said, winking a compound eye and putting one wing around his son.

"I'll whip up a batch of blood pudding," said Mama. "It won't take but a jiffy!"

And as they flitted home, still trailing threads of sticky gum, Buddy called out, "Are we mosquitoes or what?"

And they had never been happier.



Siobhan takes You Down

from *Fixing the Christians*

Siobhan was a very poised and intelligent little girl. But as she grew older, she revealed a vein of profound emotional instability. She was jealous of other girls' relationships. She thought they were out to get her. Sometimes she would curl into a ball and hide from classmates. She had deep, painful phobias – animals, doctors, performing, wearing a swim suit, sitting in plain view of others.

Gradually she drifted from the company of “normal” boys and girls, and began hanging out with the punks at her school, and even some who did not go to school. With them she seemed to know who she was. Their culture of piercing and negativity seemed to fulfill her. Everyone else was jarring and painful to her.

This may sound par for the course for contemporary teens, but Siobhan was extreme. At 16 she had a pornographic video of rock exhibitionist Gigi Allen pushing a hot dog up the buttole of a fan onstage. She showed it to me thinking I would appreciate the outré humor. I was aghast. Her whole world was like that. Indecent was cool. Down was up.

One day when she was 16 I was driving her to school, dying to know what was going on, and I pulled over and asked her a question point-blank: “Honey, what’s like to be where you are?”

She turned to me with a look of unalterable sorrow. “Always drowning,” was all she said.

She spent all her time either out with friends, who became scuzzier every year, or in her room, watching TV or sleeping. One of her friends had his whole face tattooed with flowers while drunk. It was suicide by tattoo. Who would ever hire a young man who had done that to his own face? I grieved at him, and I grieved at Siobhan for finding that compelling.

Lily and I could see she had some kind of mental illness with roots in uncontrollable anxiety, and it was carrying her away from us. We sent her to a series of psychologists, but without getting anything that felt like a solution to the growing problem. She was depressed, but it was more than depression. It had elements of obsessive compulsive disorder, phobias, high anxiety, narcissism, borderline personality, even bipolarity. She drank and smoked. She was a sick girl.

Then she refused therapy. She hated know-it-all experts having opinions about what was wrong with her. “There’s nothing wrong with me,” she said. “But there’s plenty wrong with the world.”

When depression struck Siobhan, we didn’t know what to do. We let it go on for a long time untreated, and when she finally found a psychologist she would tolerate, it wasn’t the best choice. This psychologist assured us that Siobhan was just a creative kid adapting in a creative way to the circumstances of her life.

“Give her space,” the psychologist advised us. “Siobhan’s going to surprise you with her strength.”

We took this advice to the point of doing the stupidest thing any parents ever did. One night she came home – cause for joy in itself – with a request.

“My friend Lou got kicked out of his house and needs a place to stay the night. Can he stay with us?”

Siobhan was very personable and reassuring about this request. I nodded, happy to see her looking out for a friend, and assuming the friend would be staying in the empty fourth bedroom. It wasn't until morning that I realized this fellow – 19 years old – had spent the night in my daughter's bed.

“But we're not sexual!” my daughter insisted after Lou had left the house. I looked at Lily. This didn't seem very likely.

“It's just for a few days,” she promised. Rather than force her into homelessness as well, we relented, and let Lou stay. He stayed this alcoholic, probably bipolar young man stay with us for an entire year, half the time convinced we had done something brilliant – provided a safe laboratory for our sensitive daughter to learn about men.

Of course it was idiotic, but once we committed to it we had to let it play out. It ended in tatters, with Lou on an alcoholic bender and Siobhan more depressed than I thought a human being could be.

I sometimes tell people the happiest moment in my life was one weekday night in January of 1985. A deep snow had fallen, and our little family of three loved one another in our Milwaukee apartment. Siobhan was 5 months old, and while I adored her because it was my job to, it was across a vast separation of years and outlook. We did not really share anything, mind to mind, and we could not really tell one another anything.

Still, we played. One game was sliding a rolled up athletic sock back and forth in the Milwaukee apartment hallway. Siobhan got it immediately, and slid it back to me, which I loved. Then, I did something odd - I pretended I was Rollie Fingers, the mustachioed relief pitcher, and wound up in an exaggerated "roundhouse curve" motion - and flung the ball right at her.

The moment I let go, I thought, my God, man, you just whipped a solid object in the direction of your baby daughter! But the ball hit her in the chest and fell harmlessly to the floor. But the great part was, Siobhan started laughing.

Oh, you should have heard that laugh - it was sensible and silly and totally powerful. She got it! She got that it was hilarious for me to pretend to be this comical pitching person. She got that the ball was supposed to suggest great personal harm. She got that it was all a joke, and that it was very, very funny. And she loved me for making her laugh.

I stared at her and my heart almost burst with the realization that anything I would ever throw at her, Siobhan was smart enough, and wise enough, to handle.

I think in that stupid, silly moment, I realized with a loud crash how connected we would be all our lives together. Our souls were stitched together like the heel of that old sock.

It was all beautiful, and I laughed, too, and reached for the sock to throw it again.

I often tell people that my daughter is the most interesting person I know. She is brilliant, funny, mercurial, wise in some ways and self-destructive in others. But she has suffered all her life from an assortment of medical and psychological diagnoses – a Pandora's toybox of nasty predilections. And yet, for all these things, Siobhan can be a remarkably appealing person. I like to be with her very much. She is a more daring, more dramatic version of

me. And she is my only daughter. I call Gus my pride, and I am very proud of him. But Siobhan has been the joy of my life.

When she was 16 she moved out of our house and into an apartment in Minneapolis. She ran into an old boyfriend, Frank, and took up with him, getting into bars using fake ID. Frank was the alcoholic son of alcoholic and drug-addicted parents, and although he was a gentle soul by day, he experienced frequent alcoholic blackouts, often in public places, in which he would fight with Siobhan, verbally and sometimes physically. When the two of them broke up, Siobhan went into a deep depression, missing work, imagining ugly vendettas with her supervisors, and raiding her college funds for rent and drinks.

All this time I was attending Holy Redeemer, and trying to explain what was happening to her during our infrequent visits. She had no interest, living in her personal little hell, in what blissful moments I was finding with the Christians. But I was on the up escalator, and she was on the down. All we could do was acknowledge each other as we passed.

One day I looked at my messages and there was a slurred, silly call from her. “Hi, guys, I just wanna say ...”

She was so gone, I couldn’t make out what she was saying. But I was plenty alarmed, and Lily and I sped over to Minneapolis, and had her neighbor open the back door to her apartment. Siobhan was lying dazed in a dirty bed, Styrofoam carryout plates scattered across the spread, the smell of dog and cat shit everywhere in the airless apartment. An empty pill jar sat on the cluttered end-table.

“Honey, we’re going to take you down to the ER,” Lily informed her, helping her off the bed. Siobhan said nothing, but assented.

“Promise you won’t leave me there,” she mumbled.

“I promise,” I said.

At the hospital, something bad happened. Had we arrived with a simple drug overdose, they would have pumped her stomach and sent her home, and perhaps arranged for her to return on a mental health outpatient basis.

But in giving her history, Siobhan confessed to something we did not know about, a previous, equally serious suicide attempt. Suddenly, the system closed in on us.

“We have to hold your daughter for 72 hours,” the doctor said. Lily and I were aghast. Siobhan had a horror of being shut in, and she hated psychologists with all her heart. I had given her my word I would not have her committed. But the system was intractable. Mental health is the last gulag. We had no civil rights there. There was no due process, no point of appeal.

Lily and I begged, pleaded, cajoled to keep our daughter out of Ward 31 – to no avail. We went over the ER chief’s head to talk to a hospital administrator.

“Mr. and Mrs. Craig, we are obliged by law to hold Siobhan for 72 hours. If you resist I have instructions to have you arrested and prosecuted.”

I went in to tell Siobhan the news, and triggered a king-hell anxiety attack. She shrieked. She wailed. She cried to me to make it right.

“Dad, I can’t go in there. I can’t. I can’t.”

And then I did the unforgivable thing. I put my hands on her and I began to pray. I knew she thought it was ridiculous. But I was out of ideas. All I had left to turn to was God’s mercy. So I prayed out loud about six words:

“Jesus help us. We’re so frightened. Give us –“

Jesus should have told me to duck. Because Siobhan – the little girl I threw the rolled-up sock to, and made her laugh, all those years before -- hauled off and slapped me across the face as hard

as she possibly could.

Now, I have told a story that is a lie. It happened, but it is not the truth about my girl. It was a bad day. We all have bad days. This was her worst day. And it's not fair for me to put it out there like that day was her life.

I dreaded writing these words. Not just because they hurt me, but because I am afraid they will someday hurt her. She is fiercely private – it is why she hates the idea of therapy -- and does not wish me to ever say anything about her. I would rather do anything than hurt her. But this is my story, too – and I have felt that God has been prompting me to find the right way to tell it. Not for pity's sake, but for something beyond that, a handhold, a way to understand suffering better.

The true truth of Siobhan is that, despite her phobias and panic attacks, she is the most courageous person I know. All through her teen years, dying of depression and riddled with fears of betrayal and exposure, she got up out of bed each morning and made it to school, and faced the kids who held her heart in their hands.

She lived with the knowledge that she was not as “right” as some other kids were. Yes, she felt sorry for herself. But she kept going, day after painful day. She looked her parents in the eye every day, her parents that were dying for her to know what happiness was, and she joked and laughed with us, to keep us from feeling too disappointed. She saw all her friends zoom by her on the way to college and relationships and careers – and this must have been killing to her – but she kept going, until she could not take another step.

I don't criticize my daughter. I honor her. I will love her to the day I die, and if I am able I will keep loving her after.

Daniele Replied

A MySpace post during the 'Siobhan' period.

Some words about my dad-- a man I love very much

Current mood: 😞 discontent

My father recently got a job. Now, this may sound trivial to some of you, but it's a source of much problems in my house. Because it's my father's first "job" in 25 years.

Now, I should clarify. My dad is a workaholic, and has worked 14 hours a day this entire time. But at home, with his own freelance work, and his own businesses and ventures. He's a writer, and he became a failed writer in the last 5 years or so. For a variety of reason which I will not disclose in a stupid Myspace blog, my father just can't make money any more in his chosen career. You know, the career that he's put 30 years plus into. His whole being exists as defining himself by these standards.

Well, now he can't do that anymore. He starts work in 6 days. Monday through Friday, 8am to 5pm.

I don't know whether I should be happy or not. I mean, my mom was pretty much gonna leave him if he couldn't find work. She was hard on him, and rightfully so. But it caused almost as much stress on their marriage as me and all my problems have. It took him 9 months of constant looking to get this job, so I wanna be happy, it's an accomplishment. But it means the end of his life as he knows it. And in some ways, I blame him for his failure. I don't know when exactly, I imagine around the time of the diagnosis, my dad started becoming a weak man. I'd always thought of him as the strongest guy in the world before that. I mean, he can't fix a car, or do "manly" things, but he's always right about everything, can think his way through any problem, is more of a genius than I've ever met, and always seemed to have things kinda figured out.

He met God. I personally view Christianity as a severe sign of weakness. Inability to believe things in any way other than to say "well God wanted it that way." Talk about an easy out. Being with my dad as he's transformed into an evangelical christian has proven this to me in a definite way. I lost a lot of respect for my dad when this started happening.

He seemed to lose faith in himself when he found faith in "god."

My mom and I, who have never had anything in common, felt very much together and alone in it when he started shoving god propaghanda on us. I never expected my dad of all men to preach to others about his cultish beliefs, not to be an evil bible banger strangling others with their views. But when I was at my downest, at my worst, in the psyche ward and in my "black moods" he would send me god-email, and tell me stupid things about spirituality and christianity and religion, and talk about how much better he feels now, and it felt like acid being spit in my face by the one guy I depended on most. I yanked my head away in hatred and disgust. All I remember about those moments when I look back on it was his saying the stupidest and worst things. It was like him condemning me when I was inna panicked state at the hospital, and he took my hand to fucking PRAY with me. I hated him so much, and I think in some way, I may always hate him for hurting me so much in that moment. It felt like a betrayal, because he knew I think that christians are overall, a bit simple to believe in all that wizardry, and when I was hurting more than at any other time in my life, all he could think of was his own life, and his imaginery friend.

He thought he was being helpful, and he thought I would get it, and that just proved to me how little he really knows me. I always thought he was the one person who could look beyond my sarcastic shield, and my spazzy mood swings, and see who I was, and how my mind worked. And it turned out he had no fucking idea.

And now he's written a book about it. About our whole family,

and all of our secrets, and all the horrible things that we've been through. At least the things he knows about. And above all, it's about his finding god. It's called "Fixing The Christians." He talks about me a lot in it, although he's changed my name to "Siobhan."

We share a computer terminal, and it's often laying up on the screen, or print outs of pages are on the desk. So I read it, and it hurts me every time, because he saw all of those raw moments of my life in such a twisted way. He didn't understand at all what was going on, this man in whom I had such confidence, in whom I believed utterly.

But I know he still loves me, in fact I have little doubt that he loves me more than anything else in the world. I just see it very differently every time he tells me. And he's going to try to publish his book soon, and I will probably never forgive him for baring my most personal and ugly moments to the world. I want to, and I won't ever say it to him because I don't want to hurt him. He just seems so fragile to me anymore, like if I say the wrong thing at any time to him he'll crumble and fall. And I know my past problems are part of why he is so easy to cry now. But what's done is done, and I can't go back and shield him from the hurt of it.

Him and my mom struggle by, though she makes him go to a therapist. They diagnosed him as probably being bi-polar. I think they'll make it, where as a year ago, I had other thoughts on the matter.

Where my dad loves me, he is proud of my brother. He's a good little christian off to college. He's not as weak as my father, because he's not as smart. I think he's a christian because he can't think of anything better. Then again, I never liked the kid, so that might just be me.

And my dad, Michael Craig Finley, Poet, Writer, Father, Husband, Christian-- well he starts work in less than a week. And I'm going to be as supportive as I possibly can. And I'm going to think of

this in a good light, instead of a negative one. And I will continue to love my father as much as he loves me, and I will never tell him that I will always hate him at the same time for what he has become. And maybe that will go away. Maybe we'll share our own language again like we always used to, maybe I won't always feel like I'm humoring him because he can't take the truth, or a straight answer. And maybe we'll all live happily ever after.
Daniele. Aretha. Loving Daughter.

P.S. This was tangential, I've just been feeling a lot of weird things about this situation lately, and I wanted to get it down in words, and to hear my friends' thoughts. So unless it's really harsh, please fire away guys. I can take it.

Leaders at Prayer

GOD
(Rachel)

Hello, there. You know me as God, Allah, Jehovah, the Unpronounceable One. What you may not know is that my real name is Shirley. There's a lot of things you may not know.

You're probably wondering why I called you all here today. I'm sure you're aware, I don't usually do this unless something pretty big is going on. Here it is. It has come to my attention that people have no idea how to pray.

How can that be, you say? It's so easy -- you pick up the phone, you say hello, you speak your mind, you hang up, right?

And I know all you usually get is a dial tone in reply. Sorry about that -- them's the rules! But I am to offer some more substantive advice.

To assist me in my demonstration, , I have selected three randomly selected worshipers to say their prayers. I'll use this magic remote thingie to interrupt them and tell you when they're *hot*, and when they're *not*. Got it?

First, aren't they lovely? A big hand for our volunteers pray-ers! Our first contestant is named Ariel, and he is calling from Jerusalem. Come in, Ariel.

ARIEL
(Daniele)

I, the High Commander, salute you like a soldier in this hour of dark crisis.

GOD

OK ... freeze!

This is good, Ariel's identifying himself. But you know, if time is short, this really isn't necessary. (Whispers) *I know who you are.*

Continue ...

ARIEL

We vow to fight through fire to defend your justice. And we embrace the saying, "An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth."

GOD

OK, well, this gets a little tricky, because I never actually *said* that about the eye and the teeth.

ARIEL

Thank you for your unflinching support of your chosen people ...

GOD

Yeah, about the chosen people thing. I actually tell *everyone* they're chosen. It's but at the time, I am choosing them at the time, you know, because, like, they're the ones I'm *talking to...*

ARIEL

Grant us the power to smite our enemies and all who stand against us. Give us the technology and the foreign aid to drive our enemies into the sea.

GOD Now, this is one of those misunderstandings I was talking about. I actually don't need anyone to *smite* anyone else. My original idea was that people would just be, like, *nice* to each other and get along. I want Ariel to know I'm here. I know, I'll give him a pig's tail. (Waves finger) Shalom! I mean, Shazam!

ARIEL (Feels behind himself, makes expression of profound chagrin) Wha--?

GOD But moving right along. Our next player, from Midland Texas, just goes by the name Dubya. Let's listen in ...

Dubya
(Mike) Lord, we give thanks to you for all the bounty we got around here. And we humbly thank you for your heavenly guidance in our war against evil.

GOD I'm with you, Dubya. Evil is a major pet peeve of mine.

Dubya I thank thee, Lord, that I live in a nation of liberty and justice, where -- uh -- never is heard a discouraging word.

GOD Gratitude never goes out of style, folks. Dubya, I'm liking the cut of your jib!

Dubya But I know evil can never prevail over goodness, because I know my heart is good. I know I am your true and loving subject. Also,

if I failed to mention this earlier, I am
Prezident of the U-nited States.

GOD OK, I see. The only criticism I would offer here is that it is considered, up here where I am, poor form to call yourself good. The darnedest thing, you can even *be* good, but as soon as you say you *know* you're good, it just all goes to hell in a handbasket.

Dubya Vouchsafe, if it's not too much trouble, to be our rod and our reel as we scare the nucular bejeesus out of every American citizen.

GOD Right. Good. But Dubya. Wouldn't it work better if you didn't have to *scare* people into doing the right thing. *I find*, that's no way to get people to pull together...

Dubya And I thank thee for being on our side in this struggle. You are our bridge over troubled water. You are our heavenly parakeet -- what's this word here? Can't read muh own writing!

GOD *Paraclete*. That's *paraclete*. I know sometimes it must seem like I'm on your side, but actually ...

Dubya And further vouchsafe that with your grace we will rain ninety billion dollars worth of hellfire, American, on all who oppose our freedom ...

GOD Well, yeah, sure, but, uh, it just seems to me ...

Darn.

Maybe our last contestant will be a better role model for you folks. What I'm getting at is that you need goodwill to pray, and a willingness to see what's in one another's hearts, and a kind of flexibility, to want to get along with others.

Here's our last contestant. Come in, Osama, from Las Vegas, Nevada...

Osama
(Jon) Father of all fathers, we rejoice in your favor, and we humbly offer the sacred blood of a thousand martyrs.

GOD Mmmm, blood. And martyrs -- you shouldn't have! But you know, there's been some misunderstanding about martyrs.

Osama For when even one martyr awakens in heaven, he is surrounded by seventy fertile virgins.

GOD Oh dear, the virgins, too. You know, Osama, I know what the martyr did to deserve the 70 virgins. But what did the 70 virgins do to deserve the martyr?

Osama We thank you for the gift of a million kindnesses, sparkling like diamonds in the night sky ...

GOD There's that gratitude thing. You know, I do like being thanked more than being praised. I'm no good at receiving compliments. I take after my mother that way.

Osama ... particularly your gifts of poison gas, and plastic explosives, smallpox and the plague.

GOD I didn't make those things! Well, smallpox and the plague, yeah, I made them ...

Osama And as we rise up in jihad to destroy the infidels in the name of thy holy pleasure!

GOD Oh, no, not that again.

Listen, people. I know I'm not perfect. Well, scratch that, I am perfect. What I'm not always is *comprehensible*. You know, you might as well argue with the whirlwind.

But hear me now. I know it's a rough place down there. But you must believe me: I don't take sides in football games, aluminum siding warrantees, or wars. Those are *your* inventions.

I created the universe one lazy afternoon because I wanted to split everything into little

bits, and see if you could piece yourselves together again. That was your assignment.

I gave you intelligence. I gave you souls. I gave you children, and daffodils. I gave you baseball -- indirectly.

And OK, the plague. You got me on the plague.

But you gotta stop hating. Because you've gotten so powerful, that you can be a little like me and destroy everything I created.

You gotta get a grip, because it's the wrong direction to be going in.

To recap: I created you for three reasons:

- To use your minds to learn about what is around you.
- To love one another because you are all a piece of me.
- And to laugh, and sing, and have a good time. Because life is -- life.

If you still go to war, I can't stop you. Well, I could but -- no, I can't.

But if you wanna get *really* groovy, join me now with this year's end song. Come on everyone, Osama and Dubby and Ariel have the words!

(Cue the tape: "What the World Needs Now Is Love Sweet Love")

A Kind of a Blessing

A journal entry from 2006



I have been agitated the past week because of my daughter's eviction. Today I was scheduled to go to war to appeal the landlord to let her stay in her apartment with her dog.

I was going to write The Letter of My Life, including recommendations from her psychologist and doctor. (I was toying with the idea of asking Ned for a pastoral note as well.) The gist of all this was that Daniele is at risk, and that she needs to stay where she is, and keep her dog, in order to stay alive.

I thought all this was very clear, because Daniele is obviously very upset at having to leave her nest. She is agoraphobic, and the idea of being kicked out of her home was unthinkable.

Message: If you evict her, she may die. I was ready to throw all sorts of emoluments his way: extra rent money, a steeper

damage deposit, monthly inspections, a donation to the charity of his choice -- whatever he required.

So I was donning my battle gear this morning, ready to hit him low and hard on Christmas Eve, the day it is not recommended to say, There is no room here for you.

I imagined I would work a Christmas miracle all by myself, writing a letter that would touch this landlord's heart, and everything would be better because I was so great.

This will give you some insight into my character. It was all-out war, and I was not taking prisoners.

All the time I was doing this, I was praying. And curiously, the prayers were not as anguished as my prayers usually are. It dawned on me last Saturday morning that humility - a requirement of both Christianity and my 12-step compulsivity program - makes anguish obsolete.

Because anguish - "De profundis clamavi ad te domine," was the prayer I learned as a boy (From the depths I cry out to you O my Lord) - is itself a statement of ego and therefore resistance to God. *My depths, my voice, my grief.*

Is it so unacceptable that my daughter commit suicide? I always have felt that was just The Worst Thing That Could Happen. It would end my life as a sensible person. I would become like my mom from that point on - a restless, self-loathing spirit. The death of a child is so, so bad.

I sincerely do not want harm to my daughter, and that continues to be in my prayers. Or psychological harm to sweep away my family - bad, bad, bad!

But how do I help her by being histrionic?

People always say, wow, what a great thing to be able to express yourself. But it's not a great thing, if your expression DEEPENS your sense of pain and woe, by searing it into your mind.

And God help me, I have never really learned how to use this gift in a reliably positive way. I think, because of my childhood experiences, I tend to zip to the negative side of things and adhere to it like a remora to the flank of a great white shark. I dwell there, imagining that it is safer there than in open water.

The Christmas play this year was about a decapitated head in hell - that is how I feel these days.

So this problem of my daughter's BPD - borderline personality disorder, an umbrella for all the other complaints I have told you all about - you can sum it up as "hysterical self-hatred," or "mental agony" - switches on all my own worst impulses, of forlornness, of negativity, of anguish - which is strangely ego-bound - *Lord, look at my suffering, and if you can't DO something - I know there are RULES where you are -- at least give me the satisfaction of being sorry you put me in this awful position.*

So I am Daniele's advocate, and I am about *this* different from her in terms of hysteria, self-hatred, and mental agony. Physician, heal thyself.

And this morning I call over to her. "Daniele, if you give me your landlord's fax number, I can write him and plead to get you un-evicted."

"Hi dad," she says to me. "But I've decided to move anyway."

I was dumbfounded. "But - you were so upset." She was. She quaked with grief just two days before. ("Everything that seems good always goes bad," she wept.)

“I got over it. I mean, I don’t want the hassle of moving. But I don’t like the neighborhood I’m in. And sometimes, it’s just time to move.”

Friends, those aren’t the customary words of an agoraphobic. You have to pry them out of their chairs and drag them kicking and screaming from their nests of safety. Home is survival to them - everything else is terrifying.

“Well, uh, OK, then,” I say. “We’ll just try to peaceful about this then.”

“Yeah. But thanks, Daddy, for being willing to go to war for me. I know how much you love me. And I’m so grateful to you.”

Tearful agreement. Mutual reassurances. Click.

You see, my prayers have been bending, the way a plant in the dark seeks light. From cries of mental agony to pleas for acceptance - thy will be done.

I still have super-strong feelings about what I want done. But even with all this armor clapped on, and with this righteous sword dipped in the inkwell - I have no power over others or even over myself, and no understanding of what’s best for anyone. I don’t know nuttin.’

So I think this is my Christmas blessing. I’m not an impaled hotdog turning on one of those convenience store rotisseries, hissing and dripping - this is a self-portrait created out of anguish, that we are God’s *hors d’oeuvres* and nothing more.

I feel, for the first time in weeks, that I can rest. And not worry so much.

Allahu akhbar - God is great.

Down to the River and Pray

A memoir I never published, about the six years I spent as a christian, praying for Daniele and Jon. This is about Daniele's first attempt, in 2004. In this version her name is changed to Siobhan – an Irish variant on John, meaning “The Lord is gracious.” The reason I never published this version is that Daniele survived the attempt, and we were walking on ice for those years, waiting for the other shoe to drop. I did not want my writing to be the other shoe.

Suicide still carrying stigma, I didn't feel I could ask the people at Holy Redeemer to pray for Siobhan. Some people there were very clear on who was going to hell and who was not. In any event, Siobhan would have a hard enough time in the months ahead without having the neighborhood Christians peering into her eyes to see the devils there.

But I was dying to tell somebody, anybody to offload the horror to. But that was wrong, too. How did I go up to the young parents in the church and say, still holding their babies in their arms, and say, See what will happen? And hold out my dead child to them – this is what God has given me.

I tried praying for Siobhan myself, and for my family, too. But I had nothing. It was like my salivary glands had been irradiated, like my lips were glued together. I couldn't form words, much less sentences. I couldn't think thoughts.

I didn't want Siobhan to die. But what could I do to prevent it? My words, my love, my splendid example, the books I had lining the walls of our house – none of these amounted to much. I felt I needed to come up with something, quick. How could I look Lily in the eye after a repeat?

I wanted things to be the way they used to be – sweet adoring daughter, glad doting dad, the sword of Damocles in some other room hanging over some other guy's head. Instead, half-thoughts

zipped through me, interrupted by the next ones before I could finish thinking them.

My mind was like:

God saves. But what's the good? Everyone's happy. My daughter's in hell. No one understands. Peace be unto you. Except not you. Halleluiah. Just like Job.

When I am anxious, things speed up like that inside me. It's less *thinking* than breaking a fresh rack in a game of billiards, and watching the balls scatter in every direction. When I get like this, I get envious of real Christians, the ones who have figured out how to suffer, that it doesn't matter if they live or die, it doesn't matter if lava falls down from the sky, because God's in his heaven and he long ago has saved us, and that's all that matters.

I wished I felt that way. But I didn't. What was *saved* anyway? Who did that keep alive? Just trouble, and lots of it.

I felt the horror of what Siobhan's life must be like every day, being afraid to leave her room, afraid that people will see her, having to sit facing the door in every room. I felt the sorrow of being me, and being responsible to Lily, keeping my promises to her, and now the two of us looking at each other, knowing just how messed up our child was.

I thought of the unease this must have created for Gus, who grew up so stolid and uncomplaining.

What would a Christian man do with all this? In our church, he would be the Joseph, the undisputed head of his family, the one who absorbs all violence to keep the family safe. He would have had them kneel with him before a plastic wood-grain cross hooked to the living room wall, and the family would pray for understanding and, if it be God's will, for a drop or two of merciful rain.

But I was in no position to do that. I was no Joseph, Or rather, I was like the actual Joseph, the poor slob with no credibility in his own home, the one who had to suck it up and do whatever angels

told his wife needed doing when he wasn't around, getting up in the middle of the night and saddling up for Egypt, or picking through the stalls in Jerusalem for his kid, who never failed to have this look on his face that said, "You're not my dad."

That's the Joseph I was, and my holy family was out to lunch.

Siobhan was beyond help, flying kamikaze missions in her own private stratosphere, where life was cheap and God was a joke no one let the rubes in on. Lily thought I was going crazy, and my God was a bad dream as likely to send you a holocaust as a rainbow.

And then here was Gus, hugging the stuffing out of me by the stove – so pure, so naïve, so black and white. As Lily was to me, so was I to Gus – dubious and concerned. And here he was in the kitchen lifting me up out of my body, shaming me with his love. I was supposed to be protecting him, and here he was, protecting me.

Everything was upside down.

I slept, but badly, and early the next morning, before seven, I drove down to the Minnesota River to walk the dog. Snow was falling, and the cattails and reeds poked out of the crunch with ghostly heads.

I had hoped that the cold air and the exercise would jar me out of my fear. But as I staggered across the snowy ground, I felt oppressed as never before. It was like having cancer – wherever you go, there it still is.

I tried to distract myself with the need to make some money. That was something I still had leverage over. My income was way down that year, what with one thing and another, and I did need to get something going financially.

Got to do this. Call A about B. Maybe rewrite something. Get on the phone. Go down the list of dormant clients. Good thought,

write that down. No, wait. What if I can't do it? What if it won't work?

Suddenly I had had enough and I stopped in my boots and started sobbing, leaning back against a young cottonwood. The cancer was back. Everything was shit, I saw. I was going to this stupid church, and my wife thought I was nuts and a fool, and the people at the church thought I was nuttier than sin, and if my agent and publishers could agree on one thing, it would be that I was just completely nuts.

I felt so, so, so, *so* sorry for myself.

And I did something then that I had not quite done up to that point. Something I had not even done at the retreat, where my hearing suddenly returned. Without intending to, I prayed. Not to the "great God of the universe," which was how I usually prayed, figuring what was good enough for the Jews and Muslims was good enough for me. No, I prayed to the suffering Christ. I prayed to the beaten man.

"Oh, Jesus, if you are here, have pity on me."

And I stood there shaking from my sobbing, as I let out an entire year of anguish and frustration. It came flooding out in half-thoughts. The money. The fear. The humiliation. The worry. The shame. It shot out of me like coiled snakes from an opened can.

At this moment in my life, I was setting aside all the cultural baggage, just for a second, because I was in pain, and Jesus seemed, of all the pantheon of heaven, to be the one who had an inkling about pain.

And you know, this was the closest thing I ever had to a "conversion moment." I hesitate to call it that, because I always believed in God. I just never thought he was good for very much. The world sucked, and I didn't see him doing much about that. Maybe he couldn't. Maybe he was yellow.

My ear was an exception. But I didn't know what to make of that. Write this down: God can work a dozen conspicuous miracles in

your life. He can make you Speaker of the House of Representatives, with a shiny blue PT Cruiser. You will marry Uma Thurman and bowl consecutive perfect games. And you will still wonder what it all really means. It's the way we're built. Idiots.

I didn't want a corny religion. I didn't want a blinking day-glo Jesus. I didn't want any of the crap and mediocrity and anthropomorphism and bad politics and bad poetry of The Good.

In that moment I really wanted the goodies that The Good had. I craved protection. I lusted for peace. I was a whore for the pity of God. I wanted it, and I couldn't hide that fact from myself any more.

But if not a full-blown conversion, *something* fundamental happened. Because I had a frightening feeling that I had unbolted a door, and it was only a matter of moments before Someone on the other side strode in, kicked off his galoshes, and made himself at home. It was monstrous like Death, the dark figure in the cloak and scythe, because it knew about death; indeed it had been dead one weekend, a long time back.

I conceived of Jesus as being made of wood, as being gnarled like every kind of wood, like myrtle and olive and oak, and every whorl straining as he moved, and his dried-up leaves rattling in the light and the snow.

I did not actually see this. I was not hallucinating. But it was a moment of imagining and imprinting. I imagined God in that moment, and it was a God of infinite sorrow, a God whose flesh became cross, and for what, for a "relationship" that most people live their entire lives oblivious to. This green, groaning carapace, this swamp thing staggering stiff-limbed through the rushes, offering love to the point of death with wooden arms.

I looked around and everywhere I saw bare trees lining the river's soft banks – cottonwoods, locusts, shaggy willows, scarlet maples. And I was able to behold in a flash the beautiful symmetry of each of them, its roots forming a phantom self below

the ground, its limbs raised in naked hosannas to the gray clouds above.

In the shaman books, the brujo forms alliances with certain species of animals and plants. This was my shamanic moment, and I was merging with the cold bare trees of Christ, and they would be my ally forever after, my angels, my Greek chorus, my collected consciousness.

And you know what raised the hair on the back of my neck – the knowledge that they had always been there. I had always sought to be among trees, even as a little boy. I shivered when their branches brushed up against my bedroom window as a child. I climbed, but mainly I just liked to walk among them, to feel their brawny sheltering strength.

It was like the wonderful pantheist Saint Patrick said in his famous breastplate poem. Christ in every chloroplast. The cross in every tree.

And there was nothing the trees did not know and understand. There was nothing they did not see.

It was such an outrageous and shocking thought.

And so, among the rattling rushes and trees, I knelt down and vomited.

Ted Williams in Hell

This was the last play we put on, without Daniele participating. Accordingly it was the most bent.

Cast: Dottie=Rachel
 Slugger=Jon
 Scribe=Mike

Scene: a tavern in the lower reaches. The head of Ted Williams sits on top of a box. He is sipping tequila sunrises through a straw. He is drunk.

SLUGGER: (in his cups) So I told him, Casey, it must have been a flamingo, because I've never been to Kamchatka ...

SCRIBE: (Trying to get a word in edgewise) Slugger ... Slugger ... Here's the thing, Slugger. And people want to know the whole story. You had it all, baby. The power. The eye. The smooth swing. You were like unto a god.

SLUGGER: (looks at Scribe through cocktail glass) You don't know the half of it, mister. I was the Monster of the Fenway. The Splendid Splinter. I was The Real Thing.

SCRIBE: A cut above your peers.

SLUGGER: (poking at the air) I *believed* in the game. Hic! Hey, where did that finger come from?

SCRIBE: What a feeling it must be, champ. To feel eternity in the palm of your hand, to hold infinity in one eye.

SLUGGER: It was basically all a matrix, ya know. I broke the batting zone down into 1,212 ½-inch squares.

SCRIBE: And you assigned a number value to each pitch – X, Y.

SLUGGER: Teeny, tiny squares ...

SCRIBE: And the umpires, they respected you. They knew the number was valid.

SLUGGER: ACROSS 172, DOWN 211.

SCRIBE: Perfection. The umpires saw it with their own eyes.

SLUGGER: Umpires – they think they’re so *big*!

DOTTIE: (rapidly chewing gum) Hey fellas, can I freshen those up youse guys? Say, looks like someone’s thirsty tonight!

SCRIBE: You keep ‘em coming, Dottie. We gotta keep the champ lubricated.

DOTTIE: And why is thaaaat, if I may be so bold as to assk?

SCRIBE: (Aside) I’m draining his memory core.

DOTTIE: (shrugging) Whatever floats ya boat, hon.

SLUGGER: But you know what gets me? Babe Freaken Ruth!

SCRIBE: The Bambino. The Franchise. The Sultan of Swat.

SLUGGER: The man was a giant tub of goo.

SCRIBE: Goo you say?

SLUGGER: I got out there, day after day, and I do my work, and I bust a sweat.

SCRIBE: That’s entirely true.

SLUGGER: And that old hippopotamus struck out more times than I cut wind.

SCRIBE: Statistically correct.

SLUGGER: Triple Crown winner, times two. Me!

SCRIBE: I salute you.

SLUGGER: Last hitter to hit .400...

SCRIBE: A legend in your own mind...

SLUGGER: My last at-bat, I hit a home run. Ka-pow, baby. Yeah, you heard me.

SCRIBE: The Babe never did that.

SLUGGER: I even pitched a couple of innings.

SCRIBE: It was wartime. Everyone pitched in.

SLUGGER: And now I'm just an upside-down head in liquid nitrogen in a freezer in Arizona.

SCRIBE: Tough break, Slugger.

SLUGGER: Life is sure funny.

SCRIBE: And that's another thing that never happened to the Babe.

SLUGGER: It's not like I didn't put on a few pounds myself, later on.

SCRIBE: You were a manager. Ya gotta pound down the brewskis. The men respect it.

SLUGGER: And I endorsed products for Sears. Fishing rods. Hip waders.

SCRIBE: Babe endorsed cigars. The Cuban kind.

SLUGGER: You see, I can't win. I give it everything I've got ...

SCRIBE: Never a more generous hitter...

SLUGGER: I took time off from my career to fight in two wars ...

SCRIBE: A patriot from the get-go ...

SLUGGER: I raised millions for the Jimmy Fund, to help sick little kids. Little kids, for Pete's sake ...

SCRIBE: A humanitarian is what you are.

SLUGGER: But still it's the curse of the Babe this, and the curse of the Babe that.

SCRIBE: That's not right.

SLUGGER: So here I am in this bar, and it seems like I've been here for ages already ...

SCRIBE: But nobody talks about the curse of Ted Williams. Am I right?

SLUGGER: Nobody.

SCRIBE: I knew it – I am right!

SLUGGER: And I'll tell you what – I blame the press.

SCRIBE: The press! But Ted, that's too easy. Aren't we all in this together?

SLUGGER: Ah, you guys make my jock itch.

SCRIBE: Not any more we don't.

SLUGGER: Well, you sure used to.

SCRIBE: Miss, can we get some additional libations?

DOTTIE: Put'em on your taaab, sir?

SCRIBE: My tab?

SLUGGER: Hey, Ted Williams gets drinks bought for him. He doesn't buy other people drinks.

SCRIBE: But, but, but ...

SLUGGER: That's the law of nature. You can look it up.

SCRIBE: But I'm a writer ...

SLUGGER: Say, what the hell kind of place is this anyway? I drink and I drink and I don't seem to get drunk. Not royally, anyhow. Not the way I like to be.

SCRIBE: You're in heaven, Ted. Honest.

SLUGGER: You're sure about that?

SCRIBE: (crosses heart, makes sincere face) Ted, didn't I say "honest"? But I guess that doesn't mean anything to a man like yourself.

SLUGGER: That's not true.

SCRIBE: Well, it is this one time.

SLUGGER: (cocks an eyebrow, Rock-style)

SCRIBE: Honest!

SLUGGER: (pauses, as if about to make a great statement) Sometimes .. I feel so ... oh ... I don't know

SCRIBE: Slugger, let me try and help you. Let's get back to basics. You're a disembodied head in a freezer in Arizona. Stop me if any of this sounds off-base to you.

SLUGGER: No, you're doing fine.

SCRIBE: And your own son did this to you.

SLUGGER: Check!

SCRIBE: And your son's idea is that someday there may be a cure for whatever you had ...

SLUGGER: congestive heart failure ... he's a good, loving son ...

SCRIBE: And then they bring you back to life?

SLUGGER: Yes. Teddy Ballgame. Comeback Kid.

SCRIBE: Super. But here's what I don't get.

SLUGGER: Yah?

SCRIBE: What good will it be to come back? You won't have your old body, the one that won the Triple Crown. That one's no good any more. And if they sew you onto another body, how is that going to work exactly?

SLUGGER: Oh, I can explain that ... (thinks, crosses eyes) ... I – gosh – you know, it doesn't make much sense when you put it that way.

SCRIBE: And if they're just saving your head for the DNA, to put into somebody else, how does that do you any good?

SLUGGER: (frowns thoughtfully)

SCRIBE: Gee, where has the time gone. You know, it's sure great chatting, with you, Slugger. There's no one – and I mean

this straight from the heart – there’s no one I would rather talk to about baseball than – say, isn’t that Barry Bonds over at the oyster bar?

SLUGGER: He’s so – huge ...

SCRIBE: Barry! Champ! Can I talk to you for a sec? (leaves)

SLUGGER: He blots out the sun ... no light escapes ... Barry Bonds could eat the Babe. (pauses, feels sorry for himself all over again) Geez Louise, I’m not so sure about this whole deal now ...

DOTTIE: Hey, Mistah, freshen up ya drink?

SLUGGER: Hit me, darlin’ – say, maybe you can help me. You seem to know the score hereabouts. Is this place really heaven?

DOTTIE: (Blinks) Listen, mistah, I just work here.

SLUGGER: I mean, is this it? Is this as good as it gets?

DOTTIE: You look a little down on your luck. Am I right? I can be awfully intuitive.

SLUGGER: Sweetheart, the Sox would have to win a World Series to put a smile on this old face. And we know how likely that is.

DOTTIE: (looks conspiratorially to right and left) Can I let ya in on a secret, mistah?

SLUGGER: Hit me.

DOTTIE: This place (whispers loudly) is the pits. I’ve worked a lot of dives, but this dump takes the cake. It’s some sort of holding tank for – I don’t know -- special cases. See that guy over there? A temple fell on his head.

SLUGGER: Son of a dog, he looks like the Babe, too.

DOTTIE: I tell ya, everyone's got a story down here. And that's nice, because we can all use a good explanation!

SLUGGER: You got that right, honey.

DOTTIE: Strictly speaking, I'm actually not even a cocktail waitress. I'm a singah!

SLUGGER: I'm sure you are darling.

DOTTIE: (insulted) Hey, I don't like your tone. I yam too a singah.

SLUGGER: (amused) You know any baseball songs?

DOTTIE: I know the one about the crackerjack.

SLUGGER: (Smiles broadly) Yes, yes, I love that one. Sing that one!

DOTTIE: Mistah, I'm a workin' gal. I can't just start singing at the drop of a haaat. The boss don't like thaat.

SLUGGER: I'll put in a good word for you, hon. Or maybe all these other people at the bar would like a song. What do you say folks?

AUDIENCE: (hoots and catcalls)

DOTTIE: Well, I have been workin' one song up ... it's for the holidays ...

SLUGGER: Sweetheart, I'm in here for the duration ... I'll hear anything but the Trolley Song. Please – no Trolley Song.

DOTTIE: Well, OK, here goes ...

(sings)

PUT YOUR HEAD ON MY SHOULDER

Put your head on my shoulder,
Hold me in your arms, ba--by
Squeeze me oh so tight , ba--by
Show me that you love me too.
Put your lips close to mine, dear,
Won't you kiss me once, ba--by?
Just a kiss goodnight, ba--by
Maybe you and I will fall in love.

SCRIBE: Friends, let's put our hands together for May Jane Buzzanovitch, of Great Neck, New York. A tiny little girl with a great big voice. She's going to really go places, if she can ever get out of here. On your way out, please drop a nickel in the jar. We're trying to raise money for dandruff research. Won't you help? It costs so little, and it means so much. Check your luggage, many bags look alike, but the stuff inside 'em is different. And always -- if you think of it -- keep a trash bag in your automobile. It's the responsible thing to do, and if it fills up, simply toss it out the window. That's our show tonight, folks. We were brought to you by the good folks at Gerber, the people with the baby on the jar. Wear white at night, and don't let the bedbugs bite.

This is the old scribe signing off. Goodnight everybody!

SIGN: "GRATEFUL APPLAUSE"

December 1991

DEATH, HELL AND SANTA CLAUS

My kids are reaching a certain age, and they are finding stuff out. About six months ago my seven-year-old -- she will want me to point out that she was 6 at the time -- asked me if there really was or was not a Santa Claus.

She had asked the question before, but then it was with a look on her face that seemed to say, "You won't believe what some of the kids at school whose folks are divorced said." This time, the look said, "I already know."

So I told her. "Santa Claus is a disguise for all the moms and dads and grandparents of the world, who want to show kids how much they love them, but don't want credit for doing it."

Not bad for no warning, right? Anyway, she bought it, especially when I took her aside and told her that now she was on our side, and it wouldn't do to spoil the fun for her little brother, 3.

My daughter is a gentle soul, and she absorbs these changes gracefully. But I can't get over the feeling that I am only giving her one thread of the tapestry at a time. I am aching to spill the whole kettle of beans in one summary blurt-out to her. "No Santa Claus, and we die, and there may or may not be a God, and if there is, maybe there is a hell you go to when you die, and injustice is not always punished in this life, absurd household accidents claim a million Americans every year, people's lives hit unspeakable dead-ends, they marry the wrong people, their kids move away, marry bums, and break their

hearts, the social system breaks their spirit, and the universe is a gigantic pulsing mystery, and your parents have sex."

That is too much to lay on a kid. In fact, I'll bet you're a little shaken yourself -- I know I am. But adult life is a robust catalog of this kind of gloom. Whenever we tell our kids to grow up, what we really mean is get wise and give up.

I don't remember when I first learned about death. Probably Red Ryder meant to shoot a gun out of someone's hand, but the bullet ricocheted (zing!) and pierced his heart instead. But real death, as opposed to TV death, revealed its nature only with the passage of years. One night when I was 7 my mom had to pack quickly for a trip to Michigan. Her mom had had a heart attack, and was dead. In her grief, my mom said Grandma was "with the angels now," ostensibly to comfort me -- but probably more to comfort herself. To me it raised the specter of my Grandma -- a lovely warm-hearted woman whom I had seen tear a still-warm chicken apart at the kitchen table -- cavorting with angels. Surely that was as absurd as no afterlife at all?

In those days people were less nervous about death -- it happened, and you cried. We hadn't yet learned to be properly anxious about it. I'm 41 now, and I and a lot of my generation are listening with much closer attention to talk about such things as living wills, actuarial probabilities, and claims about canola oil and rice bran. The signs of our ripeness -- bulging bellies and IRAs -- are signs that we are ready to be plucked from the vine. And our kids, these precious custom units sent to replace us, are just barely coming to grips with "reality."

Family life gave us the basics, but it took the nuns at school to platte out the full ideology of death. We die because of Adam and Eve's sin, they said. If they had not indulged themselves at our expense, we would live forever.

I spent at least a year cursing Adam and Eve's stupidity. Then it dawned on me that they hadn't been given a very complete instructions manual for the Garden. God told them they would surely die. But what did they know of death? And since when were all the rest of us included in their fate? I can see Adam and Eve having to die, but what did I ever do to deserve to die? I had always been aces to everyone I knew.

Well, maybe not aces. Maybe not even deuces. By the second grade I had accepted the concept that someday, probably when I was really old and really didn't care much one way or the other, I would die. This was hard in itself. What made it worse was the new knowledge that I would almost certainly go to hell.

Hell? Yes. In its ancient wisdom my religion had decided that the death of the body was insufficient deterrent in and of itself. The soul must also be perishable -- it could be caught in the throes of death agony throughout eternity. If you were not really, really good. A classic case of double jeopardy.

As for why I would go to hell, it was only logical. There was just too much dishwater over the dam -- mostly lies. Virtually everything I said was a lie. Couldn't help myself -- still can't. So, around age 8, I adopted a modified limited hangout strategy. Yes, I would die. But on the day of judgment, realizing God had to make a lot of snap decisions amid all the hubbub of Armageddon, I intended to make a dramatic plea for clemency -- on the grounds that I was weak, that I was sorry, that I had always had the feeling that, somehow, God had a special feeling about me, and now was the time to put that feeling to the test.

That might not work, of course, so I probably had to be working on Plan B all along. In Plan B you look to others to

save you, you work like crazy all your life to make a positive impression on people. Perhaps, if you did great and memorable things, when you died, a part of you would carry over -- your reputation. Maybe you would earn a line in the World Almanac, or have your picture appear in the daily paper, holding a big fish. Or maybe all you would be is a cherished thought in the minds of those who knew you, and they maybe would build a wax diorama of you doing something typical, like clipping your toenails, just off the living room of your great great grandchildren's house, and you would sit like that for eternity, a grin on your face and your foot in your hand. And the effigy would be smiling, because through it you had cheated the grave, sort of. That's if things went really, really well.

I haven't told my kids about hell. It's bad enough they know all about death already. All those people on getting gunned down on the news, blowing up, and going over cliffs in cars. They know all about death.

Maybe. One day my daughter threw herself on the sofa. "I wish I were dead!" she sobbed. But when I asked her why she wanted to be dead, she said she fell and scraped her knee on the bus, and whenever she flexed it it stung. If she were dead, she figured, she wouldn't feel the sting.

I was glad she didn't know about dying. I went through a morbid streak when I was an adolescent, in which I lay awake for hours at night, certain a tumor was working its way through my head, certain blackness, oblivion, and unfulfillment were my destiny. It was all about me, that death -- only I would make that dark crossing.

When my stepdad died last fall, after a long illness, I took the kids to the vigil. There lay my dear old dad, who had been a

lion in life, always roaring about one thing or another, then sick and feeble, and now, all done up by the embalmer, well, he looked great -- noble, calm, patriarchal. My stepdad was what you would call a great guy. Always doing for other people, and impossibly generous. Even when I was on the outs with my family he always slipped me a few 20s when he saw me. His employees loved him, everyone in town loved him -- even his wife and children loved him. Toward the end he let his white beard grow, a kind of Santa Claus himself. When he came down sick, with a real brain tumor, this rough, loud man surprised everyone with a sudden meekness and peacefulness of heart. It was a tough time, and he bore it well.

I held my young son against my chest as we viewed the casket. He did not disgrace me. He stared solemnly at his grandfather's face, said, "Poppa's sleeping," and absently raised the arm of his Donatello figurine.

I worried how the funeral might affect the kids, if they would have nightmares, or what. On the way back, outside Chicago, I noticed a tear in Daniele's eye. "Are you all right?" I asked.

"I'm fine," she said. "I'm just sad Poppa is dead."

Maybe that's how it is, then -- fantasy death giving way to the real thing, obsessions and compulsions giving way to grief, and life going on, like a young girl. We drove home singing the happy hiker song, and that night I dreamed of the body of Santa at night, reposed in soft snow, and high above the crisp, still sky, the stars of heaven sparkling.

COUVADE AND THE CLOUD OF UNKNOWNING

"The state of man: inconstancy, boredom, anxiety."
Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*



The concept of the pregnant man touches a deep and persistent chord in our civilization. The covers of grocery checkout tabloids boast about a man carrying a child, and usually the story, half a column in length, turns out to be that a disinterred body in Dutch Guyana shows a sizable tumor in his girth, an hormonally confused Senegalese is widely reported (but narrowly documented) to have borne twins, real milk has issued from the breasts of an 109-year-old Cossack, or a deluded fireman in Pensacola insists he is carrying Amelia Earhart's baby, and rocks, and rocks, and rocks.

Such stories make headlines because, whether true or not, they turn on an elemental obsession of our culture and of all cultures -- the idea that woman is woman and man, man, and any departure from this formula is a marvel, a freak. And we like thinking about freak occurrences because, while they suggest the possibility of monstrous error on the part of nature,

they are "out there" -- they do not really touch the lives of those of us outside the carney wagons.

It can be alarming for a male in our culture to suddenly find himself emulating the female of the species. The expectant father is prone toward all sorts of "mother imitations" ranging from morning sickness, vomiting, heartburn and constipation through such motherly other complaints as backache, abdominal swelling, appetite changes, insomnia, snappishness and a general dragged-out feeling.

Ritual couvade was unknown to the West until the nineteenth century, and the establishment of the modern science of anthropology. As preliminary observations and records were taken of peoples long remote from European and American academic eyes, long-cherished attitudes about what was civilized and what was savage began to falter. Anthropological pioneers were particularly taken by the habits in different cultures surrounding courtship, marriage and childbearing. The practice of ritual couvade, manifested so similarly in cultures continents and oceans apart, alerted researchers such as Margaret Mead in the South Seas and George Gorer in the Himalayas that something nearly universal had been uncovered. It was remarkable in its intensity, in its thoroughness, and in its ornamental embellishments. It was given the name couvade, for brooding time, for hatching.

When the full moon had shown its face thrice and the woman had not purged herself in that time, the New Guinea hunter withdrew from the rest of the tribe. He began to construct his own clothing for the waiting time, earrings of conch because his woman wore conch and a headdress of the feathers of the megapode, because it was said that that bird, which walked so close to the ground, was always nesting.

He did not sit by the fires and boast of his prowess, even though it was not his nature ordinarily to downplay his accomplishments. He did not want to bring down upon his family the anger of spirits. He visited with his wife's family and eschewed his own, even his own mother.

Through the fifth month he worked hard gathering food and hunting, and then he ceased going out into the forest to hunt, relying instead upon the gifts of his woman's people. He put his energies toward building a separate hut for himself, a stone's throw from the woman's.

He prepared his food and she prepared hers. At night they slept apart, and he neither drank after dark nor chewed the betel nor ate of the soma roots. In the final weeks he took to his bed alone, and prayed and chanted as the spirits roiled inside him, tormenting his parts. The forest night was filled with his cries of lamentation.

On the seventh day of his ordeal the woman came to his hut -- the first time she had visited him. She handed him her newborn child -- a son. He smiled, and pulled the infant to his breast, and gave suck to him, for it was his.

Rachel and I were more conventional than most people probably realized. And though neither of us knew much about kids, we figured it was an important part of life as human beings, and we were afraid if we don't go through with this, we'll wind up missing out on something somehow important.

Coupled with our vague hopes were specific fears, problems which I was sure would come to some sort of head in the months to come. I had a strong sense that I was still a child myself -- Rachel, too. In making a child, what would happen to our childhoods? What would we gain for all that we lost? What

assurance did I have that I had any business taking on the role of father? Where would the new energy come from? How would I avoid the pattern of errors I perceived in my own upbringing? Would my parenthood be a case of "like father, like son"? What if it didn't come? Why, at age 34, should I suddenly begin liking children? What kind of world was I bringing a child into anyway? Wouldn't I be better advised subtracting from the overpopulated earth than adding to it? Finally, how does a father save a child when dangers greater than wolves and bears lurk everywhere, from the gyre of holocaust to the chromosome's twist.

Looking back, I can remember feeling that I was sure being a good guy, doing all this for Rachel. She was the driving force behind the decision to have a child then. I tried to be agreeable, supportive. If I had doubts about having a child I kept them to myself. Mister Goodguy.

Which was fine by me, by and large -- I was playing the role I thought a Dad would play. If all I was ever asked for was a bit of play-acting, I'd have done a lot better than I did.

The dilemma of the expectant father today is simply ignorance. For many men, the fact of their partners' pregnancies is the first true mystery to come their way in life. For once, it is the mother who (to his thinking) operates within the traditional "male" perspective of problem solving.

She is the one who has calculated and now notices the cessation of menses; she is the one who consults with outside experts to determine the nature of the situation; and it is she who typically rolls up her sleeves and gets to work planning the project, conducting the research, charting the progress from month one to ten.

Amid this whirl of directed and perfectly logical activity, the father's status shifts abruptly, and the traditional roles played by the sexes do a flipflop.

Suddenly and horribly, it is the man who feels omitted from the excitement of an important project. It is the man who feels he hasn't enough data at his command with which to make decisions. It is the man who feels helpless and boggled at the prospect of dramatic change in his life while the woman goes her businesslike way adapting.

She, carrying conclusive proof of her condition under her belt, is free to perform systems analysis and chart timelines. He, who until this moment was the linear, dispassionate, deductive, problem-solving half of the relationship, is suddenly oscillating in decidedly unmasculine hemi-demi-semiquavers.

All of these perceptions are misogynist claptrap, and transparent misogynist claptrap at that. She was never less logical, or practical or acute at so-called male activities than he. But he considered them his demesne nonetheless. And now the poor fellow's world has turned upside-down. His map of the universe has been transformed. The mountain ranges have become seas. The seas have become stone. He's got a lot of orienting to do.

At the heart of this transformation is mystery. To oversimplify, we may say that (from the man's point of view) pregnancy for woman is process, for man, mystery. And it is mystery as unresolvable and as elusive as any religious enigma. Until now, the inner workings of his partner's body were no concern of his, because they did not affect him. Now the secret within her body not only affects him dramatically, but is one which cannot simply be whispered into his ear -- it is too profound, too resistant to ordinary description.

He sees his life as catastrophically collided -- much as a planet is struck by a hurtling comet. And yet he cannot see the approaching star. He is asked to accept the good news on faith, and he feels in the dark for the switch that is his faith, and he cannot find it.

Then something terrible happened -- we got pregnant. Rachel missed her period the third month of trying, and within a short time the urine tests confirmed our best hopes and worst fears. Sometime in mid-August, we two would become three. I say "terrible" not because it was really a terrible thing. It was terrific. I wanted to be a dad -- that's not where the ambivalence lay. It was in not knowing what it meant to be a dad. From day one something was eating at me about becoming a father. I didn't show it, but it was there, and it bothered me.

Getting pregnant was the start of a series of events which taught me more about myself than I ever thought I'd need to know, much of it unpleasant. Before the pregnancy came to term, my Mister Goodguy act would run the gamut of emotions. Anger, guilt, desperation, anxiety, the heebie-jeebies. This may sound awful, but the closest thing in my life to expecting our child was when I was a kid, and my best friend's dad lay dying of cancer for six months. The same awful sense of time suspended. The same inability, deep down, to believe what was happening.

I took Rachel out to dinner the night the test results came in, and she chattered merrily about the excitement in store for us. I kept up my Mister Goodguy act, smiling and suggesting we drink a toast. Oh no, Rachel said, no alcohol for her, not until the baby's born. But you go right ahead.

So there I was on the very first night of expectant fatherhood, drinking alone and just beginning to realize the changes ahead. I even drank an extra one, and claimed I was drinking it on Rachel's behalf.

Couvade is a crisis of faith -- the faith a man has in his ability to face the unknown. As the wife increaseth, the husband decreaseth. In his despair, he is at the bottom of the barrel of his manhood. There he gropes for something new in his composition to help him to cope; and what he finds is something very, very old -- an ancient technique to help man survive this very normal but very upsetting ordeal.

Ancient tools, ancient tricks, ancient masks. What he discovers is that modern man and ancient man, different as button-down and buckskin, are quite alike in one respect -- they both value their security, and are both threatened when their manly armor starts to crack.

The cloud of unknowing in which the expectant father drifts can be a torment. A man who cannot bear to be kept in the dark about so important a matter as incipient parenthood will have great difficulty finding peace and minimizing the stress of transition to a new social status.

A man who, on the other hand, understands that there is a purpose for this suspension of his traditional "hunterly" practicality and clearheadedness, will be better able to grope toward understanding and adapting.

Couvade may be thought of as a sustained, low-grade anxiety attack. This may not be a pleasant way of regarding it, but as such it does have the advantage of having a beginning, middle, and an end. That it does indeed end, and with such a knowable marvel at the end, i. e. , a baby, is very good news.

The man who understands that *couvade* is a necessary preparation for the new role of father, a rite of passage or crisis in his development as important in its secondary status as pregnancy itself, can more easily "give himself" to the *couvade*, hit bottom sooner, and find himself once again on the surface of his life, this time stronger, clearer, perhaps even wiser.

But while I was spreading the news with one part of my head, another part still seemed to be in the dark. Periodically I'd ask myself how I felt. Great, I answered. Fantastic, I'd tell myself. Oh God, I finally broke down and admitted -- what in the world had I got myself into?

The first two months seemed very unreal, like sleepwalking almost. At work, everything continued as usual, except for some of my colleagues who pumped me for details, at which I grinned and improvised, not actually knowing any correct answers. Did I prefer a boy or a girl? How did I know? I just hoped it (all I ever called it was it) was healthy and didn't hurt my wife too much. And didn't cost too much. I found I could hardly talk about specifics. I didn't know anything. I couldn't even feel anything.

I could feel myself shrinking, like the wicked witch in *The Wizard of Oz*. Day by day I felt increasingly insignificant -- whereas a year or so ago I had been Romeo to Rachel's Juliet, now I was more like Friday to her Crusoe.

She was so happy and busy and businesslike, putting all our bureaucratic ducks in a row -- sorting out our health insurance and maternity leave benefits, lining up our doctor and midwife, finding a good back-up obstetrician -- tasks that all seemed somehow beyond me at the time.

I admired her so, but felt so inadequate myself. My main accomplishment was lugging a used air-conditioner up two flights and installing it in the bedroom. And when that was over, feeling a sharp twinge about midway up my back. My back would ache virtually nonstop through the duration of Rachel's pregnancy.

The spectacle of ritual couvade -- it was called institutional couvade because it followed a set form which must not be deviated from -- was an astonishment to Western eyes, and today still seems foreign, exotic and unimaginably odd. Thus the suggestion that there is some connection between what expectant fathers feel and do today and what this pagan felt and did in the woods of Borneo a half-century ago seems ludicrous and worse, useless.

But consider the advantages of our man in the field. Ask what his objectives are as he undergoes his rituals. They are simple, but they are also immense. He wants, first and foremost, that his family be healthy and whole. He does not wish to trade a partner for a child, or vice versa, and in this there is nothing obsolete about him -- expectant fathers cite this worry as their number one source of concern during pregnancy.

Couvade achieves this objective through ritual. By wearing special clothes and withdrawing from the dangers of cheap society, by abstaining from polluting substances, by undergoing the trauma of birth itself, he has taken the danger away from the woman and onto himself. In this sense couvade is far from a show of "womanishness" -- it is bravery and resourcefulness in the face of the gravest source of danger -- angry spirits. In its truest sense it is heroism.

He wants, secondly, to express various things that need expressing. He wants to state unequivocally the bond that henceforth exists between father and child-- a statement which we in the West have struggled over the centuries to make, and usually failed. He wants to announce to the world that he accepts his new responsibility and status as father, and that this child, whom he has not seen, is indeed his.

This stands in stark contrast to the modern father, who greets the prospective new arrival with large helpings of incredulity and self-doubt.

He wants, thirdly, to get himself through a tortuous season in a man's life without losing his cool. The time of pregnancy has always been a time in which powerful forces are at work, evil spirits within and without a man easily capable of violence, hysteria, hostility, flight. Ritual couvade provides a culturally sanctioned outlet for the father to vent some of this passion. It is an established safety valve for the excess of emotion in the expectant father.

He wants, finally, to tell himself certain things -- to admit to himself what he is also admitting to his society. Whereas his life before centered on the hunt, on the courtship, on the games and friends, all that must now change and he must accept these changes. Couvade changes the expectant father from the inside out, as well as from the outside in. Once he has successfully performed the recommended tasks of couvade, even the least articulate father-to-be understands the powerful transition he is caught up in, and is better able to move within its currents.

Why was all this happening? I asked myself. I began thinking conspiratorially that I had no proof personally that a child was on the way. Rachel wasn't showing, she was still wearing her

usual clothes. Nothing seemed different, and yet everything was.

Whereas most people think of me as sociable, cheerful and outgoing, a dark and sinister, Darth-Vaderish streak was beginning to show. At work I found myself quarreling at the drop of a hat, usually about some perceived slight, but just as often about my new, true field of expertise, obstetrics and gynecology.

For some reason I took it upon myself to wage war against the excesses of the medical establishment. Soon this general defensiveness became generally offensive, as I began lashing out at doctors in general. All they want to do is pump you up, cut you up, and hit the links by two, I told anyone who would lend an ear. Sophisticated stuff. My colleagues shook their heads -- I was on my way to being the company crank.

An angry, misanthropic side of me blossomed. I became very impatient with colleagues reducing me to the least common denominator of EXPECTANT FATHER. Wherever I went, it was, "How's the mother?" or "When's that due-date again?"

It annoyed me that people should have forgotten I was a human being with diverse interests. I still liked baseball, I still followed the Brewers box scores. My work never suffered, I never missed a meeting. I read novels, not baby books. Why this typecasting? Wasn't I still me? I felt betrayed by my so-called friends and co-workers, and withdrew further and further into my work...

The only remaining issue to understanding ritual couvade is to apply the test of modernity to it. Does it work? Or is it just some hocus-pocus, backwoods weirdness that anthropologists dote on but doesn't have much to do with anything? How can

any reasonable person believe that dressing up and pretending to have a baby serves to anchor a man during pregnancy?

The answer to this question is a complicated one. But understanding the appeal of maternity for men has little to do with our concept of modernity.

So I withdrew into my work. And into my aspirin bottle.

Week by week my back hurt more and more. Pain killers couldn't touch it. Eventually I had to quit running because exercise aggravated the pain. It was like my rib and tenth thoracic vertebra had collided and were now sparking like downed power lines. I squirmed in my chair at work, and twisted from side to side as I drove on the freeway. I was coming apart at the seams and couldn't understand why.

Rachel was terrific. By four months she was clearly showing, and morning sickness and drowsiness were taking a heavy toll on her energies. We would sit at nights and gaze forlornly into one another's eyes, each knowing the other was uncomfortable, each wishing he or she could swap lives with the other for just one day.

Days would go by and I would numbly know that a baby was on the way. Ten months seemed like eternity. Gradually I came to think of pregnancy as a permanent condition, an ordeal which had no reasonable end.

Rachel gained weight. I did too. Without exercise, with my back hurting more and more, and without a strong sense of my own center, I lay about a lot, drinking several beers or wines every evening, snacking on a bowl of popcorn with the seating capacity of the Astrodome.

Rachel abetted me with her own ferocious appetite. I joked with her about plucking snails off trees and gobbling them, immune to their pathetic little cries. I saw her hunger as an excuse to stuff myself. Since I've always had to be careful about my weight, I should have known better. But I was in the throes of some great wave of denial, and munched onward.

By mid-term we were obviously going to have a baby. My back was killing me, plus someone was clearly living inside Rachel, and was pounding on the walls of her tummy, looking for secret panels, I think. Rachel was down to three or four outfits for the duration of her pregnancy, and I was down to two pair of pants that would still fit my expansive self.

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We are moving more and more toward the view that modern couvade solves, in its frustrating, willy-nilly way, the same problems as ritual couvade. First, it re-inserts the man in a process from which he has been removed. His complaints serve notice to all that the change that is upon him has not gone unnoticed.

In a subtler sense, a man's psychosomatic lashing out at his own body may be as magical as anything anyone ever did in the jungles of Borneo -- his bellyaching may well be an expression of his profound caring for the partner and unborn child. Despite his outward ambivalence, the expectant father may well be acting as decoy for the evil spirits of the modern world, the bogeys of stress and anxiety which prey on all our weaknesses. This is modern man's one shot, and in its recoil we get a glimpse of something rare today -- a look at man's unresolved need to nurture and to be nurtured.

Only now did I begin to get into the swim of birth preparations. I finally met our midwife, a spacey, California-esque Aquarian type named Felicia who ran roughshod over us in a mellow, sparkley-eyed way ("Remember, it's your birth, not mine," she explained, handing us our forms).

I met our doctor, an eccentric, stammering Scot who wore red plaid pants and kept an electric shoe-buffer in his waiting room. And we booked visits with a genetic expert to perform ultrasonographic examinations and amniocentesis on the baby.

Upon visiting the genetic counselor, I got my first true taste of the horrors of parenthood. A cultivated Spaniard, he gave us computer printouts listing such possibilities as Down's syndrome and other chromosomal abnormalities, the risk of spontaneous miscarriage, neural tube defects such as anencephaly, spina bifida, congenital malformations, ethnic genetic diseases, etc.

I felt my heart sink. How could I have been ignoring these terrible realities? It stuck me how irresponsible I had been behaving, crossing my fingers and hoping for a lucky draw. Face it, I told myself, no one's normal. Somehow I knew my child would be a monster of unspeakable deformity.

Watching the monitor on the ultrasound machine, I saw my child for the first time -- skeleton first. It was breathtaking, terrifying and gorgeous. For the first time, my knees went a bit weak. There it was, turning slowly in the monitor screen -- my replacement unit, stewing away in its mother's broth. And outside its chest (at least it looked like that) I saw its little heart beating away. It looked like some sort of frantic, kiss-blowing tulip.

It seemed so brave to me, all of a sudden. Coming into existence, unarmed by anything at all except the will to life. There it was, the most helpless thing in the universe -- and it was a juggernaut.

We asked not to know the child's sex -- we wanted to save that surprise for the moment of birth. In this one way we were still old-fashioned.

Our worry deepened, and so did my guilt. How could I be the kind of caring, watchful parent my child deserved, I asked myself, if I continued my indulgent, crackpot ways? I felt a solemn seriousness set in. Rachel was doing all the work, while I fretted and sipped beer. I finally started reading the baby books -- though I could not finish any, as I kept looking up from the books, daydreaming. My son, I kept thinking. My daughter.

After all the travail of the couvade experience, there appears to be but one sure-fire cure, the birth of a child. Aspirin may help with headaches. Maalox may help settle the queasy stomach. A regimen of regular exercise may help reduce stress levels overall. But only a flesh-and-blood baby, squinting up at the new father through his or her swaddle of receiving blankets, can ultimately and effectively end the transformative process. Thus one great mystery comes to an end, and another, perhaps even greater mystery, makes itself known, with a fanfare of squalls and frowns.

In the end, of course, it is foolish to speak of couvade as having any sort of cure. Diseases are cured, life struggles only "happen." It would be truer to think of couvade as a cure itself, for it is nature's instinctual school for fatherly preparation. Whatever it is that a man brings with him into couvade, he

exits as a new father. Modern man is compelled to admit what the so-called savage engaged in ritual couvade knew for centuries -- that it works.

Soon it was summer, and Rachel had gained 30 pounds. We decided to make a last-ditch romantic trip together, and flew for a week to Puerto Vallarta and points south, all on borrowed money. We wobbled, two giant norteamericanos, up and down the cheaper beaches of the Mexican Pacific, my sweating hand in her edematous hand. We were fat, we were nauseous, we were in love.

Upon returning we discovered that Felicia, our midwife, had decided to move back to California for a month -- right when we were scheduled to deliver. I was furious, and called her down to the house to face my wrath. Now here was a side to me few people, myself included, had seen -- do it to Mikey, I'm used to hearing, Mikey doesn't get mad about nothing.

I told her how betrayed we felt, and how ironic it was that she, who had been busy forming all sorts of magical Aquarian bonds with us, and telling us about the importance of trust, was now clinically assuring us that any old midwife would do. It wasn't her fault, but I was still very hard on her. Suddenly I saw myself facing a birth without the people I had been counting on. I wiggled out. I was tacky, I was childish, but I showed spunk and initiative. I was not ashamed.

After that, I stopped trusting folks to do my job for me. I polished off the last of the baby books and went and dug up an old shower curtain and spread it on the bed. This, I told myself, would keep all that blood from destroying the mattress and box springs.

The baby still needed a name. I issued the decree that if it were a boy his name would be Isaac, for "he laughs." My son would have a tough enough time amid the future without a sense of humor, I decided. His would be built-in.

If it was a girl? I didn't know that yet. No name seemed right. Rachel wanted to name the child after her father, Daniel, who had passed away when she was sixteen. But Danielle seemed too française or something. We would be condemning our child to be coquette for life. I'd come up with the right name, I told her.

We attended a party at the medical/dental clinic where Rachel had been working, and I watched on as Rachel danced the tango, the jitterbug, and other steps with a dashing doctor friend. She was rotund, yet so graceful on the dance floor. She never looked so beautiful to me.

Ritual couvade achieved a variety of ends. It functioned to protect the infant and mother by serving as a "decoy" to evil spirits in the vicinity. It served as a symbolic expression of the close physical and moral bond between father and child. It signaled acceptance of a new role and status in society, lest anyone doubted. And it was a somewhat public and therefore legal admission of paternity. Ritual couvade was also a valuable outlet for potentially violent emotions. In social systems which tended to shut the father out from the rest of the family, couvade was a way for the father to reinsert himself.

The beauty of ritual couvade was that it was purposeful behavior. And it was learned. It did not simply "occur" to a man to take to his bed and commence pre-enactment of a birth -- it was expected, it was the law.

Couvade today is, due to ignorance and lack of community support, improvisatory on the part of the father. He does what he can to achieve the same objectives sketched above, in his blind effort to assure the safety of mother, child and yes, self. He has no idea he is "doing" anything. And yet, at some subconscious or unconscious level, some kind of business is getting "done," and in its own bumbling way it is empirical and it does indeed work.

Four days after the due date, then five. Then one night we kissed one another and went off to sleep.

Later Rachel told me that the phone had rung, and some fool asked her what she was wearing. Disgusted, she slammed the receiver down, and grumbling remaneuvered herself under the covers.

We woke up around midnight, the bedding swamped with water. Rachel's bag had ruptured in her sleep. We turned on the lights, glanced at one another. Without a word I rose and called Felicia. I moved in a kind of unthinking but purposeful fog. Rachel began to worry about various things. I patted her hand and stroked her face. She had the look of a condemned prisoner.

She asked me to listen through the fetuscope for a heartbeat. I listened and could detect no heartbeat. Rachel panicked. I looked at her, sucked in my breath, and told her I was picking up a beat. Counting -- 140 beats per minute! It was a lie, a very dangerous one, but it relaxed Rachel, who I now saw was ready to trade her life for this new one inside her. If she was willing to take a risk, I thought, so was I.

Felicia, fresh from California, arrived several hours later, Doppler in hand, and took the baby's pulse. My heart was

tripping so quickly I half expected her stethoscope to pick it up. Beat! , Beat! , I urged that little tulip inside the baby, and sagged with relief when the reading showed a strong heartbeat-- and get this, at precisely 140 beats per minute. Believe it or not.

There is no cure for couvade. Couvade is itself a kind of cure for fathers of their non-fatherliness, and the process is finally capped by the birth of his son, his daughter, or some fearsome combination of the two (twins, triplets, etc.). And the most painful couvade is the one which is most ardently avoided.

Just as the mother discovers (generally around mid-afternoon of the baby's first day) that pregnancy and birth are less significant than the greater issues of parenting that have only begun, so does the father understand that couvade is very much of a stop-gap action against a short-term problem.

From birth on, the cloud of unknowing is lifted. The problems of parenthood get, if anything, more and more difficult. But the father -- expectant no longer -- has done his homework. He is prepared for the challenge. He may not know what exactly to expect, but at least, henceforward, he will know who it is he is dealing with.

In nature's wisdom, the travail of couvade gives way to the even more heroic struggle of day-to-day fatherhood. Thus the day of birth marks the completion of the first long cycle in a man's life. Without this process, that man's growth, at least in one direction, can never continue. In retrospect we see that couvade is a man's way of giving birth not only to his offspring, but in a deeper and more abiding, more private sense, to himself. It is, or ought to be, a time of joy.

For the next 20 hours, the little heart beat out time for us. Rachel and I walked, we rocked, we laughed and cried. We walked in trembling circles in the courtyard of the building. Kids on bicycles rang past us, laughing. I loved us both so much at that moment. During transition we put Rachel in our neighbor friend's bathtub and kept the hot water coming. We sang. Took pictures. Ate popsicles. Worked. Friends drove all the way from Minneapolis to Milwaukee to help us through. Another made beet and carrot soup.

I was never so proud of Rachel -- you could read the will to life in the furrows of her brow. And I was proud of myself, too. No squeamishness, no fear.

Except at the very end, a final shudder inside me. It was time for Rachel to push, for the baby to finally be born. All the panic rose up in me, and I walked outside the birthing room and stood by a window, watched the traffic pass by outside. Soon this great ordeal would be over. Soon the great unknown would reveal itself. My legs quaked far below. I nearly fainted.

But I didn't. I was done indulging. I had been through so much the past ten months. All the worry, all the evasion, all the screwy ways I had devised to get ready for this one telling moment. I was ready.

Except for one thing, our accompaniment. I flipped through my cassettes looking for a moment too long for just the right fanfare for the new person. Finally I settled on Gustav Holst's *The Planets* and returned to the bedroom. Within a half-hour (the tape was on "Saturn") I caught the baby as it slipped from its mother's womb.

It was a little girl. She looked around, blinked once, and sighed with relief.

Ahh, she said.

And I held her up to look at her, to gaze into her dark, solemn eyes. I felt tears racing up my face. She felt like butter to me, impossible to be so soft and so prudent. How insipid all my worries suddenly seemed, how self-referential when all along this marvelous person was boring into existence out of next to nothing, a gob of germ, calling to itself such completeness.

I thought about how hard it was for a person to come into being. Hard on the mother and hard on the father, too. Judgment that you had planned on isn't there any more. The you that was is someone new now, everyone is new. I saw how all my convolutions and worries were maybe my way of drawing fire from the real action, which was now in my arms, blinking at the silent bedroom full of people, this hungry life, my heart.

There is honor in a newborn's eyes. It seemed to me there was honor everywhere, nobility and valor filling every seam and every interstice of the world. I forgave everyone everything, total amnesty, and after, champagne.

I snipped the cord and laid the girl on her mother's heaving breast.

"This is Daniele," I heard myself say, patting the still-wet skin.

August, 1984

The psychotic salesman

Daniele and I kept up an on-and-off email correspondence for many years. I saved a lot of it. I was always grasping for some kind of teaching that would help her to find peace. She hated that I was a Christian, so I had to camouflage everything I said to her. This letter is an example of that. The psychotic salesman was God, I'm pretty sure.

Excellent, tip-top question! It goes to the very heart of the matter.

When we encounter beauty, our tendency is to dismiss it at all costs – this can't be for me. This can't be for a purpose. Santa Claus isn't real.

Our default perspective is pseudo-scientific. We like it because it seems cold and smart. In it, we are a coincidence of nature – intelligent monkeys – and while the universe is beautiful, it is some sort of accident. Our job is to scratch – our heads, our bellies, our asses.

This “certainty of uncertainty” overlooks all the weird threads of meaning we freely acknowledge in our lives. If you pay close attention, hardly a minute does not go by that something does not penetrate our consciousness, however dully, and we get a fleeting glimpse of something.

Like, I'm at my table now. Mark Isham is playing “That Beautiful Sadness,” a favorite song (and what a title, in the context of this conversation!). I am surrounded by empty coffee cups, and musical debris, and up on the wall is a note

that you wrote me when you were in the 6th grade. A photo of Poppa Dick cuddling Jami when she was about 5. A thank you letter I am writing to Stan Babel.

No big whoop, but it all has a swirly, spiritual feeling about it. It is incredibly textured and poignant. In a graph-paper universe, on an endless x-Y grid, I doubt I would be moved by the piano solo.

In a truly unscientific, fact-based universe, why would everything be so richly meaningful? What would be the point of that?

We surround ourselves with “respectability.” The #1 assumption of respectability is that people are a freak accident of the cosmos. No other animal designs space ships or paints frescoes. Coatimundis belong; flesh-eating bacteria belong – we don’t.

The earth is NOT the center of the universe – we’re just a speck in a bad neighborhood. Since nothing matters, we live out our existences like toys on some absent kid’s shelf – trivially, desperately, resentfully.

And we keep drumming this “we’re freaks” attitude into us, so that – I don’t know – the light in the clearing does not fall on our faces, does not find us and claim us.

It’s like the baby rabbit in “The Runaway Bunny,” determined to run away from the mother’s love. WTF? Why does the baby have to run away, and why does the mother guarantee she will find the baby, no matter what?

Because that is the true nature of reality – that we crave to cut ourselves off – rationally or however we manage it – from knowledge of ourselves. We cultivate all kinds of wisdom and heppness – but not self-love. It’s our JOB to avoid that at all

costs. To love ourselves, forgive ourselves, to really care for ourselves requires an incredible personal grace. Most people can't do it – it strikes them as odd.

But the Big Bunny will find you, and will take you home to the burrow.

Was the light in the clearing there if you were not there? The reason you ask is because you insist on two assumptions: 1) that everything is relative, and life without me (without me being in the clearing) is as valid, as real, as scientific as life with me standing there. At all costs you do not want to be guilty of some foolish medieval egocentrism (This is about me).

And yet is all about you. Your life is about you and you alone. Only you are standing the clearing. What is happening is happening only to you. To imagine otherwise is the true “anthropomorphism” – the true intellectual provinciality, the real “small town attitude.”

Which is more sophisticated: to prove one does not matter, or to embrace that you are here, at the perfect center of everything?

That is the question I think you are asking, and I think it is THE question. And I wish I believed the right answer more than I do. And I am trying to believe the right answer more, for my sake and for yours.

I love you Daniele - Dad



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