Civilization for

Morons

(a personal journey)

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Civilization for Morons (A Personal Journey)

We are so screwed. Or are we? On the minus side, we have climate change, a debt crisis, and various sociopaths trying to destroy democracy.

But on the plus side, we have a few million years of hominid evolution, the Magna Carta, and neighbours who still smile and wave.

This book is about those things, as well as the two main concepts which have the potential to tip the balance from minus to plus (though to find out what they are, you'll at least have to crack the spine on this thing and check out the introduction).

Admittedly, the author is somewhat of an asshole (more on that later). But he's an asshole who nonetheless managed to figure out what those two concepts are. He did it with the help of 0.0001 grams of LSD, a public library card, and ten years of university.

Still confused? Then you'll have to read the introduction. But it's only two pages long. So go for it. Then maybe you can help to tip that balance from minus to plus.

Civilization For Morons

(A Personal Journey)

16TH Draft

2021

By Evan Bedford

Published by

_____ ?

This book is
dedicated to my younger
self, in the hope that he
might learn something.

All authorial proceeds
from the sale of this book
will go to the
New Democracy Foundation.
www.newdemocracy.com.au

(I would love to direct this $
to a similar Canadian organization,
but the closest equivalent seems to be
MASS LBP, which is a private
consultancy, rather than a
non-profit organization.
I am, however, open
to suggestions.)

Three Themes
in Four Quotes

The smartest person in the world
is that person who knows
where the shoe pinches
on his/her own foot.

Paraphrase of an Irish proverb

If the pus from a dead dog's boil
gives enlightenment,
then it should be prized
as the finest elixir.

Paraphrase of a Tibetan proverb

Sooner murder an infant in its cradle
than nurse unacted desires.

William Blake (18th/19th century poet)

Everyone is entitled to his own opinion,
but not his own facts.

U.S. Senator (1977-2001)
Daniel Patrick Moynihan

The Dog's Breakfast

Introduction...Preface...Warning...

Are you sometimes unable to sleep at night, thinking about an uncertain global future? Like that associated with runaway climate change?...or a new covid variant?…or one of the Trump kids in the White House in 2024?

No? Then you may as well put this book back on the shelf.

For those of you remaining, let me introduce myself. My name is Evan, and like you, I'm *also* unable to sleep at night. That's because I spent many years at university, studying "societal sustainability" and I'm not very optimistic.

I *did*, however, find the two main concepts which can fix our rapidly disintegrating civilization. One of them is called "communitarianism" and the other is called "deliberative democracy".

Communitarianism is simply defined as a society which has a better balance between personal freedoms and collective responsibilities (if you gladly wore a mask and got vaccinated in 2020/21, you likely already know about the latter).

Deliberative democracy, however, is a bit harder to explain. So I'll first describe what it is *not*. It is not what we have now, where a polling firm asks a random selection of people what they think about a very serious issue (let's say climate change), and even though many of the respondents might not know the difference between a methane molecule and a giraffe, they'll still give answers about which policies they prefer. Then these answers are fed back to politicians, who allocate dollars and make laws based on them. That's somewhat more advanced than Medieval Europe, but not much.

Contrast that with deliberative democracy, which involves – you guessed it – deliberation. And a couple of good examples were the Citizens' Assemblies on Electoral Reform held in BC and Ontario in 2004 and 2007 (though the subsequent referenda were prime examples of what are often toxic, *non*-deliberative processes).

Before we go any further, I want to assure you that I'm not a nut-case. Deliberative democracy and communitarianism have other backers with far more letters behind their names than I'll ever have. Charles Taylor, for example, who is a recipient of the Order of Canada, and who did the Massey Lectures back in 1991, was one of the many contributors to a very important book titled *Changing Maps* (Carlton University Press, 1995). And that book is *still* the most profound – and readable – collection of words ever written about these two subjects. The problem is that 99.99% of the population is unaware that the book ever existed.

So what, therefore, is the average 21st Century insomniac supposed to do? Or rather, what did my younger 20th Century self do? At that time, there was only one option: I had to cycle from Edmonton to Ottawa, in order to try and give a copy of *Changing Maps* to Jean Chretien (who was Prime Minister at the time). And a significant part of *this* book is about that quixotic episode.

Aside from chapters on “public consensus”, “social infrastructure”, and the “crisis of legitimacy”, *Changing Maps* also includes a section on “Culture and Values”. In it, the authors state that in order to counteract the potential for “post-modern nihilism” and "a pell mell jailbreak into hedonism, violence and general disaffection from society" (p.35), we should consider re-visiting, "perhaps with some irony" (p.38), that ancient anachronism we call religion. In my book, I take the discussion much further, looking at religion versus spirituality, belief versus experience, and experience versus physical evidence. I look at it all through the lens of my personal encounters with cannabis and LSD, as well as a disappointing pilgrimage to India, and half a lifetime spent scouring library shelves for concepts such as Carl Jung’s "collective unconscious" and Albert Einstein's "spooky action at a distance" (more on that stuff later).

I will admit that this book is somewhat of a chaotic mess. You will have the opportunity to read not only about that cycling trip to Ottawa, but also about my earlier quest to find a hippie commune in California. You’ll be free to scoff at the details of my first LSD trip, as well as laugh at the details of how I lost my virginity. You might

squirm as I try to explain capitalism versus socialism, or Alberta versus Norway. But I guarantee it will all be somewhat entertaining, somewhat educational, and generally chopped up into mercifully brief, digestible chunks.

And besides: we all love chaotic messes that are mercifully brief. The internet is chaotic, and we can't fathom how our brains used to operate before it came into existence. Gone are the days when the average person could wade through more than a single paragraph of Thoreau's *Walden* without running from the room, screaming for the comfort of a few pixels on an LCD screen. So don't worry. Just grab a beer (or a glass of wine or a spliff), crack the spine on this thing, and you'll be just fine.

chapter i: the early years

I came into my first big windfall when I was five years old. It involved money from a church offering plate.

In the early 1960's, my father was a United Church minister in the village of Hythe, Alberta.[1] His office was in our slightly dilapidated manse, which was right next to the slightly dilapidated church, which was right next to the post office, which was right next to the only grocery store in the village.

The grocery store was tiny, with narrow aisles and wooden floors. But it had a cooler at the back, which was full of sugary pop. So I took some of the money I found in an envelope in my dad's office, and I confidently strolled into the store for a six-pack of Coca Cola.

Like a lottery winner with more money than brains, I wasn't satisfied with a single bottle. A single bottle might have gone unnoticed. But the shopkeeper was quite aware that Coca Cola had never made an appearance on any of my mother's grocery lists, and

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[1] Hythe is now better known as the home of Wiebo Ludwig, convicted oil and gas industry terrorist. But back then, it was just a tiny place on remote highway with a hardware store, a Chinese restaurant, a bunch of muddy streets, and rows of caragana hedges attempting to invade the crumbling side-walks.

that a minister's salary was hardly sufficient to have permitted such an indulgence. So he didn't accept my money, and instead picked up the phone and told Mom about my new financial situation.

I next recall my father showing me a rather thin book with a photo of a happy family on the front cover, and a title that had the word "God" in it. As he turned the pages, it showed the family enjoying a picnic or walking to church or cheering a local sports team or playing fetch with a handsome collie. And each photo was accompanied by some inspiring words.

But the words didn't inspire me in the least. I knew I had done something wrong, and I knew my father was disappointed in me. But neither the words in the book, nor my dad's disappointment made the slightest impression on me...except for a vague feeling of unease and a longing for the lesson to be over with.

Another book in the house was Dr. Spock's *Baby and Child Care.* Whether it was the lessons in this book or whether it was the lessons from the Sermon on the Mount, Dad never used corporal punishment on us kids. He was (and is) a gentle soul. In my early years, I would sometimes cry at night, knowing that someday he would, just like the rest of us, die.

In 1966, we moved to Fort St. John, B.C. It was only a couple of hours up the highway, but whereas Hythe was a village of 200 people, Fort St. John was a vast metropolis of 7,000. It had a Dairy Queen and a movie theatre and lots of paved streets that seemed to be made for 3-speed bicycles with banana seats and ape-hanger handlebars.

Tommy lived across the street, and he had the best sandbox on the block. It was oblong, so that we could easily reach across from any point to drive our Dinky/Corgi/Matchbox vehicles. And it was on the north side of his house, so it was cool on a hot day, and the moistened sand didn't dry up too quickly.

Brian was another friend, who lived a few blocks away in a

much bigger house and had much finer toys (such as a pool table in the basement and a 90 cc Suzuki motorcycle in the backyard).

The other element in this story was the candy store, which sold 3 jawbreakers for a penny, as well as many other delights suitable for rotting teeth.

One day, I met Tommy out on the street. I was on my orange 3-speed, and he was on his black single speed, with its fake gas tank attached to the top tube.

"Want some Ton-O-Gum?" I asked.

"Sure."

I started to break off a mammoth chunk from the pink slab and casually mentioned that I had taken a dime from Brian's room to make the purchase.

Tommy looked away. "Uh...I gotta go."

And then there was an uncomfortable silence as I had my first realization that not everyone in the world was a selfish jerk.

One day, a new student walked into our grade four class and the teacher introduced him. Tim had an English accent, curly hair, and a sweater with a few holes in it. When we were asked if anyone would like to help Tim get settled, my hand shot up. Perhaps it was due to the fact that Mom and Dad were born in Britain, and that we had gone there on a vacation a few years previous.

I hung out with Tim occasionally after school. Sometimes, we took our bikes to a huge undeveloped lot behind Brian's place, where there was a scrub forest criss-crossed with trails, and a frog pond teeming with tadpoles. And sometimes we hung out at the schoolyard with its rusty playground amusements and a surrounding fringe of willow bushes (the branches of which could, with a pocketknife, be fashioned into decent whistles).

I do remember that one day, Tim took me to see his house. It was on the outskirts of town and and it seemed small and grimy. After that, I don't remember seeing Tim very much. He may have transferred to another school or moved to another town.

A year or two after that, I was at home when the door bell rang. It was Tim.

"Hi! Remember me?" he said with a big smile.

"No, I don't remember you at all. Sorry."

"I'm Tim. Tim from school!"

"No. Sorry. I don't remember you." (Like Donald Trump, I had yet to develop any sense of shame.)

"Oh. OK." And with that, he simply walked away. And I shrugged, relieved that the burden of an inconvenient friendship had so easily disappeared.

I also remember this:

“McNab’s fleas!”

“McNab’s fleas!”

It was a cruel game of tag, which took place in our Grade 3 classroom. We pawned off imaginary fleas on each other from ____ McNab. She may not have been pretty, and she might have worn hand-me-down clothes, but we all knew damn well that she didn’t have fleas.

Years later, in Junior High, the taunt was “Choke it!” “Choke it!”, a cruel reference to the last name of ____ Choqette, a girl with a rather unfortunate DNA inheritance. I never called out the dreadful nickname, but neither did I have the intelligence or backbone to tell my friends to shut the fuck up.[2]

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[2] The “sin of omission”, defined rather well in James 4:17 (“So whoever knows

In Tommy's sandbox, we played with Dinky Toys. But in the late 1960's, Hot Wheels arrived. Dinky Toys had wheels that turned, but Hot Wheels had wheels that turned fast! And they had their own slippery, smooth tracks with loops and jumps. And there was a finish gate with a plastic checkered flag that impartially told us who had the fastest car.

But after we had sorted out which cars were fastest and which were slowest, and after we had exhausted all the other possibilities (like sending a speeding Corvette off of the ramp into the ribs of the family pet), the fun started to wear off.

But wait! Brian had the updated version. Now, we wouldn't be slaves to a mere clamp on a table edge. Brian had the new Supercharger set that accelerated the cars via a pair of foam-edged spinning flywheels that gave each car a boost as it went through the little plastic garage attached to the track. And when that got boring, Brian managed to get Sizzlers, which were Hot Wheels with their own tiny batteries.

I couldn't afford those tracks, but at some point, Hot Wheels produced an evolutionary dead end that I *could* afford. It was heavily discounted at the store, presumably because no one else wanted it.[3] It didn't have batteries and it didn't have humming flywheels that ran off of household current. It had big rubber bands attached to a set of catapults. Each time a car came around the track, I would have to reset the catapult, so that it would hit the back end of the car and send it whizzing off for another lap.

But even before I got back from the department store with the catapult contraption in my grubby little hands, my ten year old brain managed to form an extremely sobering thought. I realized that the novelty of the new track would not last. I might play with it for an

the right thing to do and fails to do it, for him it is sin.")

[3] In fact, it was such an evolutionary dead end, that even with a fairly extensive internet search, I could only find one other reference to it...from "Jeff" on www.feelingretro.com.

hour or two – or maybe even a day or two. But the glitz and glamour would rapidly vanish, and like all of my other toys, it would gather dust. I had discovered the Buddhist concept of anicca (or impermanence).

...at least for month or so. My birthday was approaching, you see, so the concept of anicca rapidly lost ground to the much more enticing concept of Kenner's Smash Up Derby! [4]

At that age, I looked forward to the next MAD magazine like I currently look forward to the next Atlantic Monthly. MAD in the late 60's and early 70's was a refreshing antidote to anything authoritarian. Plus, it was a secret entry into a lot of the adult pleasures that I wouldn't normally have access to – in particular, the sardonic send-ups of movies that I still was too young to see in the theatres.

I first came across MAD in a department store in Edmonton (a rare family trip, since it was a full day's drive from Fort St. John). I grabbed a copy off of the stack and showed it to my dad, asking if I could buy it with my hard earned nickels. He thumbed through it for a while and gave me the nod. I don't think he had ever seen it before, either. But I suspect that certain aspects of it – such as its anti-Vietnam war slant – resonated well with both United Church theology and his NDP (New Democratic Party) voting patterns.

I'm not sure how much the MAD ideology rubbed off on me, but it certainly gave me a window on the world which I had previously ignored. Before MAD, I was so ignorant about world affairs that I thought Martin Luther King was a prime minister of Canada. After all, it was just a couple of weeks after he was shot that Pierre Trudeau became our head of state.

MAD magazine may have been a learning tool, but it was also a commodity to be coveted and hoarded. Our grade eight Language

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[4] "..crash, bang, crash 'em up. Put 'em back again. Crash, bang, smash 'em up. It's smash up time, my friend." (Sung with a slightly southern-Country twang)

Arts teacher, Mr. Lawrence, had a big stack of them at the back of the classroom, and he allowed us to read them if we finished our classroom assignments before the bell. But his stack was way bigger than my stack. So naturally, I got into the habit of inserting the occasional issue in amongst my school books. However, at some point, he raised the alarm, and a search of our home-room desks ensued. Luckily though, the detective work was assigned to our class clown, so it became a slapdash effort, and I dodged another bullet.

In the early 70's, we moved to Calgary. It was a traumatic experience, moving from a town of 7,000 people to an endless metropolis of half a million. Not only did I have to leave familiar surroundings and friends, but there seemed to be a different atmosphere about the place. A harder edge. An air of indifference. It was like Hythe versus Gotham City.

I first noticed it during recess at our Junior High School. I had just switched over from an elementary school, so that transition was difficult enough. But now the big city became personified in the form of an older bully who went around giving gonchies[5] to the younger students. It was the first day of class, and he was having a delightful time, going from victim to victim. Fortunately for me, I was still dressed in Fort St. John attire, which meant un-hip trousers and a fairly snug belt. It was the belt that saved me, since the bully attempted for a minute or so to reach down past it, but soon gave up in order to stalk easier prey.

The main irony in it all (which occurred to me even before I knew what the word "irony" meant) was that the bully had his own belt with a large buckle in the shape of a clenched hand with the index and ring finger extended in a "V".[6] "Peace, man!" said the

[5] More commonly known to fans of The Simpsons as wedgies, where the perpetrator seizes the rear waistband of the victim's underpants and hauls upwards, causing a goodly amount of material to get wedged between the two halves of said victim's bum cheeks. Also potentially uncomfortable for the scrotum, due to the increased pressure being transmitted to the front of the underpants.

buckle.[7]

However, even though I noted the irony, the message I took away from the experience was not one of peace, but of the importance of belligerent swagger.

Not long after that, I had my first and only fist fight. I was walking home from school down one of the back alleys[8] when I came upon a group of kids about my age from the local Catholic School. I thought that it was necessary to keep my direction of travel, and so I strode through the lot, and managed to bump one or two.

"Fight him, Joe! Fight him!"

Joe was even shorter than me, but he obviously had experience in this arena before, so he promptly showed me who was the boss. Luckily, this was the early 1970's, before swarmings, and before our

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[6] This symbol was used by the hippie movement in the 1960's, but also by Winston Churchill during WWII to denote victory. It was thought to have originated centuries ago, when archers held their hands up to foes and allies alike, showing that they were still quite capable of pulling back a deadly bowstring with the two fingers, and that they had not been captured (which often entailed having the two offending digits amputated).

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[7] This juxtaposition of the symbol with its antithesis was common in the 1970's, which had the counter-cultural message of non-materialism, along with the capitalist urge to make money off of it. At about the same time as the gonchie incident, I put brightly coloured, hollow plastic straws on the spokes of my bicycle wheels, because they looked cool and sounded cool as they slid up and down the spokes. The name of the product was called Cycle-delic, taken from the word psychedelic. So while the Latin root of “psychedelic” means to make "manifest" the "soul", “Cycle-delic” was simply an inane form of kiddie bling sold in the 1970's equivalent of a Wal-Mart.

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[8] Alleys were fairly important thoroughfares for young pedestrians, since they were often short-cuts, and they often provided some degree of cover for activities that grown-ups would frown on. A favourite in our time was to fling a tin can that had been flattened by a few vehicles. This deadly frisbee would fly half the length of a football field in an unpredictable manner, and it amazes me that – as far as I know – we never managed to break a window or put an eye out.

culture went from shoot-em-up westerns with a modicum of civility, to shoot-em-up video games, where it is apparently justifiable to kill police officers on a whim. So it was a fair fight, with fists only, and after a few minutes, I exited the scene without so much as even a bloody nose.

Well, that's was the selfish little snot. Now I'll introduce a kid who was quite the opposite. Warning: the incident involves bed-wetting.

Sometimes, bed-wetting can be amusing. James Joyce noted – in toddler-speak – that "When you wet the bed first it is warm then it gets cold." But just as often, it can be a nightmare. At the boarding school he went to, George Orwell was regularly humiliated for it in front of the other boys by "Flip" the Headmistress, and "flogged" mercilessly with a riding-crop for it by "Sambo" the Headmaster. "You dir-ty lit-tle boy"[9] he shouted, as each syllable coincided with a thunderous whack on Orwell's bum. Indeed, Sambo was so merciless, that on one of those syllables, he managed to snap his riding-crop in two.

Up until I was about ten years old, I also wet the bed on a fairly regular basis. So Mom put a plastic cover on the mattress, and over the bottom sheet, she put a section of folded flannel down by my hips to soak up the majority of the expected piss. On the other hand, Dad's technique was preventative...if not quite scientific. It was an attempt to somehow influence my autonomic nervous system by raising my allowance from 25 cents a week to 35 cents, with the proviso that 5 cents would be taken off for each morning that Mom had to wash the flannel. I don't remember it working terribly well, but at least I was still raking in an average of about 25 cents each week...and there was definitely no humiliation involved from either parent.

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[9] From “Such, Such Were the Joys” in “Funny, but not Vulgar”. Folio Society, 1998. p.226.

In Grade 6, I hung out with Lance. During the 70-71 NHL season, we both enjoyed collecting and trading the Esso Power Player cards which everyone's fathers picked up whenever they gassed up their cars. And when that got boring, our next obsession became assembling plastic model kits of airplanes and fast cars.

That summer, I got invited to Lance's place for a BBQ and sleep-over. His parents had a tent trailer in the back yard, so I brought along a sleeping bag, pyjamas, and flash-light. However, that evening, his mom made hot chocolate for us, and I knew that if I accepted a mug of it, I'd be tempting fate. But the sight and aroma of those tiny coloured marshmallows floating on top of hot, creamy cocoa overcame my hesitancy. And afterward, I figured that if I crawled into my sleeping back with my jeans still on, they might serve to cover up any potential accident.

Wrong. The next morning, when we went in for breakfast, there was a noticeable stench in the air. So I feebly made some sort of excuse to go home for breakfast, and neither Lance nor his mom argued with me.

I suppose if I was in Lance's shoes, I might have quit building model cars with the bed-wetter. I might have even taunted the bed-wetter at the school play-ground. Who knows?

A week or two after the sleep-over, I saw Lance for the last time,[10] since it was just prior to my family's move from Fort St. John to Calgary. Lance and I had just watched the Saturday matinee at the

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[10] Actually, no. Nearly two decades after that, I was a student at the U. of A., and while chatting with a fellow student in the Forestry faculty, I noticed someone on the other side of the room who had a peculiar -- but strangely familiar -- way of eating potato chips. He would eat a chip, and then rub his fingers together to get rid of the salt. Eat a chip. Rub. Eat a chip. Rub. Then it struck me. Could this person be Lance? So I walked over and introduced myself. And sure enough, he was the same fellow who chose not to point out the obvious stench at breakfast. We chatted for a few minutes, and I found out that he was a year or two behind me in the program. But that was that. I should have kept ties with him, but even as an adult, I was still a bit of an introverted jerk. I see he's doing well now, though. I just googled his name, and he's very high up in one of the BC crown corporations.

Lido Theatre, and his father picked us up in his car. Lance pointed to the rear shelf of the sedan, where there was a box wrapped in brown paper. "That's for you". I was a bit puzzled, but after a bit more prodding, I took it and tore off the paper. It was the much coveted plastic model kit of Don Prudhomme's dragster, the "Snake" (famous for racing against Tom McEwan's "Mongoose"...not only on drag strips, but also on Hot Wheels tracks). I'm not sure what eventually happened to the Snake, but for at least a year or two, it occupied a prominent spot on a window ledge in Calgary. And even though the move to Calgary was otherwise a very traumatic experience for me, I somehow never stank up the flannel sheets again.

chapter ii: the party years

The scourge of acne[1] hit me in grade nine. It wasn't severe enough that it left any of the Bill Murray-type scarring, but it definitely scarred me in other ways.

So, given that, plus my short stature (I don't think I ever made it over 5' 6"), I wound up in the middle stratum of our high school pecking order. The top stratum included the jocks and the cheerleaders, as well as those who looked and behaved enough like a jock or a cheerleader to fit in. The lower stratum consisted of the nerds[2] who behaved like school was more important than peer pressure.

The rest of us had neither the brains nor the looks necessary to fit into the other two categories. School was a useless ordeal, and although we desperately wanted to go to the cool parties and meet the hot babes, genetics dictated otherwise.

During our free time, we would hang out in the parking lots of the various neighbourhood 7-elevens. We would gulp down slurpees and gobble down Mars bars and talk about important

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[1] Acne has always been a nightmare for some teenagers, but the attitude of many dermatologists (including mine at the time) only served to make things worse. In contrast to the old truism "you are what you eat", he peddled the lie that acne and diet weren't related...or at least that it's much harder for the medical profession to sell dietary information, than it is to sell office visits and medication. I took the cruel paradigm to be gospel in my teen years and I suffered greatly as a consequence. Fortunately, however, I finally went to the library in my late teens and found a book called "Acne Can be Cured" by Gustave Hoehn. And sure enough, a diet lower in fats and hydrogenated this-and-that worked a miracle within just a week or two. However, by then it was already too late to heal the psychic wounds.

[2] Carl Grillmair was one of the nerds. We were both in Mr. Campbell's Electricity class, but obviously he took it a lot more seriously than I did. These days, he is noted as being an astronomer who finds potentially earth-like planets in other solar systems. His curriculum vitae is about as long as your arm and includes notes on how many hours he has logged on the Hubble Space Telescope.

matters, such as the TV fare from the previous night, and whether or not a particular girl in a particular class happened to have worn a bra on a particular day.

However, it was in one of those parking lots on a lazy summer night when my world changed dramatically. Rob (a friend from Scouting) pulled up on his XL350 motorcycle, and with a sly grin, motioned us over to have a look at something he had hidden away in his helmet. It was a plastic baggie containing some dried vegetative matter.

A shiver went up my spine. The dreaded substance had arrived. My friends and I would now inevitably become ensnared. I knew it was dangerous, but I also knew that I desperately wanted to be included in with whatever my friends were doing.

A weekend or two later, Sam (a friend from various truancy and shoplifting adventures) had his parents' house to himself, and so a small party[3] got started. Of course, there was some beer and a mickey or two of rum, but now there was also pot.

The conventional wisdom was that the first time you smoked it, you wouldn't get high. It might take two or three sessions. And that was how it happened with both Sam and me. Several puffs, all inhaled deeply. But nothing. Oh well.

Dean was also in our circle of friends, and it was at his place a few days later that I finally found out what pot was all about. It was noon-hour on a school day. His folks weren't home, but his older sister was. She was gorgeous and she was smart. Maybe not school smart, but she knew about music and she knew about books. Maybe not the Mozart and Tolstoy type of music and books, but certainly the Frank Zappa and Carlos Castenada[4] type of music and books.

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[3] This was in the days before Twitter and Facebook facilitated large, destructive mobs of drunken Neanderthals. So the small party remained small, and Sam's parents' house remained unscathed.

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[4] A bestselling author with a Phd in Anthropology, and an abiding interest in both native spirituality and a psychedelic species of cactus (peyote) found only in Mexico and Texas. *Time* magazine (March 5, 1973), paraphrasing

And of course, it was the latter type of cultural wizardry that really mattered.

"Evan hasn't gotten stoned yet? Well, I'll get him stoned. Don't worry about that."

And indeed she did. After a small pipe bowl full, I was well and truly high. I had joined the club, the secret brother and sisterhood that the world had known for millennia. And it wasn't quite what I had expected.

Actually, I didn't know what to expect. Over the previous weeks, I realized that the still-somewhat-tenacious joint puffing, axe murdering, Mansonesque stereotypes from previous decades[5] were just myths. My friends were still relatively sane, and no one had gone on a blood-soaked crime spree yet. But I still had no idea how I might feel under the influence.

As we walked to school that afternoon, my feelings alternated between euphoria and paranoia. The euphoria is difficult to describe, but at various times in the weeks and months and years ahead, I felt elated to be merely alive. Whether I was looking at the complex branching patterns on a tree or whether I was digging a ditch, the world was an utterly marvellous place to be living in.

The paranoia is much easier to describe. I knew I was high, and I was certain that the whole world could read my face like a book. And, of course, I was also in the middle of those years when the hormonal rush was as much a hindrance as a joy. Like many other male teens, I often had to walk down the school hallway with my

Winston Churchill, called him “an enigma wrapped in a mystery wrapped in a tortilla.” Critics are still divided as to whether his books are fiction or non-fiction.

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[5] Much of it derived from over-the-top ideological nonsense, such as the 1936 film called Reefer Madness, which depicts rape, manslaughter and suicide as the consequences of having a few puffs. Today, the film is a cult classic, shown in smaller art house theatres to people (often under the influence) wanting to have a few chuckles over the notion of an establishment so paranoid about a recreational drug from the Afro-American ghetto, that it would stop at nothing to demonize it.

clutch of books strategically placed in front of my crotch. And now, with the aphrodisiac powers of marijuana surging in my veins – and with peers and parents and teachers *all most certainly* looking at me with either amusement or disgust – I often felt like I had taken one puff too many.

A third feeling came over me during the following weeks and months. It was the dawning realization that society was capable of lying to me. Marijuana didn't cause me to go mad and neither did I start to crave heroin. And if I was suddenly faced with the prospect of "dry" times , I didn't start to climb the walls in a feverish sweat.[6] Over the next decade or two of fairly regular use, I found that on the first dry day, I would momentarily think "gee, I could use a toke right now" perhaps a dozen times or more. The fleeting thought would disappear as fast as any other thought. On the second day, the fleeting thought would occur perhaps a half dozen times. And so on. After a week, it might be once a day. And after well over a decade (as at present), I find that that thought pops up...hmm, maybe once a year? Usually, it's on those occasions when I'm watching the newscasts of amiable potheads puffing away in front of a town hall or a legislature building, trying to assert their rights to alter their consciousness.[7]

Of course, some people like to alter their consciousness a bit more than others. These people hang out in bars a bit more than they ought to. These people often mix their pleasures. These people often progress to other types of mind altering drugs which are much more habit forming. And as I found out later in life, Dean's older sister was one of these people.

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[6] As noted in the Wikipedia entry on "marijuana addiction", although there is a common withdrawal syndrome associated with marijuana, there is not the same potential for serious physical dependency normally associated with drugs such as nicotine, alcohol and heroin.

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[7] This particular sentence was first written about four years *before* Trudeau the Younger legalized pot on October 17, 2018. However, the sentence was also written about four *decades after* the Le Dain Commission recommended precisely the same thing to the government of Trudeau the Elder…with zero effect.

During this time, the quantities of alcohol I consumed often got into the stupid realm. The only saving grace was that the habit was just a weekend pursuit. I didn't crave it during the rest of the week. I simply guzzled it during the weekend parties in order to gain acceptance with the guys and to more easily talk to the girls.

Of course, I also smoked pot at the parties to an excessive degree, but the effect on my consciousness of the relatively expensive weed was easily obliterated by the effect of the dirt-cheap mickeys of rum that I favoured.

Alcohol is supposed to loosen the tongue…though I don't recall any transcendent conversations. What I do remember was urinating off of the front steps of my parents' place when I commandeered the house for a party. I also remember a few beer stains on the carpet and the stinking ashtrays the next day. But luckily, the place didn't get utterly trashed and luckily, I didn't do it a second time, due to the perceived imbalance between the initial fun and the subsequent clean up.

The lowest point came when I tried to drink a 26'er of gin at a party. I remember the first half hour or so. But then there was just a blank. And after that blank, my next memory was of myself sprawled across the back seat of my old Datsun 510, which happened to be parked nicely in front of my parents' house. It was a bright Sunday morning, and the car was an oven. I didn't feel terribly well, and I immediately noticed that the clothing around my crotch was damp and not smelling particularly fresh. Another friend, Dan (who introduced me and Dean to the jaw-dropping spectacle of Saturday Night Live), had driven me home…fortunately. Otherwise, I might have woke up in a rural ditch or an urban alley or perhaps not at all.

After that, I toned down the drinking somewhat. That is, I reverted back to the mickey. That way, I could at least remember a few more of the stupid things that I did.

It wasn't too long after I first started smoking pot that my parents found out. I had been smoking with a fellow who we only knew as "Chemical Kid" (platform shoes, bell-bottoms, and heavily glazed eyes). He was either from a rich background or he was a dealer, since he always used to have a lot of the stuff on him. The mere mention of his name (usually just shortened to "Chemical") was enough to induce fits of laughter in us, since his face seemed to be permanently on the verge of dribbling down to the floor (just like on Robert Crumb's "Stoned Again" poster).

I hadn't been quite so wrecked in a long time, and my eyes must have been quite red. When I got home, Mom noticed it right away and asked if anything was wrong. Of course, I said "no", and I somehow managed to make it to the sanctity of my room without going through the gauntlet of any more questions.

Nothing more was said, but the beans were spilled some time in the next few months when our family went for a vacation in the truck camper. Of course I took along a small stash. I hid it in my clothing cubby hole, in one of my socks. But on the last day, as we rumbled down the highway towards home, Mom started to do a bit of pre-arrival packing (it was still legal to walk about in the back of a truck camper while speeding along at 100 kph). And she must have found the sock, because shortly after that, the vehicle stopped, all us kids all got shunted into the back, and her and Dad had some sort of serious discussion in the cab.

When we got home, my sisters were sent to their rooms, and a very solemn conversation ensued. Dad asked me when I was going to give up smoking the stuff.

"I'll never give it up." The resolute calmness with which I said it made its own statement.

There weren't any consequences. As I mentioned before, Dad wasn't big on punishment, physical or otherwise. And in hindsight, I suspect he probably did the right thing. A visit to the wood-shed – either literally or figuratively – would have built up nothing more

than a big pile of ill-will.

Fast forward a few years, and I was smoking pot on a more regular basis. I was holding down a regular job in an automotive parts warehouse; I always arrived on time; and I took very few sick days. That helped to smooth things over both with the family and with society at large. However, I was smoking several times a day, every day...even at work (as were at least half of the other employees, so an appreciable portion of our coffee breaks and lunch hours were spent up on the mezzanine floor with either a bong or a some hash oil on a cigarette).

Of course, the law of diminishing returns kicked in, and my tolerance level climbed higher and higher.

Mom's most common question at this time was: "how much are you spending on that old pot?" ("that old" somehow indicating a strange mix of endearing familiarity and contempt.) I usually replied about twenty dollars a week, which was both fairly accurate and approximately ten percent of my income.

Fortunately, I decided to go to university in 1985. Not only did my earlier connections dry up, but studying cell biology while under the influence was a lot harder to do than sorting mufflers on a pallet while under the influence.

chapter iii: a girl

Janice was 14. I was 16. So Dad warned me: "Just remember: she's only a year older than your little sister." However, as noted in previous chapters, parental warnings had little effect on me.

She was originally going out with Todd, who had a shiny new F150 pick-up truck. So when they broke up, and I subsequently heard through the grapevine that she liked me, I was puzzled...but elated. 45 years later, I can only guess why she might have liked a short, pimple-faced guy like me. Maybe it was because up until then, she had only seen me on a few weekday evenings (ie, when I wasn't shit-faced drunk).

And indeed, it *was* a weekday evening when I picked her up for the first time. We went to someone's parents' house, where there was a small, sober gathering in the basement den. Perhaps the TV was turned on, showing M*A*S*H or the Six Million Dollar Man. Or maybe the girls had one of their scratchy pieces of pop vinyl on the turntable (invariably either Supertramp's Crime of the Century, or Wings' Venus and Mars).

In the other corner of the room, there was a big La-Z-Boy recliner. And although I don't remember talking with Janice about anything – ever – I do recall that we quickly found ourselves in that recliner. Oblivious to the others, we held each other and kissed…very slowly. And when we drew our tongues apart, I felt as though there was a small orb of energy suspended between them.[1]

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[1] Too much information? No. Rather, too little. Because to this day, I don't know what that "small orb of energy" was. Several years after the event, while checking out the shelves in a New Age bookstore, I saw the same phenomenon depicted on the cover of *The Human Aura* (author: Nicholas Regush). It was likely a doctored photo (two people about to kiss, with spiky aural fringes around them, and a small orange sphere suspended between their mouths), but at the time, it was a strong confirmation of what I felt in that La-Z-Boy.

Now, when I look back on it, I wonder. Could it have been something metaphysical? After all, physics has now shown that what Einstein once derided as "spooky action at a distance" (or "quantum entanglement", to use

It might have been ten minutes, or it might have been an hour. But it felt like an eternity. And it was the first time that I had ever kissed a girl.

It wasn't long after that when I started lusting after her friend, Jo-Anne. In fact, my next memory of Janice is of her sitting in the back seat of a crowded car at a drive-in theatre on an alcohol-fueled weekend. I was in the front seat, trying to kiss Jo-Anne. Jo-Anne, of course, was extremely uncomfortable, but in my drunken hormonal state, I could only begin to detect her discomfort after about a half-hour of trying to stick my tongue down her throat.

My third and final memory of Janice was at another of the weekend parties, when someone mentioned that she was looking for a ride home (hint, hint). I wasn't interested. Apparently, I was only interested in boosting my own ego by crushing someone else's. I remember her standing forlornly on the front steps of the house where the party was winding down, while I started up my car and left.

I'm not sure what I think of the Hindu/Buddhist concept of karma.[2] However, in my case, it certainly worked. Nearly two decades passed before I next had any kind of significant, intimate,

the technical term) is real. Communication at the sub-atomic level can occur instantaneously across vast inter-stellar distances...or maybe across a few centimetres, while reclining in a La-Z-Boy. This is not homespun drivel, but solid research from physicists at MIT, the University of Vienna, and the University of California at San Diego. And it builds on quantum entanglement studies going back to the 1960's.

But don't take my word for it. Check out PBS's Nova series on the matter (go to Youtube and search "quantum riddle 2019"). At 47 minutes into the video, we hear:"[The results of the experiment] mean that…an action in one place can have an instant effect anywhere in the universe, as if there is no space between them…". So "spooky action" is real. Therefore, a bit of humility is in order whenever we're tempted to think that the universe is simply built out of bricks and mortar, and that every paranormal claim has the same validity as the 1967 attempt to levitate the Pentagon. After all, that cell phone in your hand *could not have been made* without the help of "quantum theory" (google it!).

physical relationship with a woman.

[2] …or the Christian version: "...for whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap." (Galatians 6:7)

chapter iv: LSD

Just like Rupert Bear[1] comics (in the mid-1960's) and MAD magazines (in the early 1970's) exerted a strong hold on my psyche, the late-1970's offered up something called High Times. I still have the first copy that I ever bought (July, 1976). And just like I occasionally enjoy reading through my old Rupert Bear books and MAD magazines, I get the same pleasant feelings of nostalgia as I flip through the tattered pages of this ancient ode to recreational drug use.

High Times was mainly concerned with marijuana. However, it also had advertisements and articles relating to cocaine. A quick content analysis of my 1976 issue reveals no leading articles on the drug, but there are plenty of advertisements for silver coke spoons, a page full of information given to various cocaine busts, and within the "Trans-High Market Quotations" section, there are some of the then-current prices listed (eg, in the Great Lakes region, cocaine was $75 to $125 a gram, with the quality "on decline", whereas in Bogota, Columbia, it was $300 to $400 an ounce and "becoming very hot to handle").

Like a typical teenager, I was somewhat impressionable. So cocaine easily registered on the "interesting" side of the ledger. Fortunately though, I also had a well-worn library card. And I had fond memories of public libraries going back to my days in Fort St John: the attractive librarian with her slender stylus, oh-so-carefully pressing out due dates on cards tucked into the back of books which detailed the adventures of Henry Huggins and Homer Price[2]. My memories of the Calgary Public Library were more recent, but they

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[1] A British comic strip character dating from as far back as 1920. My grandmother regularly sent me the annuals when I was a child. The artwork was marvellous, and there was flawlessly metered rhyme to accompany the pictures (as opposed to the typical speech balloons for Archie and Donald Duck). But as marvellous as Rupert was, I never bothered to write a single thank-you note to "Nana".

[2] Marvellously written and illustrated Americana about nerdy, adventurous boys in the 1940's and 1950's (hey, we were *all* nerds back then).

were still fond: the massive wooden card catalogue, which I pawed through in order to find books about building model airplanes and making shortwave radio antennas.

But this time, I looked under "C" for cocaine, where I found the book Cocaine Papers, written by Sigmund Freud (the famous neurologist who began the practice of psychoanalysis in the late 19th century). Freud was an early user and proponent of the drug, and he recommended it as an anti-depressant, as well as a cure for morphine addiction.

I suppose that given the knowledge of the drug at the time (it wasn't isolated from the coca plant until 1855), Freud might be forgiven for being a trifle naïve,[3] and thus perhaps not the best source for a young man with visions of silver coke spoons dancing before his eyes. However, I still read through the massive tome (easily the heaviest book I had ever lugged home from a library), which meant that it must've been at least somewhat engrossing (and one person agrees with me, since the single review on amazon.com gives it 5 out of 5 stars).

Many years later, about all I can remember from the book is an account of the Bavarian army being issued the drug to help it on its occasional long marches. So, at the time, my conclusion was that cocaine was an interesting drug, but essentially it was nothing more than caffeine on steroids (and in fact, both drugs are classified as habit-forming stimulants). The interest dwindled, and at no time after that did I ever try to score any of the white powder.

However, the 1976 High Times issue also featured an interview with Albert Hofmann.[4] At the Sandoz Laboratories in Switzerland in 1938, Hofmann was the first scientist to isolate the LSD[5] molecule

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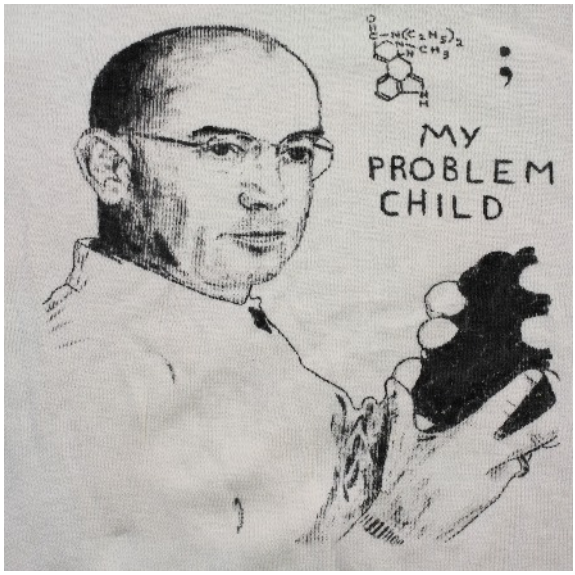
[3] In fact, much of the later analysis of the book shows that Freud was blind to the obvious negative effects of the drug. http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2011/oct/13/physician-heal-thyself-part-ii/?pagination=false

[4] If it appears that the image of Hoffmann on the next page was painted on fabric, then you have a good eye. This, and many other similar images in this book were painted by myself on t-shirts that I wore in the 1980's.



from a fungus on rye plants (for research into bleeding complications associated with childbirth). Five years later, he accidentally absorbed a very small amount through his skin and became the first human to trip on acid. 63 years after that, in a New York Times interview,[6] he called LSD "medicine for the soul". And finally, in 2008, he died of natural causes, at the age of 102.

In a preface to the *High Times* interview, Hofmann wrote:

> "I was at first not in agreement with the idea of publishing this interview here. I was surprised and shocked at the existence of such a magazine, whose text and advertising tended to treat the subject of illegal drugs with a casual and non-responsible attitude."
>
> But later: "Nevertheless, I came to the decision that my statement's appearing in a magazine directed to readers who use currently illegal drugs might be of special value and could help to diminish the abuse or misuse of the psychedelic drugs."

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[5] Lysergic acid diethylamide. According to Wikipedia, LSD is "non-addictive, is not known to cause brain damage, and has extremely low toxicity relative to dose, although in rare cases adverse psychiatric reactions such as anxiety or delusions are possible."

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[6] In the January 7th, 2006 issue, in an article by Craig S. Smith, titled *Nearly 100, LSD's Father Ponders His 'Problem Child'* .

As I once again read through the yellowing pages of this battered old magazine, I am pleased to see that even at that young age, I was already in the habit of underlining text. So I now have a good sense of what I was thinking at the time. At one point in the interview, the editor asks Hofmann: "For many people, LSD provides what they describe as a religious experience. What are your feelings on this?" And I see that I had underlined the following:

> "Another reason for the incidence of religious experiences is the fact that the very core of the human mind is connected with God. This deepest root of our consciousness, which in the normal state is hidden by superficial rational activities of the mind, may become revealed by the action of the psychedelic drug."

Speaking of God, I had quit going to church several years earlier. My parents didn't argue, realizing the futility of trying to force me. But I remember my dad confronting me one day, asking if I still believed in God (or that entity which Northrup Frye called "the ferocious old bugger up in the sky with the whiskers and the reactionary political views…").[7] I replied in the negative. It was certainly inconvenient to believe in God, given the boredom of church attendance. And it was a bit of an intellectual stretch, given that science and religion have always had a somewhat stormy relationship (astronomers were no longer being burned at the stake, but on one occasion, I recall Mom being somewhat dismayed when I happened to mention that we had evolved from fishes). However, the linkage between God and an illegal drug (as proposed by Hofmann) was a bit of an eye-opener to a young cynic like myself.

In January, 1977, just a few months after the High Times issue, another magazine published a bit of earth-shattering material that played with my mind. My parents had a subscription to Reader's

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[7] From *Northrup Frye in Conversation* by David Cayley. House of Anansi Press, 1992. Concord, Ontario. P.53. (The inclusion of that quote, though worth a good chuckle, is not really fair to either my dad or the United Church, since neither of them can be described as being remotely reactionary)

Digest, and in that month, its Condensed Book section highlighted Raymond Moody's *Life After Life.* Moody, a psychologist and medical doctor, studied what we now call "near-death experiences". You know the typical scenario: the heart stops, the soul floats up over the lifeless body, there's an intense white light radiating love, the subject sees loved ones who have gone before, and then he/she gets sucked back into the body, since it isn't yet time to go. It has such common cultural currency now, that I can think of at least two episodes of The Simpsons where it featured quite prominently: one where their dog dies and one where Mr. Burns dies.

But in 1977, coming shortly after the Hofmann interview, it was doubly fascinating. And it must have been for others, also. My grade 12 math teacher, Mrs. Wong, asked the class if anyone had read the article in Reader's Digest. She probably wasn't too surprised when I was the only one to raise my hand, since she often had to reprimand me in class for reading non-math material.

"Do you think what he wrote was true?"

"Oh yeah, I think so." I said.

She just nodded her head and then her thoughts momentarily went somewhere else. The rest of the class had absolutely no idea what we were talking about.

Later on, when I worked in an auto exhaust parts warehouse, and I was grabbing a pipe from a bin high up over the concrete floor, I momentarily pondered what would happen if I just let go. Of course, there would be a "splat!" But would I float above my body and see the white light?

On one particular day in 1978, I ingested a "purple microdot". It was a small, cylindrical purple pill, about the size of a large grain of sand. It was mostly just filler (ie, whatever non-medicinal ingredients that pills are mostly made up of), but within the filler, it held about 100 micrograms of LSD. That's 100 millionths of a gram. A dollar bill weighs about a gram, so if you chopped one up into

10,000 tiny paper chunks, one of those chunks (a single square millimetre) would weigh about 100 micrograms.

In a scaled up analogy, if a dose of LSD was the same size as a penny, then a dose of cocaine (about 1/10th of a gram) would be a stack of pennies about 5 feet high. And the alcohol content from a single glass of wine (10 grams) would be a stack reaching half way up the side of the Empire State Building.

Luckily, I made the choice to ingest the drug on a weekday evening (ie, without alcohol). A bunch of us were at another one of the dreadful basement dens with the parents' bar and the shag rug and the lumpy couches. The parents were home, so we were likely just watching TV…sports, I'm guessing, since if it was anything remotely interesting (like a PBS nature documentary), it would have surely imprinted itself on my memory. But as it was, my friends were doing their normal boring activities, and I was free to mentally cloister myself (they were aware that I had dropped some acid, but since it was a fairly modest dose, my outward behaviour didn't attract any undue attention).

The main thing that I recall about that trip 40 years ago was the very distinct impression that my mind had become somewhat disassociated from my body. The analogy that came to me at the time was of someone operating a hydraulic excavator. I was the operator in the cab, pulling levers this way and that. And my body was the excavator itself, moving about in response to the signals given to it. I felt like a tiny entity inside my skull, telling my arms and legs what to do.

And that was about it. The peak experience might have only lasted about half an hour. The rest of the time, I just felt a mild revulsion against the typical proletarian nonsense coming from my boisterous buddies. And there were no after-effects the following day.

The weekend came and I hurried off to the library, where I found *The Politics of Ecstasy* by Timothy Leary. Looking back, my main recollection from the book was his model unifying the various levels of consciousness. Eight in all. And it must have struck a chord with

other "innernauts", since I see there is now a thorough description in Wikipedia under the heading *Eight-circuit model of consciousness*.[8]

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[8] I'll summarize (since the Wikipedia entry is seven pages long). It describes eight levels of consciousness. Some of the lower levels, we share with other animals; some of the higher levels are those which are only attainable through disciplines such as meditation or via specific psychedelic drugs.

The lowest level is the bio-survival circuit, associated with either going towards nourishment or away from danger. The human infant becomes imprinted at this level, depending on whether his/her environment is a nourishing/trusting one or a painful/scary one. In terms of animal consciousness, the invertebrates would be at this level.

The second level is the emotional-territorial circuit, which is associated with dominance versus submission, as well as territoriality. This is the stage where the human toddler's brain gets imprinted with either dominance or a more cooperative outlook. In the animal kingdom, wolf packs are well known for utilizing dominance/submission and territoriality.

The third level is the symbolic and dexterity circuit, associated with analysis and invention and tool use. When the first proto-humans broke away from the rest of the primates, this circuit became dominant.

The fourth level is the domestic and socio-sexual circuit, associated with tribal morals. It concerns both the acculturation of the young, as well as the transmission of culture across generations.

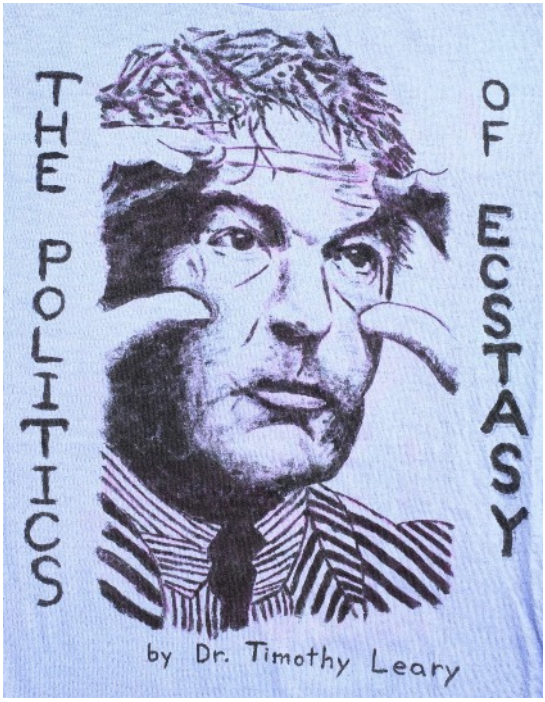
The neuro-somatic circuit is next, where a more in-depth awareness of the body occurs. It also takes the form of a hedonistic detachment from the concerns of the previous four circuits.

The neuro-electric circuit involves awareness of the body's nervous system and the potential reprogramming of the imprinting of the first four circuits.

The neuro-genetic circuit is associated with awareness of the body's DNA and RNA, supposedly tying in with memories of past lives and reincarnation, etc. My personal thought is that DNA would be utterly incapable of encoding such memories. Perhaps they would be better lumped in with the next circuit?

The last circuit is the psycho-atomic or quantum circuit, associated with awareness beyond the ordinary space-time continuum. Out-of-body and near-death experiences are supposedly associated with this realm.

In the following years, I read a few more of Leary's books, but at some point, he started proposing space travel and colonization as the main answer to humanity's problems. I saw this as elitist nonsense, and I thought about the other 99.9% of us, who would be trapped on this nest which we are so adept at fouling up. Wouldn't it make much more sense to simply clean up our act? And perhaps not have quite so many babies while we're at it?

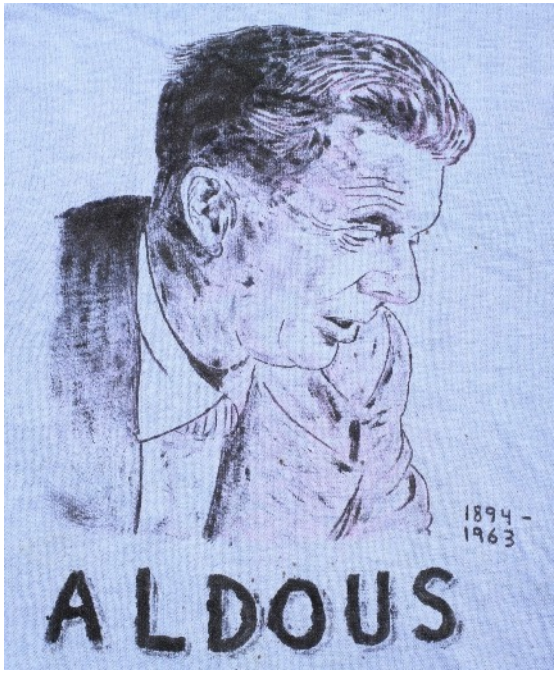


Soon after reading Leary, I started reading Aldous Huxley. If Leary was the Bart Simpson of the psychedelic world, then Huxley was its version of Walter Cronkite. Leary advised pretty much everybody to "turn on, tune in, drop out", whereas Huxley advised constraint. Leary wound up in a federal prison, in a cell adjacent to Charles Manson's, whereas Huxley was awarded the *Companion of Literature* by the U.K.'s Royal Society of Literature. Their lives could not have been more different from each other. And yet...

At about 11 a.m., on May 6, 1953, in a comfortable house somewhere in the hills above Hollywood, Huxley ingested 0.4 grams of mescaline, another psychedelic compound. After about an hour and a half, he looked at a vase of flowers on the kitchen table:

> "At breakfast that morning I had been struck by the lively dissonance of its colours. But that was no longer

the point. I was not looking now at an unusual flower arrangement. I was seeing what Adam had seen on the morning of his creation-the miracle, moment by moment, of naked existence."[9]



He was seeing something, but he was not attaching any concepts to it. Later on, he saw something that the rest of us tend to attach far too many concepts to:

"We walked out into the street. A large pale blue automobile was standing at the curb. At the sight of it, I was suddenly overcome by enormous merriment. What complacency, what an absurd self-satisfaction beamed from those bulging surfaces of glossiest enamel! Man had created the thing in his own image - or rather in the image of his favourite character in fiction. I laughed till the tears ran down my cheeks."

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[9] This quote and the next quote were taken from Huxley's book *The Doors of Perception,* first published in 1952, but also in 2011 by Thinking Ink Limited (New York), pages 5 and 28. The term "doors of perception" was lifted from a poem by William Blake, the English poet and mystic who lived in the late 18th and early 19th century. Huxley's book title subsequently became the inspiration for the 1960's rock group, *The Doors.*

Obviously, this was a drug that was not conducive to rampant consumerism. And indeed, 13 years later, it was outlawed.

Dean loved booze – perhaps a bit more than most. And Dean could be a nasty drunk. Some people get mellow when they get drunk; others get crazy. Dean was in the latter group, so he would occasionally look for someone to pick on. And at one party, that turned out to be me. However – coward that I was – I simply reminded him that there was someone else at the party who was even a riper target for abuse than I was: Perry, with his disco shirt and platform shoes. And Dean fell for it.

Like a lot of the other boozers, Dean would sometimes take his alcohol laced with a nominal amount of LSD. Was it because Dean liked the sensory changes associated with the latter? Was it because Dean was a bit of a philosophizer? No, it was because LSD enabled him to drink more than he otherwise could. Booze is classified as a depressant, so it's at the opposite end of the spectrum to the psychedelics. Just like venom and anti-venom or matter and anti-matter, they tend to cancel each other out.

But LSD had a certain underground cachet. If alcohol was the Ford Pinto of the drug world (ie, cheap and dangerous), then LSD was the Lotus Elise (a sensory extravaganza in a very small package). So the next time Dean was a drunken mess and trying to get belligerent with me, I stuck out my metaphorical chest and said, "I bet you can't do acid without drinking." That seemed to shut him up. He must have experienced, at least once, that sensation when LSD forces you to sit back and assess your life under a microscope.

Joe was another friend. He was very much like Dean's older sister, in that he knew which music was good and which music was just popular drivel. He read Rolling Stone magazine religiously, and each time we went over to his place, he had new vinyl to share. As I look in my CD cabinet today, I can still see his influence: Jeff Beck,

Miles Davis, Herbie Hancock, the Grateful Dead, Isao Tomita, and on and on. My fondest memory of Joe is of him listening to Isao Tomita's electronic rendition of Modest Mussorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition*. The particular track was the *Ballet of the Unhatched Chicks*. Joe is sitting back in a recliner and giggling deliriously. His arms and legs are rhythmically flailing against the empty air, in time with the cheeping of the chicks. Dean and I are also laughing deliriously – half at Mussorgsky's chicks and half at Joe. Of course, a little bit of hashish helped to add some levity to the situation.

A few years later, Joe disappeared from the scene. We found out that he had developed schizophrenia. I bumped into him a few years after that, and he mentioned that he was working for the postal service. He seemed OK, but in the decades since, he hasn't been to any of our high school reunions, and of all the friends I used to have, he is the one I'd most like to see again.

According to the Wikipedia entry on schizophrenia, "A number of drugs have been associated with the development of schizophrenia, including cannabis..." The entry also states that genetics plays a factor (so there was likely some schizophrenia somewhere in Joe's family background), and that the prevalence of the disorder in the wider population is about 0.3% to 0.7% .

According to researchers at the Mount Sinai School of Medicine in New York:

> "The effects of hallucinogenic drugs resemble some of the core symptoms of schizophrenia. Some atypical antipsychotic drugs were identified by their high affinity for serotonin 5-HT(2A) receptors, which is also the target of LSD-like drugs. "[10]

So the drugs that Joe uses to keep his condition under check work on the same cell receptors in our bodies that drugs like LSD work on.

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[10] From 2009 Apr;32(4):225-32. Epub 2009 Mar 5. Psychedelics and schizophrenia.González-Maeso J, Sealfon SC. Department of Psychiatry, Mount Sinai School of Medicine, New York, NY 10029, USA. (http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/19269047)

This takes us back to the "doors of perception" that William Blake, Aldous Huxley, and Jim Morrison all talked about. As Huxley noted:

> "The schizophrenic is like a man permanently under the influence of mescalin, and therefore unable to shut off the experience of a reality which he is not holy enough to live with, which he cannot explain away because it is the most stubborn of primary facts, and which, because it never permits him to look at the world with merely human eyes, scares him into interpreting its unremitting strangeness, its burning intensity of significance, as the manifestations of human or even cosmic malevolence, calling for the most desperate countermeasures, from murderous violence at one end of the scale to catatonia, or psychological suicide, at the other."[11]

After Joe's unfortunate circumstance came to light, I thought of an analogy: rusty door hinges. Practices such as meditation and psychedelic drug use may allow us to open the doors of perception, but some people have doors that might be difficult or impossible to close again. Joe was one of those people. He was one of the 0.3% to 0.7% of the population with a genetic heritage that causes huge problems when they mix their Mussorgsky with marijuana or magic mushrooms.

In subsequent years, I dropped LSD perhaps a half dozen times. I also did magic mushrooms a few times, and noticed very little difference in effect between the two drugs. Likewise, with the legal alternatives, such as San Pedro cactus and morning glory seeds.

They were all mild trips. No fantastic visual and auditory hallucinations. No warpage of time. Just a feeling of relaxed alertness, a child-like awareness of the beauty of nature, and an ability to live in the present (instead of obsessing over the next day's

[11] *The Doors of Perception.* Thinking Ink Limited edition, p.27).

deadlines and the previous day's mistakes). But there were also those moments when my psyche forced me to analyze the questionable path that my life had taken up until then.

Maybe there was a bit of Todd Rundgren to listen to. Maybe a few National Geographics to flip through. And I was fine with that, since the possibility of an unpredictable, high-octane trip was, to tell the truth, a bit unnerving. And in the case of the teeny little microdots, I suspect that the producers thought it wise to distribute recreational dosages, rather than mind blowing ones. If the weekend alcoholics used them to aid in the drainage of their glasses, well so be it.

The effect of psychedelics on me came not only when I was high, however. A huge influence came about via the library and the various used book stores that I wandered through. Merely reading about the relationship between psychedelics and religion and mysticism[12] brought about massive changes in my thoughts about what was important in life, and what was not.

I consciously tried to be less of a jerk. The same neighbours who might have once seen me pissing off of the front step of my parents' house, now saw me walking the family dog up and down the back alley with a home-made poop scoop (made from a broom handle attached to a plastic flower pot). I may have looked like an idiot – and this was long before scooping poop was the politically correct thing to do – but the neighbours smiled at my efforts and said hello. And it felt good to say hello back.

Institutions were another matter, though. At that point in my life, I didn't see them as people. So I felt justified in ripping them off...especially if they were large corporations. The exhaust system on my Triumph Spitfire was in perfectly good shape, but it felt good to "stick it to the man". So I secretly stashed away a brand new muffler out back of the warehouse where I picked it up later...not realizing, of course, the ripple effects that such seemingly insignificant acts send into society. Like littering, the effect is not

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[12] …with the word "mysticism" simply being defined as religion without the associated dogma, guilt, and rock-hard pews.

seen merely as a single Tim Hortons cup covering a tiny patch of grass, but rather as the millionth Tim Horton cup contributing to an expensive eyesore that will cost a tidy bundle of tax money to clean up.

In the cultural arena, I threw a lot of conventions out of the window. I wore a leather jacket with a prohibition sign prohibiting a smaller prohibition sign inside of it. In other words, I was nominally a libertarian...though somewhat conflicted, since on the opposite side of the same jacket, I had painted the PBS logo (my wild Friday evenings had now been given over to watching Washington Week in Review and The McLaughlin Group…while slightly stoned, of course).

I cut my own hair without a mirror. I just grabbed handfuls here and there and snipped away with scissors until my head looked like a haystack. However, that only lasted a day or two. When Mom saw me, she was mortified, and out came the electric clippers.

If there was one societal convention that I had trouble throwing out of the window, it was rampant consumerism. I realized that it was an evolutionary dead end (for both my sanity and the planet). But it still had me in its clutches.

There was a beautiful Norton 850[13] for sale that screamed "Buy me! Buy me!" I equivocated a bit, but in the end, I gave in.

And then, after a few months, I crashed it. Going around a decreasing radius turn at night, I hit the ditch (I was slightly drunk, it should be noted). To this day, I don't remember the crash...or the

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[13] A British motorcycle reputed to be the hardest of all bikes to kick start. According to Hilton (who you'll meet in chapter vi), the South African army would recruit new members into their motorcycle corps with a single test. The potential recruit was simply told to walk over to a Norton and kick start it to life in one try. Not easy. I found that only way I could do it was to have the bike on its centre-stand, lock my knee, jump up a foot or so, and then wish upon a star that the engine wouldn't kick back. (There was no electric start on the early Nortons).

next 12 hours. Dean got me home that night, but the next morning, my sister (Kathy) freaked out when I apparently said "so, you must be my sister."

A few years before that, I managed to put a chunk of connecting rod through the crankcase of my Triumph Spitfire (also while I was slightly drunk, it should be noted).

Crashing a Norton Commando, and destroying the engine on a Triumph Spitfire. These are hugely treasured wheels in the minds of connoisseurs. But since I tended to treat vehicles like I treated people (Tim and Janice come to mind), none of them lasted more than a few months.

chapter v: books

I began to read more and more on the subjects of mysticism and comparative religion. When I belatedly got my high school diploma, it was a World Religions elective that accompanied Chem 30 and Social Studies 30. And during my first years at university, I took courses on Tibetan Buddhism and Christianity.

I wish I still had my little library, but my habit of constantly moving around dictated that I could own nothing more than what could easily fit in a small storage locker. Books were bought, but they invariably wound up back on the shelves of the used book stores where they came from. So, to reminisce, I am now forced to thumb through something called *501 Must-Read Books,*[1] where I at least have a chance to once again see some of my old acquaintances.

Aldous Huxley

Besides *The Doors of Perception,* Huxley wrote the popular science fiction novel *Brave New World.* It was meant to be a distopian novel, but when I read it in my teens, I thought it would be a pretty cool place to live. There was a drug called soma, which kept everyone happy, and the sexual activity was universal, free, and "wonderfully pneumatic".

At about the same time, I read George Orwell's *1984.* It was also a distopian novel, but it was definitely *not* a cool place to live in. Its drug was called *Victory Gin*, and it smelled "sickly" and tasted like "nitric acid". Sex was tolerated, but only as a means to make babies who would grow up in dismal, grey drudgery under the watchful eye of Big Brother.

Years later, I would read Neil Postman's book *Amusing Ourselves to Death,* which argued that our present world is much more like Huxley's nightmare than Orwell's. The current analogy for Orwell's world is North Korea, whereas Huxley's *Brave New World* is best exemplified by the empty glam and glitter of Las Vegas. The

[1] Published by Bounty Books (London, U.K.) 2006.

former enslaves people by brute force; the latter enslaves people by their own addiction to "bread and circuses".[2]

Huxley died in 1963, on the same day that Kennedy was assassinated. But the year before, he wrote a utopian novel, *Island.* It was full of references to eastern religious practices and magic mushrooms. Although I agreed with the theme of the book, I found it far too didactic. I much preferred his earlier work, *After Many a Summer Dies the Swan.* It's about a gazillionaire (supposedly based on the newspaper tycoon William Randolph Hearst…or was it Citizen Kane?…or perhaps Monty Burns?[3]) growing old and desperately looking for the mythical fountain of youth. Of course, his search is unsuccessful, and it comes at the expense of any realization of what the purpose of life really is.

Carl Jung

Jung was the Swiss psychiatrist who was featured in the movie *A Dangerous Method.* I hadn't read any of his books when I was younger – and if I did, I likely wouldn't have made it past the first few pages.[4] However, I ran into him on a regular basis when reading other books. I constantly came across references to his concepts of the "collective unconscious"[5] and "synchronicity".[6] So much so, that

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[2] Words used by the Roman poet Juvenal, who lived almost 2,000 years ago, and who mourned the erosion of civic pride among his contemporaries.

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[3] In the 4th episode of the 5th season of The Simpsons, Burns recalls from his childhood, a beloved stuffed bear called Bobo. This was based on the 1941 movie Citizen Kane, which, in turn, was loosely based on the life of Hearst.

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[4] Except for his autobiography *Memories, Dreams and Reflections,* which I read fairly recently, as a result of seeing it mentioned in *501 Must-read Books*.

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[5] The notion that there is a vast cultural, psychological and spiritual web unifying humanity's past which underlies our normal reality. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Collective_unconscious

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[6] According to wikipedia, "the experience of two or more events that are apparently causally unrelated or unlikely to occur together by chance and that are observed to occur together in a meaningful manner." Also known as the 5th album by the "new wave" rock group, The Police.

when a documentary about his life came out in 1986, I eagerly went to see it at the local avant-garde theatre (the same theatre where I had attended midnight screenings of *Reefer Madness* and *The Three Stooges* while buzzing on pot).

In the film *Matter of Heart*, I vaguely recall seeing Jung as an old man, on the shore of a Swiss lake, carving intricate designs and inscriptions upon rather large rocks. These rocks formed a large part of his life, since he lived in a small castle, built with his own hands from those same rocks.

Henry David Thoreau

If Jung built and lived in a stone castle by a lake, then Thoreau built and lived in a wooden cabin by a pond. His most well known book, *Walden,* is about his experience living in a 150 square foot cottage for 2 years, 2 months and 2 days. His aim was "to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life, to live so sturdily and Spartan-like as to put to rout all that was not life..." The book is also about his thoughts on contemporary society, particularly its emphasis on empty materialism.

I recall reading some of it. Did I read the whole book? Or only a chapter or two? Likely the latter, since as John Updike noted of *Walden*, "...the book risks being as revered and unread as the Bible." And as I thumb through a copy, I can easily see the unread portions. Take this, for example:

> I think that we may safely trust a good deal more than we do. We may waive just so much care of ourselves as we honestly bestow elsewhere. Nature is as well adapted to our weakness as to our strength.[7]

This paragraph drones on like that for another eight sentences, all of them essentially just saying “relax folks” (at least I *think* that’s what he’s saying).

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[7] *Walden* p.9 from Harper and Row’s series *Perennial Classic*, 1965 edition.

I'm being harsh, yes. But it takes a supreme effort to wade through his repetitive and obtuse 19th Century prose. And unlike the proverbial plowboy, who, at the time, could supposedly digest the texts of the Lincoln-Douglas debates with ease, our modern attention spans are much shorter.

But luckily, we get to the meat and potatoes of the book by page 30, where he states "Near the end of March, 1845, I borrowed an axe and went down to the woods by Walden Pond, nearest to where I intended to build my house, and began to cut down some tall, arrowy white pines, still in their youth, for timber." And it was likely page 30 that I skipped over to when I was a teenager, dreaming about getting away from the rat race, spending my time communing with nature, and reading great works of literature.

As it happened, I lucked out. For eleven summers, I worked at remote forest fire look-out towers, searching the horizon for wisps of smoke. I'd read a page, then look around, read a page, then look around again. My office was a tiny cubicle perched on stilts, from which I could see fifty miles in any direction, while a hundred feet below the cubicle, I had a cozy cabin (perhaps twice the size of Thoreau's). So I knew firsthand some of the pleasures that he knew.

Hermann Hesse

Hesse's book *Siddhartha* was one of the books that Mrs. Wong scolded me for reading in math class. But unlike *Walden,* I do remember finishing it.

Siddhartha is the fictional biography of a person who meets the historical Buddha. And anytime you have a decent writer (Hesse received the Noble Prize for literature in 1946) writing about an interesting person who lived a long, long time ago (about 500 BC), while using straightforward prose, it becomes hard not to turn the pages.

There was also a movie of the same name, released in 1972, which was filmed in India in suitably exotic locations. As Wikipedia notes, the film shows Siddhartha's experiences with "...harsh asceticism, sensual pleasures, material wealth, then self-revulsion

and eventually to the oneness and harmony with himself that he had been seeking." The "sensual pleasures" part of the film was agreeable to me at the time, since the lead female actor had a nude scene. This wasn't received very well by the Indian censors, since at the time, even kissing was banned in Bollywood.

William S. Burroughs

You couldn't have lived through the 1970's without bumping into this guy. A heroin junkie with a long, drawn out drawl, he shot his wife by accident – though even he wondered whether it was really an accident. They were playing a game of William Tell, but instead of an apple, there was a glass of water on her head, and instead of a bow and arrow, he had a revolver that didn't shoot straight, and instead of a Swiss background in archery, he had quite a bit of alcohol flowing through his veins.

I had read one or two of his short stories, but all I remember is his reflections on killing his wife, as well as a classification that he formulated of gunshot wounds (knee-cap, groin, stomach, and chest in some sort of order of gruesomeness and/or mortality and/or pain). To me, he would have been forgettable, except for the fact that he hung out with Allen Ginsberg and Jack Kerouac, two of the major influences of the Beat Generation of the 1950's. Kerouac wrote *On the Road,* a very influential book about traveling light and living life to the fullest. *Time* magazine rated it as one of the 100 best novels of the 20th century. So I'm astonished that *501 Must-Read Books* didn't include Kerouac.

You can pick up a copy of *On the Road,* randomly flip to just about any page and read one of Kerouac's melodious and enthusiastic descriptions of the many people and places that they came across in their travels. In Los Angeles, for example:

> "Wild negroes with bop caps and goatees came laughing by; then long-haired brokendown hipsters straight off Route 66 from New York; then old desert rats carrying packs and heading for a park bench at the Plaza; then Methodist ministers with raveled sleeves, and an occasional Nature Boy saint in beard and

sandals. I wanted to meet them all, talk to everybody..."

I wouldn't have minded talking to Kerouac, but I sure would have minded living next to him and his raucous crew. They were partiers and they loved booze and noise. In fact, Kerouac managed to drink himself to death by the age of 47. His closest travelling companion, Neal Cassady, was found in a coma, at the age of 42, on a railroad track in the middle of nowhere. He had overdosed on barbiturates. Ironically, Burroughs, the heroin junkie, lived to see his 83rd birthday. Ginsberg lived to see his 70th. He was the most contemplative of the bunch, and I wouldn't have minded him for a neighbour, except for the fact that he was an unrepentant pederast.[8]

In some small way, I'm sure that *On the Road* contributed to my travel bug. But more on that later.

Alexandra David-Neel[9]

Like Huxley's *Doors of Perception,* David-Neel's *Magic and Mystery in Tibet* was such a great influence on me, that just thinking about it three decades later, I am compelled to order a copy online and re-visit the accounts of super-human feats supposedly accomplished by the various Buddhist monks that she met. These were acts such as levitation, generating extraordinary internal body heat in the frozen wastes, and traveling long distances over formidable terrain in very short order. I also recall some of the little details, like Tibetan tea, flavoured with rancid yak butter.

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[8] According to wikipedia, "a sexual relationship between an adult male and an adolescent boy outside his immediate family." common in ancient Greece and Rome. See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pederasty and http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Allen_Ginsberg#Association_with_NAMBLA

[9] A Belgian-French explorer who managed to get into the closed kingdom of Tibet in 1924, disguised as a pilgrim. At a time when solo travel by females was frowned upon, she managed to go to India in 1890 and Sikkim in 1911. Still in Sikkim, she lived in a cave from 1914 to 1916, learning about Tibetan Buddhism and meditating. And, remarkably for a European woman at the time, she was twice able to meet the 13th Dalai Lama.

Unlike David-Neel's book, however, a slightly different Tibetan book *did* manage to survive my various moves from storage locker to storage locker. It is a well-thumbed little gem from Oxford University Press detailing the life of Milarepa (c. 1052 to c. 1135). If Buddha is the Tibetan equivalent of Jesus Christ, then Milarepa might be their Saint Paul. The hagiography goes as follows:

> Milarepa and his widowed mother suffer at the hands of an evil paternal uncle.
>
> Milarepa learns the black arts, and through fantastic sorcery, wreaks revenge on the paternal side of the family.
>
> Remorse sets in. Enlightenment is not possible when the mind is mired in evil thoughts.
>
> Milarepa finds a teacher of the white arts. Many onerous tasks over many years finally wipes the mental slate clean enough for Milarepa to start on the long road to enlightenment.
>
> Enlightenment is attained. The End.

The English translation uses very colourful language, similar to that of the King James Bible. On the quest for revenge, for example, we hear Milarepa's mother: "What I should like is to see thee dressed in a coat of mail and mounted on a steed, dragging thy stirrups over the necks of these our enemies." Wow! That's Old Testament stuff, for sure.

On the gastronomic side, I don't recall if there was any mention of rancid yak butter. However, barley is mentioned a lot, being one of the few crops that can thrive on the high Tibetan plateau. Part of Milarepa's revenge consists of directing hail storms (apparently a popular vocation back then) over the barley crops of his enemies. Even without hail storms though, agriculture was a perilous business: the small field that Milarepa's mother owned was called "Little Famine Carpet".

The biography of Milarepa is best seen as a mix between the King James Bible and the grimmest of the Brothers Grimm fairy

tales. Allegory, irony, and tragedy abound. I was so impressed with the book that, in my early 20's, I spent many hours in my parent's basement with an old manual typewriter, hammering out the first two episodes of a radio play, based on the epic. I was partly successful, in that the CBC Calgary producer liked what he read. However, the terse answer from CBC Toronto was "we don't do epics".

Along with allegory, irony and tragedy, there is likely a bit of hyperbole (directing hail storms, perhaps?). Part of the problem is that science tends to raise inconvenient questions. But another problem is that biographies are sometimes written many years after the person being written about has ceased to walk the earth. For example, the earliest gospel in the New Testament (Mark) was written about thirty years after the crucifixion of Christ. And the earliest biographer of Milarepa wrote his account at least 300 years after that saint attained nirvana.

But that's no reason to dismiss either the gospels or the account of Milarepa. Fantastic literary details tantalize us, and they add flavour to those fundamental kernels of wisdom.

Thomas Merton

In my early years, I came across Merton haphazardly: a stray mention here and there, and at least one TV documentary. He was a Trappist monk who was noted for his open-minded approach to other religions. In fact, he happened to be at a conference of Christian and Buddhist monks in Thailand, when he reached out from his hotel bathtub to adjust an electric fan and was electrocuted.

His name is often associated with another author who tried to understand the commonalities of the different world religions: Alan Watts, who was a Harvard lecturer, radio commentator, Episcopalian[10] priest, and Buddhist Zen master. He was quite a bit more unorthodox than Merton. He wrote books with strange titles,

[10] Derived from the Anglican Church, and similar to the United Church of Canada, in that its doctrines are fairly liberal.

such as *The Book: On the Taboo Against Knowing Who You Are*. And he experimented with mescaline and LSD.

As for his thoughts on psychedelic drugs, Watts said, "When you get the message, hang up the phone." In other words, when you have received the wisdom from a mescaline trip (for example), it makes no sense to take it again and again and again, as if it were a carnival ride. This is somewhat similar to the advice of Albert Hofmann, who said that it's really only necessary to clean the cobwebs out of your brain once every five years or so.

I was sure I had read Watts' autobiography many years ago. But had I really? As I now read through a recently acquired copy, I suspect that perhaps I hadn't. I suspect it was one of the many books on my various cinder block and plywood shelving units that became "ten percenters". All through my life, I've generally only ever read about ten percent of any book that I've picked up...except for a small number (also around ten percent) which have been so captivating that I've actually gone through and read the whole thing from cover to cover.

Robert Hughes

Hughes' *The Fatal Shore* was definitely not a ten percenter. It's all about Australia's experience as a penal colony in the 18th and 19th centuries, and it is one of the few books that I enthusiastically raced through in just a few days

Yes, ancient penal colonies are fascinating – and I highly recommend that you read Hughes' book, if you get a chance – but I really wanted to mention it in connection with a whole bunch of other similar historical books that I'll affectionately called "misery porn". On my bookshelf at the moment, examples include Robert Graves *Goodbye To All That* (about life in the trenches in WWI), John Keegan's *The Face of Battle* (military life both in and out of the trenches throughout history), Primo Levi's *If This Is A Man* (life in a Nazi death camp), Enda Delaney's *The Great Irish Famine*, and Juliet Gardiner's *Wartime Britain 1939-1945*.

Do you see the pattern? These are all books that, among other things, show what *real* misery is. And why is that important? It's vitally important because it shows you and I how insanely lucky we are to be living at this particular time in history.

OK, I realize that misery didn't only reside in the past – as the average Haitian or Syrian can easily attest to. But I also know that *I'm* not currently starving or being tortured, and I assume that *you* aren't either.

The important message, therefore, is that we need to quit whining. For example, only a fool would complain about the price of gasoline, when it currently costs less than Perrier water, and when a mere cupful of the stuff is able to propel a 4,000 pound cage of metal and glass at a dizzying speed for several miles.

If society ever crumbles, it will be the whiners and the fools who will turn out to be our biggest burdens. So if you know any of these folks, be proactive, and point them towards a copy of Juliet Gardiner's book or Robert Graves' book. Then maybe they'll figure out how much they have to be thankful for. And they might also begin to appreciate what our ancestors were able to accomplish under the absolute worst of circumstances.

Alexander Solzhenitsyn

Are there any other books that mightily influenced my world view as a young man, but which, for whatever reason, *501 Must-Read Books* didn't see fit to introduce to the world? Yes, there is: *The Gulag Archipelago* by Alexander Solzhenitsyn, the Nobel Prize winner for literature in 1970. I find it utterly incomprehensible that *501 MRB* missed this guy. *Time* magazine called it the "best non-fiction book of the twentieth century". And I have to agree.

His trilogy about the Gulag comprises more than 1,900 pages of misery, caused by unspeakable cruelty in the Stalinist penal camps of Soviet Russia. 1,900 pages! And I, just out of my teens, made it half way through the lot! How rare is that? A dense book with tiny print and a few grainy photos of long-dead Russians was able to

compete with *Happy Days, Three's Company, The Gong Show* and…OK, so maybe it's not so far-fetched after all.

The horror was appalling. I can recall a few of worst atrocities. Imagine being strapped to a massive log at the top of a steep hill, and then having a Soviet boot send the log tumbling down to the bottom. The result was nothing less than hamburger. And the torture. The secret police knew exactly how to make any male sign a confession without leaving a trace on his body: they just placed a boot on a testicle…and gradually increased the pressure.

Solzhenitsyn was writing about the 1940's and 1950's, but even after Khrushchev denounced Stalin in the 1960's, it was evident that Brezhnev was maintaining much of the brutality in the 1970's and 1980's. According to historian Robert Service, there were still about 10,000 political and religious prisoners living in terrible conditions during his tenure.

Meanwhile, there was a Lada dealership in Calgary in the early 1980's. Sure, I had heard all the Lada jokes,[11] but I wasn't laughing; I was seething. I fantasized about sneaking into the dealership at night with a few cans of spray paint and reminding people where these vehicles came from. But I didn't. No nerves, I guess.

A few years later, I was washing dishes with a Pole by the name of Joseph. I had brought in a book detailing the various camps still across the USSR, and we were taking a few minutes away from our scrubbing to look through it. But just then, the manager of the

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[11] A man goes into a car shop and says to the assistant "Can I have a hub cap for my Lada?" The assistant thinks for a moment and replies "Okay, it seems a fair swap."

"Why is the Lada's rear window heated?
So the hands of the people pushing it will not freeze.

Did you know that the Lada's instruction book contains 500 pages?
There are two pages with information about the car and 498 pages with bus and train timetables.

For many more, go to: http://www.webtolife.co.nz/content/lada-jokes

restaurant briskly walked into the kitchen with his permanently etched frown, and came over to us. "What is it?", he muttered. He must have thought that we were looking at car magazines or underground comics or something. But when he saw the book, he just said "Hmm. Good. Very good." in a subdued voice. He had what sounded like an eastern European accent.

I later told Joseph that we should totally boycott the USSR. "No", he replied quietly, still scrubbing away at a pot, "I don't believe in using food as a weapon." I sometimes think that due to the mere fact that decades later, I can still recall his statement, perhaps some tiny morsel of his wisdom had rubbed off on me.

chapter vi: berkeley

At various times, I headed out west to the mountains. It was not so much in the spirit of Jack Kerouac, as it was in the spirit of a wannabe hippie who was born a decade too late. Whereas Kerouac travelled for the sake of travel, I was more interested in a destination. Whereas Kerouac and his buddies would often get drunk in a bar or a flophouse or in the middle-class home of an unfortunate relative of an acquaintance, I would travel with a sleeping bag and a pup tent. Kerouac was looking for whatever experiences might come his way. I was looking for something specific: either a hippie commune or a Buddhist monastery…or a field full of magic mushrooms.

I had four modes of travel: bus, bicycle, motorcycle and hitch-hiking.

A typical bus trip would take me out to Vancouver. From there, I might take a ferry over to one of the islands, or perhaps north to the Sunshine Coast. With my backpack full of essentials, I would usually walk an insane distance to find a campsite, and then upon arrival, question my sanity. Of course, I would always be on the lookout for the mythical Mother Lode of magic mushrooms. But I never found any. So I would pack up the following morning, walk the insane distance back to the nearest corner store, gobble down a cold can of beans, and get the series of buses back to the comfort of my parents' house in Calgary.

A typical motorcycle trip would have many of the same features...with the addition of extremely cold fingers. I drove a Honda XL185, which although being very reliable, had an engine that was literally 1/10th the size of many of the touring bikes that one sees these days.

I still remember some frosty nights at the higher altitude campsites in my flimsy sleeping bag. Too cold to sleep, except for the last hour or two, when fatigue finally overcame the chill. Perhaps a quick dream or two, featuring scenes set roughly at room temperature, but then it was time to fold up the frost-laden tent, and hit the meandering highway again.

Somehow,[1] I heard about the Yasodhara Ashram nestled in the woods near Kootenay Bay. So I took the bus to Creston, and started walking north with my thumb out. I had on my old army greatcoat, which was woolly and warm, but also ridiculously heavy and quite prone to soaking up rainwater. In my back-pack, I had a pup tent and sleeping bag, as well as a candle lantern, and enough toiletries to make myself somewhat presentable.

At the time, I was reading *The Way of A Pilgrim,*[2] which was written by an anonymous Russian some time between 1853 and 1861. The book is about his wanderings across the vast land, and about the results of his interpretation of Thessalonians 5:17, which states that one should "pray without ceasing". So that's what I was doing:

"Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me, a sinner. Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me, a sinner. Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me, a sinner...." And so on. I was making my way towards a Hindu ashram, while reciting the "Jesus Prayer".

Even at that point, however, I had read enough about brain chemistry to know that the effect on my consciousness would have been much the same whether I was reciting the Jesus Prayer or immersing myself in endless repetitions of "mango chutney, beware the Ides of March". Contemplatives have known for millennia that repetitive stimuli alters consciousness. Whether that involves chanting a single syllable, staring at a mandala, observing one's breath going in and out, or simply living in a cave, the results have been similar. If practiced with enough diligence, the adherent is often able to shed the veil and begin to apprehend those realities

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[1] I often wonder how I found out about anything – let alone an ashram in the middle of nowhere – in that strange era before the internet. Perhaps a notice in a health food store?...or in a New Age bookstore?

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[2] Not a totally obscure book. J.D. Salinger (author of *Catcher in the Rye)* featured it prominently in another book titled *Franny and Zooey*…though that wasn't how I found out about it.

which normally remain hidden from our day-to-day consciousness.

But the words did have some value. At that point in my life, I was very much aware of sin, especially in St. Paul's sense of the sins of omission.[3] I could do better. I could eat healthier food. I could meditate, do yoga, anything. But the willpower needed to do the really boring stuff was lacking. I could read stacks of books on the tough spiritual practices, but I couldn't sit still for ten minutes. So the repetition of the word "sinner" was a good reminder that I wasn't perfect.

And then there was desire. With respect to women, Jimmy Carter famously mentioned it in the November, 1976 issue of Playboy. But since I was young and full of hormones, I wasn't too worried about that aspect of it. I was more concerned about my desire for material things and how I still hadn't really learned much since my childhood epiphany about the Hot Wheels set. Biblical admonishments about moths and rust and “doth corrupt” could not hope to compete with the sweet rumble of a ‘72 Norton.

And Jesus Christ? Even back then, my professed dictum was to neither believe nor disbelieve...in anything. The key was to rely solely on *experience*, if that was possible. But there was historical evidence for Jesus. And I had filled my mind with stacks of books that went on and on about purported miracles in both the eastern and western traditions. So I was quite ready to accept that an ancient Jewish carpenter had somehow acquired powers which weren’t readily recognized by the laws of classical physics. And I was quite ready to accept that somehow my repetitions might be heard. I just wasn't going to bet my sanity on it.

A young fellow in a battered old pick-up truck pulled up and gave me a ride. He knew the exact timetable of the daily RCMP patrol along the road, so he wasn't too concerned about the speed limit. And I'm not sure whether it came from him or myself, but we shared a toke or two of pot.[4] When we got to his parents' acreage,

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[3] From Romans 7:19 he states "For the good that I would, I do not..." Or as Martin Luther King said: "In the end we will not remember the words of our enemies, but the silence of our friends."

they gave me a big square of carrot cake and I went back out to the road and continued to stick my thumb out.

"Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me, a sinner. Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me, a sinner. Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me, a sinner..."

A short while later, a big family in an even bigger station wagon stopped to pick me up. We chatted and I told them that I was headed to a Hindu ashram up the road. And being Born Again Christians, they *also* told me where I was headed...but in a fairly diplomatic manner. I mentioned that my father was a United Church minister in Calgary. We talked about theology. We probably talked about theology all the way to Kootenay Bay, since at that point in my life, it was one of my favourite topics. And it was always interesting to try and figure out what – if anything – turned people on, spiritually.

The father must have sensed that I was a sincere searcher, since when we got to the end of the line, he turned to me, and with tears welling up in his eyes, asked if I'd be willing to accept Jesus into my heart. I thought to myself, "Um, yeah! I've been asking him to come into my heart all effing morning, dude!" But I just nodded my head nonchalantly and said "yes, of course I would". I don't remember what was said after that, but we parted amicably, the vast gulf intact between his belief and my yearning for experience.

I found out later that he had phoned my dad to let him know where I was and where I was headed...in both senses of the word.

There was a substantial walk to the ashram, which was nestled back in the woods. Of course, the place was idyllic, like much of rural British Columbia. But when I entered the bookshop, I quickly realized that this wasn't like the typical ashram in India or monastery in Tibet. I couldn't just present myself at the door and offer to chop

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[4] If it was mine, it would have been imported Colombian; if it was his, it likely would have been homegrown pot from Colombian seeds. This was in the early 1980's, when you had to smoke half a joint to *really* get high. And Colombian was actually the new kid on the block, having twice the strength of the old Mexican crap we smoked in the '70s…though both of them were still much, much weaker than the specialized varieties available today.

wood and carry water and then, in the early hours of each morning, sit still while observing my breath. This was a business, where people who were vastly wealthier than I, could come and take yoga courses, and then return to so-called civilization in a better frame of mind. But I looked around the shop anyway, where I bought a copy of Leary, Metzner and Alpert's[5] psychedelic version of the Tibetan Book of the Dead.[6]

On the walk back to Kootenay Bay, I spied a vacant spot in the woods to pitch my tent. So, after reading a few pages of Leary, Metzner and Alpert by candlelight, I nodded off into a deep sleep.

The next day, I hitch-hiked back down the road to Creston. But since my grand quest to chop wood, carry water, and observe my breath merely resulted in a book, I boarded the next Greyhound back to Calgary.

On another westward mushroom quest, I hitched a ride with Dan. We were just getting to the top of Roger's Pass on a beautiful Wednesday morning, when we noticed the RCMP had a bunch of semi's pulled over (probably looking for unsafe brakes, since westbound traffic had some fairly steep grades to look forward to). But they pulled us over as well. And as luck would have it, I was driving, and the old cop brazenly reached over and stuck his hand in my shirt pocket. Not a good place to hide a small bag of dope, as it turned out.

"Have you got any more of that hidden away?"

"No."

"Would you tell me if you did?"

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[5] Timothy Leary (who we met previously), Ralph Metzner, and Richard Alpert (who we'll meet in Chapter XIV).

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[6] The Tibetan Book of the Dead, according to Wikipedia, is "…intended to guide one through, the experiences that the consciousness has after death, in the bardo, the interval between death and the next rebirth."

"Probably not."

"OK, well I guess we'll have to tear your car apart, then."

He then got his younger partner to do the search, and he eventually found our main stash: an ounce of Columbian and a couple of small vials of hash oil. But he must've either been blind or sympathetic, since he left us one of the vials.

Anyway, we continued on to Vancouver Island, where we camped at Strathcona Provincial Park. We did find some mushrooms growing on rotting logs, but the stems didn't turn blue when we broke them (which would have indicated the real deal), and we didn't get very high when we dried them and smoked them.

A few months later, we appeared in a Revelstoke courtroom to plead guilty and pay our $75 fine. Five years later, our names were erased from the Canadian naughty list. Thirty years later – after getting precisely zero information from the Department of Homeland Security at the Calgary Airport – I experimentally drove across the border and found out that my name apparently wasn't on Uncle Sam's naughty list either…though I guess if this book ever sees the light of day…

I had always done a lot of cycling. I rode my first 2-wheeler on the rudimentary sidewalks and gravel roads in Hythe. Then, in Fort St. John, I graduated to asphalt and a banana seat bike with ape-hanger handlebars (just like Peter Fonda in Easy Rider!). In Calgary, I got serious with a beat up old Raleigh that had drop-handlebars and a rear derailleur (just like Eddie Merckx in the Tour de France!). And finally, due to my first full-time job (washing dishes), I was able to buy a shiny new unit with rear *and* front derailleurs, toe clips, and pannier racks (just like…um, Dervla Murphy?[7]).

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[7] A woman who, in 1963, cycled solo from London to Delhi, via Iran and Afghanistan, with not much more than a small pistol and a helluva lot of guts.

I packed lightly, taking a 3-season sleeping bag and a bivy sack. And for food, I had little more than trail mix and water. A few light layers of clothing and a gore-tex anorak, and I was ready to go.

I didn't get very far. Less than twenty miles outside of Calgary, I pulled off the highway by an overpass to munch on some trail mix. And as I walked the bike over towards the shaded concrete head-slope, one of the tires managed to clip a sharp piece of metal that was barely sticking out of the grass. If it was a normal flat tire, I could have fixed it there and then. But the shard had ripped a huge gash out of the sidewall, so I was stuck.

Now I had no choice but to stick my thumb out again. So I flicked the quick-release hub, took off the front wheel, and hauled my bike back out to the shoulder. Luckily, only a few minutes passed before a car stopped. It was a small car, and the young female driver had a quite a load packed into it already. But somehow we managed to stuff my bike in there as well. She was a student, heading back home to B.C. after a term at the U. of C. And as we wound our way through the mountains, the chatter ranged from her allergy to bees (which she had a healthy fear of), to her time in the Church of Scientology (which she also had a healthy fear of).

She let me off at Radium Hot Springs, where I camped in a pine forest overlooking the small town. In the morning, I walked the bike down to the nearest hardware store and found an oversized tire that sort of fit. Then I was back on the road. It was full of twists and turns, and long stretches where the shoulder was practically non-existent, but I must have made fairly good time, since my next memory was of the much larger town of Cranbrook, 150 kilometres to the south.

The cheapo tire that I picked up in Radium was a good excuse to shorten the forthcoming miles. So I decided that I'd take the bus to Vancouver, where there would be some upscale bicycle shops with decent lightweight tires. Luckily, the bus station at Cranbrook wasn't too far from a mattress store, which served double duty. Out back, there were lots of mattress shaped cardboard boxes, which were just the right size to stuff my partially disassembled bike into. Once that was all taped up, I then used a second mattress box to crawl into and

wait until the the wee hours of the morning, when the next Greyhound was supposed to arrive.

It was cold. Too cold to sleep, but also too cold to get out of the box and dig in the first box to retrieve my sleeping bag. It was one of those many episodes when I had to keep telling myself that the present discomfort would inevitably end, and that I'd soon be basking in the pleasant warmth of the future.

And sure enough, it wasn't long before I found myself gazing out of the window of a Greyhound bus, with the warm Okanagan sun shining in. And a few hours after that, I was in Vancouver, where I managed to find a decent tire at a decent bike shop. Dusk arrived soon after, so I settled down for the night on an abandoned railroad siding in an old industrial area.

The next morning, I headed to the nearest market to stock up on more trail mix, and once again, the modest little duffel bags strapped to the pannier racks bulged out between the bungee cords.

Leaving the market, I sensed that I was being followed by another cyclist. And after a while, he pulled up beside me.

"Hi there! You seem to be keeping up a pretty good pace."

"Yeah, well, I don't have a lot of extra weight. I guess that's why." (His bike had large, bulging pannier bags, front and rear, plus a handlebar bag and a mountain of stuff on top of the rear rack).

His name was Ed, and he was from New York City. And although he had taken the train to Chicago, he had cycled the rest of the way to the west coast. His legs were like tree trunks.

"Where are you headed?"

"I'm not sure. Why?"

"A bunch of us have found a decent spot at the old shipyards. You're welcome to join us if you'd like."

Sure enough, there was a sheltered spot on a raised wooden platform in the midst of ancient marine desolation. Some of the

others had cooking utensils and small naptha stoves, so we shared what we had, and then talked into the night.

The next morning, Ed and I headed north. First, across Burrard Inlet, and then on to a ferry for the quick trip over to Vancouver Island. We landed in Nanaimo, where sterile shopping malls dominated the landscape. So we headed south to Victoria, noted for its Old English pubs and ivy-covered stone walls. We made good time. The weather was glorious, the traffic was sparse and the shoulders were wide. It was a bit of a huff going up the Malahat Pass, but we sped down the other side almost as quickly as the folks in their "cages". And before we knew it, we were in downtown Victoria, signing in at the youth hostel.

The next day, we were on to another ferry, this time to Port Angeles in Washington State. From there, we headed east, enjoying more great weather and lots of twisty, hilly roads through tiny rural farming communities. My main memory here was the realization that when cycling 100 or 200 kilometres per day, synthetic underwear works on the crotch in a manner not unlike sandpaper. (Note to self: get cotton underwear at the nearest available department store.)

At one particularly lush spot, sandwiched between the Olympic Mountains and Puget Sound, we found a shady campground with lots of tall evergreens. I had my bivy sack, but Ed apparently had survived his continental trek with nothing more than a tube tent.[8] In any event, there was no rain and no mosquitoes with which to test the relative merits of our shelters.

The next morning, we continued on south. But it wasn't too far into the journey before I decided to test a theory of mine. So I bid farewell and good luck to Ed, and I once again took the front wheel off of my bike and stuck out my thumb.

The theory was validated. Within minutes, a vehicle stopped. It was a camper van driven by a little old lady.

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[8] A tube of plastic sheeting that is held up by a rope, usually strung between two trees. It is invariably described as an "emergency shelter".

"Is something wrong with your bike?"

"No, I'm just hitch-hiking with it; that's all."

"Oh. OK. Well, let's get your bike in the back. I'm just going to visit my son down near Eugene." She was a retired school teacher, so after an extended chat about geography and literature (while watching 300 kilometres fly past the windows), she let me off by an inter-change and we wished each other a great day.

Another few minutes passed. Another vehicle stopped. This time, it was a massive old boat driven by a similarly massive community college instructor. That got me as far as a state operated campsite that was not too far north of the California border. So I had come nearly 700 kilometres in one day.

Early the next morning, the sun was already beating down relentlessly. My first benefactor was a salesman in a VW micro-bus. It had no air conditioning, and so we had all of the windows cranked open. We made good time, even though part of it was spent in reverse, scanning the road-side vegetation for critical receipts that periodically flew out of the VW's windows.

At the end of that ride, I decided to do a quick dog-leg to the west and hit the ocean. But this time, I re-attached the front wheel and resumed pedaling. It was tremendously exhilarating, being able to see and hear the breakers of the Pacific Ocean as I gradually ticked off more south-bound miles.

However, after a few hours, the thrill wore off, and I started sticking my thumb out again. This time, the ride was from a college student in a Datsun 280Z. We continued winding along the coast road until we crossed the Golden Gate Bridge, and where I finally found myself (spatially, not spiritually) in the fabled hippie mecca. Hippies were nowhere to be seen, but there were hills…lots of them. And they weren't kind to bicycles. But there were also parks…beautiful parks. So that evening, I found a hedge to give a bit of shelter and privacy to the bivy sack.

The following day, I cycled back over the Golden Gate and headed west towards the Marin Headlands Youth Hostel. I remember a road full of twists and turns, some expensive sports cars taking advantage of those twists and turns, and a sign over the hostel toilet, reading: "If it's brown, flush it down. If it's yellow, let it mellow."

The next day, I continued along the windy road and found the Green Gulch Zen Center. It was a little piece of paradise with footpaths and lush vegetation. Like my expectation of the Yasodhara Ashram, I was thinking that I could just walk in and ask to chop wood, carry water and observe my breath while sitting in a pretzel-like pose. But once again, I only had to enter the registration center to see that this wasn't the right place for a penniless wanderer (OK, I still had a few dollars in my pocket – but probably not enough for bus fare back to Canada).

So I decided to try Berkeley, which was a quick trip across the bay. There were more hills, and there was another night in the bivy sack (this time, curled up in a dusty rural ditch somewhere out towards the Lawrence Livermore Lab, where guys with slide-rules spent their time designing nuclear warheads).

The next morning, I found myself at *the* hotbed of revolutionary fervor: the University of California, Berkeley. I was ten years too late for the fiery protests, and five years too late for the kidnapping of Patty Hearst.[9] But U.C. Berkeley did have a library. And that library did have back-issues of a magazine called *Communities.* And I knew from haunting the alternative bookstores back in Calgary, if you wanted to find hippies, then *Communities* was the best place to start. In each issue, they had full listings of all of the communes and co-ops in North America.

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[9] A truly weird saga where the grand-daughter of the gazillionaire featured in *After Many a Summer Dies the Swan* gets kidnapped by Robin Hood wannabees, and then joins them in a series of bank robberies and attempted assassinations of police officers. These days, she gets ribbons for showing those ugly little Shih Tzus at dog shows. (For the best overview, check out Jeffrey Toobin's book: *American Heiress.*)

What I found was an entry for the nearby Ohmega Salvage (a wood salvage cooperative). So I excitedly left the library and made my way down to San Pablo Avenue, where I found an open lot, surrounded by a high wooden fence. And inside the lot was an acre or so of stacked timber, window frames and bathtubs. Old bathtubs. The kind that were perched up on four "claw feet" and which were often seen in old western movies (with lots of bubbles if Stella Stevens was in one, or cold, greasy water if the occupant was Ernest Borgnine).

"People pay really good money for those", said Chuck, the lanky Afro-American behind the till. I mentioned that I had seen *Ohmega Salvage* listed in the *Communities* magazine.

"Do you need any new members?"

"Oh, possibly. How ‘bout if you stop by the warehouse after work and meet the rest of the gang?"

The warehouse was just that: an old warehouse that had been divided up into smaller sleeping, cooking and eating areas. Part of it was left open, and a climbing rope was suspended from the 2-story ceiling.

I was introduced to the diverse bunch. Vito and Victoria were the patriarch and matriarch. Vito looked like an old hippie who had been left out in the sun too long. He had a smoker's rasp and a friendly chuckle. Victoria had coke bottle glasses, but her eyesight was good enough to make a decent living with her artwork (about which I can't remember a thing). There were two white South African brothers. Hilton was the younger, and his artwork I can remember very clearly. It was composed of extremely tiny dots of ink painstakingly arranged so that when viewed from a few feet away, they formed a conventional black and white image. One image was taken from the famous Eddie Adams photo of a South Vietnamese general executing a Vietcong prisoner at close range. Hilton was the introvert. His older brother, Leon was the extrovert. He rolled his own cigarettes and occasionally inserted some pot in with the tobacco. He always offered me a puff, but my natural aversion to

nicotine[10] was such that I could never inhale enough without getting more nauseous than high. Sandy was Leon's girlfriend. She was attractive, friendly and had piercing blue eyes. Richard was scruffy and quiet. He was always the first to volunteer to do the dirty jobs. When we later had to rip asbestos out of the walls at the worksite, it was he who donned the face mask and the haz-mat suit in the hot sun. Tony had long, dark hair and an equally long beard. He was a dead ringer for Rasputin and he always wore the same pair of pants with a huge rip up the back side (and no underwear). Sandy occasionally offered to sew them up for him (not for his sake, but for ours), but he always politely refused. And finally, there was Shitty and Pissy, the two lovable German Shepherds who never got walked (and thus earned their names by doing their duty in the warehouse).

Somehow, the group decided that I should be given a chance to join the co-op. That meant that I would be allowed to tag along to the work site for a short probation period.

Early the next morning, after bulking up on milk and granola with raisins, a bunch of us piled into an ancient Chevy Suburban and an equally ancient 5-ton dump truck, and we headed off to Treasure Island.[11] The group had already been tearing apart an old naval barrack for a month or more. It was three stories high and the flooring was all oak tongue-and-groove planks. It was the oak that we were mainly after, since it fetched a mighty fine dollar back at Chuck's salvage yard.

Our main tools were nail pullers and small, padded platforms on shopping cart wheels that we sat on as we scooted our butts across the oak flooring. The roof and walls of the third floor were already gone as we attacked the flooring, so at any moment, we could catch our breath, look up and see the most marvellous panorama: Alcatraz

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[10] Once, Dean and Sam and I went on a camping trip with the primary goal of getting hooked on cigarettes. I was the only one who was unable to accomplish the task.

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[11] Treasure Island is a 0.9 square mile artificial island in the middle of San Francisco Bay. Originally built for the 1939 World's Fair, it became a naval base during World War II. It is accessible via the Oakland Bay Bridge, which links Oakland and San Francisco.

over to the far right, then the Golden Gate, then San Francisco, and finally over to the Oakland Bay bridge on the left. On one unforgettable day, we were blessed with a flotilla of tall ships entering the harbour.

I guess I worked hard enough and learned fast enough on that first day, since the rest of the crew decided that I could stick around. In the weeks and months ahead, others weren't so lucky. A recovering heroin addict with a dog that could climb ladders lasted just a week or two. Then there was a Vietnamese fellow who seemed to fit in well...until Sandy alleged that he purposely dropped a nail on her – point first – from the third floor. She was on the second, and just happened to look up at the precise moment that it hit her on the forehead. Doink! She showed us the indentation afterward.

The next day, I went to the Army and Navy store and picked up some cheap work clothes. One of them was a khaki jacket, the back of which seemed to be a blank canvas. So I picked up some acrylic markers and wrote in large letters "READ ABOUT PSYCHEDELIC DRUGS AT YOUR LOCAL PUBLIC LIBRARY" (the word "psychedelic" was written with the full rainbow spectrum of colours). I knew how my mind was opened in this way, and I wanted others to have the same experience. I wore it around for months after that, and I only ever had one stranger comment on it. "Why should we read about psychedelic drugs?" he asked. "Because it's an *extremely* important subject" I answered. "Oh" was about all he said, perhaps sensing the evangelical fervour that might erupt if he stuck with the topic.

I continued along my book reading path, but only because I was able to get a California ID card. Perfectly legitimate; I just showed the authorities my Alberta driver's license, and within a week or so, I was able to use their card to get a library card.

Life was rather sedate at the co-op. In the three months I was there, I only

recall one party – and a fairly quiet one at that. No loud music and no complaints from the neighbours. This was even though the infamous Wavy Gravy[12] and various other members of the Hog Farm[13] were in attendance. I shook his hand and said hi, but at the time, I was just barely aware of his historic significance.

Pot was not floating around too freely at the co-op, so I had to go out and find my own. This generally went OK, except when I made the acquaintance of a dealer with the charming name of "Blood". He took my money and said that he'd be right back with the dope. And of course you know what didn't happen next. Luckily, I was warned by some of the local kids that it probably wasn't a very good idea to go looking for Mr. Blood.

There was a TV room at the co-op. Actually, it was more like a crawl space – about 100 square feet with a ceiling so low that even I had to crouch when entering. The TV was in the crawl space because it was banned from the other living areas. It was thought to be too distracting. Perhaps so. Have you ever met a TV that *wasn't* distracting? It distracted me. I was especially distracted by the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, which began on Christmas Eve that year. Evenings were spent in the crawl space, watching with increasing

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[12] Wavy Gravy is perhaps most famous for being the MC at the Woodstock music festival in 1969. He is also a clown...really. He became a clown both for reasons of artistic expression and also due to the fact that clowns tend to be arrested less often at political demonstrations. His name was given to him by BB King at the Texas International Pop Festival in 1969. He said that it has worked out well for him, except when talking to telephone operators. With them, he has to say: "Gravy. First initial: W". For more on his life, see: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wavy_Gravy

[13] America's longest running hippie commune. They went to the Woodstock festival, thinking that they had been assigned the task of building fire pits and trails and assembling a kitchen. However, when they arrived, they found out that they were also signed up to provide security for the event. Taking the new task in stride, they called themselves the "Please Force", hoping to maintain order by stating "Please don't do that; Please do this instead." When asked what kind of tools they would use to enforce order, Wavy Gravy said "cream pies and seltzer bottles." For more on the Hog Farm, see: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hog_Farm

trepidation the lines of tanks crossing the border from the north. I was fairly certain that World War III was just around the corner.[14]

We were free to work as many days per week as we wanted at the co-op, just as long as we could pay the rent and a share of the groceries. I started out working five days a week, but after a while, four days looked increasingly inviting. I could still afford the occasional joint, and the occasional Playboy magazine, and the library books and the TV signals were free, so I was comfortable. Sometimes, I even went down to three days a week. I don't remember what I filled the other four days with, but it certainly wasn't with watercolour paintings of the bay or trying out for the local soccer team.

At some point, I voiced the complaint that grocery money was being used to buy the occasional bottle of wine...and meat. (I was a vegetarian). Why should I have to pay money out of my sweat for something that I didn't drink or eat? My whining might have died a merciful death, were it not for the fact that Sandy supported my right to complain. Surely, the co-op could adjust the financial arrangements a bit so that I wouldn't have to support other people's habits.

But adjustment wasn't on the menu. One day, not long after, Vito called a meeting. The co-op was to be disbanded. Wow! There wasn't a lot of discussion. Vito just said that things weren't working

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[14] I've always been a pessimist. Luckily, though, I've also always been wrong…so far. WWIII didn't happen. Peak oil didn't materialize like I feared…though peak *conventional* oil occurred back in 2005. A successful attack on one of the North American electrical grids hasn't happened…though the U.S. Energy Secretary, Jennifer Granholm, recently stated that the Russians and Chinese *do* have the capability to take them out. The climate hasn't irreversibly changed…though I suspect we'll have to meddle with geoengineering to ensure it doesn't. And the G7 nations are all still democratic…though the Trump family is trying its best to change that.

The only thing I'm somewhat optimistic about is that it seems possible that advanced civilizations might not always destroy themselves. I'm referring to the recent anomalous footage from U.S. Navy pilots of UAP's (unidentified aerial phenomena).

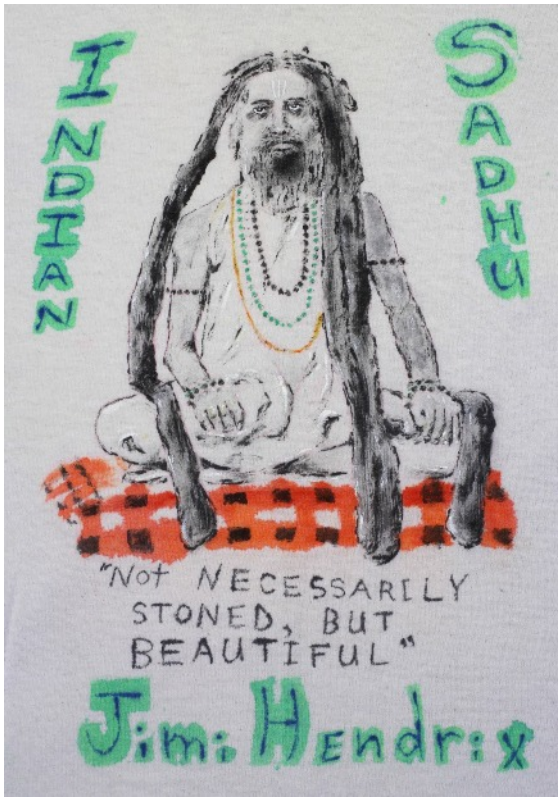
out. And everyone else seemed resigned to the inevitable. Richard was going to head back east, where his home was. Leon and Hilton had only so much time left on their visas, so they weren't sure what to do. Sandy had family in the area, and Tony's inscrutable Rasputin face said nothing.

I went back to my room and pondered my options. Hmm. What options? Best to go back to Canada. After all, World War III could be just around the corner. So, the next day, I gathered my belongings and got Leon and Hilton to give me a ride to the bus station (I left them my bicycle). Luckily, I had enough change to see me back to Calgary.

It wasn't long after that, however, when I had an introspective moment. Even before the bus crossed back into Canada, I realized, once again, that I had been a jerk. And I mused about a scenario in which Leon and Hilton arrived back at the warehouse, the smiles came back out, and everyone rejoiced that the ruse had worked.

chapter vii: dreadlocks and tattoos

Dreadlocks? Well, no. My hair in the mid-1980's was "jetta", something identical in form to the Jamaican dreadlocks, but a world away from it in concept. Jetta is the matted hair that Hindu holy men (sadhus) and women (sadvis) sometimes wear. According to Wikipedia, it is "...an expression of their disregard for profane vanity, as well as a symbol of their spiritual understanding that physical appearances are unimportant." Symbolically, it is depicted as being worn by the god Shiva, where it serves to soak up the seasonal floodwaters of the Ganges River.



The Rastafarians, on the other hand, take their cue from the Old Testament[1] story of Samson and Delilah, where Samson's phenomenal strength was derived from his long hair. I guess it was taken seriously back then, since his enemies, the Philistines, bribed his girlfriend Delilah to cut it off. Back to the 98 pound weakling, he was subsequently blinded and put in shackles. But the Philistines, being the biblical

[1] Numbers, Chapter 6, Verse 5: "All the days of the vow of his separation there shall no razor come upon his head: until the days be fulfilled, in the which he separateth *himself* unto the LORD, he shall be holy, *and* shall let the locks of the hair of his head grow."

yokels, forgot about the fact that hair grows back. And the rest is history...well, sort of.

The Rastafarians are sorta cool. They smoke pot. They tend towards vegetarianism. They don't drink alcohol. They have wild hair. Their music (reggae) has a hypnotic beat and lyrics that sometimes approach Shakespearean profundity. But in other ways, they're yokels, just like the Philistines. Like all biblical literalists, they're homophobic. And they believe that an Ethiopian monarch from the last century was an incarnation of God. When asked about it, the monarch (Haile Selassie) simply said, "who am I to disturb their belief?"

So what's crazier? A semi-feudal emperor as an incarnation of God? Or a god whose hair soaks up the Ganges River? I preferred the latter, but in truth, a large part of my reason for growing jetta simply went back to the phrase above: "...spiritual understanding that physical appearances are unimportant." I wanted people to know that I wasn't brainwashed by society. Of course I *was* brainwashed by society (and still am), but supposedly not quite as much as those folks who were addicted to the canned laughter of TV sit-coms or the grand spectacle of professional sports.[2]

So, at some point, I just quit combing my hair. I still washed it on a regular basis, but as the reggae musician, Keith Hudson sang, "I broke the comb". In other words, I used the so-called “neglect method”.[3] I started wearing a rolled up balaclava (like the one Khrushchev wore in the famous Karsh photo) even in the worst heat of August. Mom confronted me, "Have you quit combing your

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[2] Oh sure, the Isle of Man TT race (the 2nd most dangerous sport, after climbing Mt. Everest) is on my bucket list. But I rationalize that bit of brainwashing with the fact that the IOMTT has over 100 years of edifying history to back it up. (That’s my story and I’m sticking to it).

[3] This was in the 1980’s, when I was unaware that there were other methods available which didn’t literally take years to accomplish. These other methods typically use waxes and/or rubber bands and/or a potentially dangerous chemical known as glycerol monothioglycolate. They also tend to produce dreadlocks which are thinner and relatively uniform in shape and size…unlike the bulbous mats that sprouted out of my head.

hair?" And so I gave her the story.

At the time, I was delivering flyers door-to-door – at minus-30 – for a living (probably the worst job this side of a Soviet gulag). But the employers didn't care that I was wearing a lumpy toque. Co-workers didn't seem to mind either. They might have thought that I was crazy. But I was obviously harmless. One guy said that he just assumed that the big lump in my toque was my "money bag".

After a while, it outgrew the toque. So Mom sewed up a kind of bandana out of a bath towel for me.

The hair was starting to get seriously weird. In the mid-1980's, I was probably the only non-Jamaican in Alberta to have matted hair. Once, I was waiting to use a pay phone at a public park and a couple of cops walked over.

"How come I've never seen you around before?!", one of them barked.

"Um. I don't know", I replied as innocently as possible. (Of course I knew. On Friday nights, when he was dealing with shit-faced drunks, I was at home, totally absorbed in Washington Week in Review and the McLaughlin Group).

"What are you doing?"

"I'm waiting to use the pay phone"

"Who are you going to call?"

"My sister" (It was the truth...probably for my regular weekly visit to do some laundry, since I was living out of my car at the time.)

"Do you have any drugs on you?"

"No"

"Would you tell me if you did?"

"Of course I would" (I had learned the correct answer since my slip-up on Roger's Pass).

They then asked for my ID, got on the two-way radio and waited for their office cohort to punch some data into the computer. Nothing. It was five years since my boo-boo, so my record had been wiped clean.

"What do you do for a living?"

I told him about my casual labor gig, and then mentioned that I was also busy upgrading my high school credits so that I could get into university (which was also the truth). By this time, he and his buddy had visible relaxed. We chatted a bit further, but by this time, they realized that I was harmless. They wished me luck at school and one of them even shook my hand.

I loved the matted hair. At the auto parts warehouse, we had to constantly duck down and grab mufflers from beneath enormous metal shelving units. Nowadays, it would call for bump-caps or hard hats. But back then, it was each to his own. However, I had my own

hard hat. The jetta strands were incredibly tough, but soft at the same time. And they conformed perfectly to my head. I'd be willing to bet that the larger strands had a tensile strength of half a ton or more.

But women didn't seem to be quite as enthusiastic about them. During a date, one asked if I'd ever cut them off. I said no, and I never saw her again. On other dates, the subject seemed to be taboo. However, one gal, who sat next to me in a university lecture theatre seemed intrigued. "Who does your hair?", she whispered in a conspiratorial voice. I just shrugged and said, "It just does itself."

But, at one point, I did get them cut off. I did it to try and impress a woman. But it soon became apparent that she didn't care one way or the other.

The heft and texture and aesthetics of dreadlocks can be truly extraordinary. It's not without reason that historically, renunciates never had any monopolies on them. They were also worn by some warrior groups (Wikipedia lists the Maori, Masai, and the early Scottish clans in the latter category). So soldiers obviously knew that there was something imposing about them.

I'd love to grow them back again. However, I suspect my wife might see them as grounds for divorce.

I have a few tattoos. The first (an AUM symbol[4] on my left bicep) was done back in 1985, at a time when only bikers, neo-nazis, and Popeye the Sailor had inked body parts. The last (a likeness of Gandhi on my right forearm) was done in 1992. And at some point

[4] AUM or OM, the primordial sound of the universe, according to Hindus and Buddhists. If you're not familiar with it, just check out any George Harrison album. The symbol is plastered all over his record covers.

in between, I had the words "Black Flag"[5] etched into my right elbow.

There is a another that I'd like to get added to the collection, and amazingly, my wife has agreed to the last request with no mention of any potential divorce proceedings. That would be a likeness of Churchill on my left forearm. Churchill on my left forearm and Gandhi on my right. But Churchill despised Gandhi. Churchill didn't want India to slip from the grasp of the British Empire, whereas Gandhi wanted Indian independence. Churchill was the 20th century's most famous warrior, whereas Gandhi was its most famous pacifist. They were total opposites, and yet on another level, they were very similar. For example, they both famously despised fascism *and* communism. So there is unity within opposites (and thus a great set of images for a couple of tattoos).

But I wrote those words a few years ago (during the first few drafts of this book). Fast forward to now, and there is a worthy candidate which may just edge Churchill out of his reserved spot. I'm referring to George Orwell.

Oh sure, I mentioned Orwell back in chapters i and v. And I'm sure that many of us had read *1984* in high school English class. And I'm also sure that many of us have heard the word "Orwellian" being used to describe an out-of-control government bureaucracy bent on destroying the very soul of humanity.

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[5] Referring not specifically to the rock band (since I had never actually listened to any of their music), but to the symbol for anarchism (a black flag). What is anarchism? If you go to the Oxford Thesaurus, it gives the following words as synonyms: agitator, insurgent, insurrectionist, malcontent, mutineer, nihilist, rebel, revolter, revolutionary, terrorist. That doesn't sound terribly appealing. However, if you go to Wikipedia, it gives a drastically different definition: "...stateless societies based on non-hierarchical voluntary associations." That's very similar to the definition of community, where elements like trust and empathy are paramount – the same elements that are notably absent in the vision statements of both capitalism and socialism. Thus, we need a better balance. I vote for a mix of 60% capitalism, 25% socialism, 10% anarchism (ie, community), and 5% Monty Python's "Silly Party" (led by Jethro Q. Walrustitty).

That's the high school version of George Orwell. That's what I knew about him in the late 1970's. But to really understand the man, you have to read his non-fiction.

I became re-acquainted with him in the early 1990's, when I saw a copy of *Down and Out in Paris and London* on a friend's bookshelf. So, out of curiosity, I ordered a boxed set of his works of non-fiction, which I devoured in very short order.

Orwell was not only a great writer and a towering intellect; he was also, quite simply, a very decent chap. He (and his 6' 2" frame) crawled down into the cramped coal mines to see and feel the hardships endured by the stunted, sooty men who formed the basis of the British economy in the 1930's, and he fought against fascism in the Spanish Civil War (and got a bullet in the throat to show for it). We are sometimes asked what historical figure we'd like to have a pint of beer with. Jesus Christ comes to mind. But so does George Orwell.

Was he a right-winger, as anyone who has only read *1984* might immediately assume? Hardly. Here is his description of the idle rich in the 1930's: "They were simply parasites, less useful to society than his fleas are to a dog."[6]

And this: "...we have got to fight against privilege, against the notion that a half-witted [upper class] boy is better for command than an intelligent mechanic."[7]

And what type of political system do you suppose he recommended in the year 1947? (when he was just starting to write about the terrifying visions in *1984*). "...a Socialist United States of Europe seems to me the only worthwhile political objective today."[8]

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[6] *The Lion and the Unicorn: Socialism and the English Genius*, 1941. Seen in *My Country Right or Left and other selected essays and journalism*. London: The Folio Society, 1998. P.222.

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[7] ibid. p.241.

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[8] *Toward European Unity,* 1947. Seen in *Funny, But Not Vulgar and other selected essays and journalism.* London: The Folio Society, 1998. P.271

But neither was he blind to the shortcomings of those on the left:

> "The immediately striking thing about all these [left-wing] papers is their generally negative, querulous attitude, their complete lack at all times of any constructive suggestion. There is little in them except the irresponsible carping of people who have never been and never expect to be in a position of power."[9]

And not to leave anyone out from his blunt honesty, here is what he wrote about the common Jane and Joe Lunchbox on the street: "To the British working class, the massacre of their comrades in Vienna, Berlin, Madrid, or whatever it might be, seemed less interesting and less important than yesterday's football match."[10] (He was obviously not a paragon of political correctness.)

[9] *The Lion and the Unicorn.* P.227 (Hmm. Reminds me of the folks protesting the recent Munk debate between the right-wing extremist, Steve Bannon and the right-wing moderate, David Frum. What were the protesters protesting about? Something about the fact that David Frum isn't Bernie Sanders. And something about the fact that Steve Bannon still has a right to free speech.)

[10] *Looking Back on the Spanish War,* 1942. Seen in *Funny, But Not Vulgar,* p. 14

Things haven't changed much since Orwell furiously pounded away on his typewriter in the 1930's and 1940's. Indeed, Big Brother's Ministry of Truth was mirrored in many respects by the Donald Trump White House.

Yes, Orwell was a giant of literature. So much so that I got carried away and forgot that I was writing about tattoos.

Tattoos. Yes, well, following are the three pieces of advice I have for anyone contemplating getting one…or a second…or a third…

1. Black ink is better than colour, particularly in that it is more stable. In fact a single bad sunburn can noticeably blur a colour tattoo.[11] My first tattoo, on the other hand, is black, and the edges have only just started to blur after a period of over 35 years (though I suppose it may also be due to the exquisite craftsmanship of whoever was working at Smilin' Buddha in Calgary back then).

2. If you think you'd like to get a particular tattoo, then ponder the choice for at least a year. If, at the end of that year, you still think that you might like to get that particular tattoo, then there is a much smaller probability that you may have made an idiotic decision. (I have made at least one idiotic decision by ignoring that rule).

3. If you walk into a tattoo parlour and it reminds you of a dentist's office (ie, there is a cleanliness that borders on the obsessive, and there is a lot of equipment sitting around that looks like it is new and expensive…like I saw at Smilin' Buddha), then that's a good sign. But if you walk into a tattoo parlour and the "artist" looks like he belongs to a biker gang and has left his empty beer bottles on the counter, and he wonders out loud why nobody has ever asked him to ink a tattoo of Hitler, then that's a bad sign. (I have made at least one idiotic decision by ignoring that rule).

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[11] Source: http://poundedink.com/colour-vs-black-and-grey-tattoos/

chapter viii: university

My early forays into the realm of mysticism included an introduction to the pseudo-science of pyramidology. I happily lapped it up, and one day, on my parents' dining room table, I assembled a paperboard scale model of the Great Pyramid of Giza. It was about a foot high and it was held together with Scotch tape. I had read that if you oriented one of the sides to true north (as opposed to magnetic north), and if you suspended a needle from a thread just above the tip of the pyramid, the needle would start to orbit around the tip.

So I tried it. And something seemed to happen. Or did it? I wasn't quite sure, so I moved the pyramid on to the floor, directly under the edge of the table. I placed my hand on the table edge, so that my thumb and fore-finger (holding the thread) were just a tad past the edge (to reduce the chance that I might sub-consciously move the thread). The needle was directly over the point of the pyramid. Nothing. So I gave the needle a slight tap with the other hand. And damned if the thing didn't start to oscillate! And gradually, the oscillation turned into a small, elliptical orbit. And then a circular orbit – perhaps an inch or two in diameter. I was stunned!

Then, even though it wasn't mentioned in the book, I wondered what would happen if I placed my other hand over the hand holding the thread. So I did. And the orbit promptly disappeared. Now the needle floated motionless over the tip of the pyramid. Again, I was stunned.[1]

Later that day, Mom came home, and I showed her. She seemed

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[1] To this day, I'm still stunned. I half suspect that if I tried the experiment again, nothing would happen. I've grown more sceptical over the years, since I've had most of a lifetime to hone my bullshit detector. And yet I can't erase my memory of what happened that day. Neither can I erase my memory from a few years later, when in my university dorm room, I put a pear inside another north-aligned paper-board pyramid. After a month or two, I found a tiny, shrivelled pear without a speck of mould on it. I should have put a second pear in a cardboard cube, as a control, but I didn't think of it at the time.

impressed. "Why don't you go to university and study this?" (Mom and Dad had been socking away money for years in an RESP for me, so they were getting quite worried that I was turning into a hippie-punk-druggie-slacker, for whom "university" was just a word in the dictionary, right next to “unkempt”.)

She was right, of course. But at the time, I was sceptical of the notion that there could be any program of study in a conventional university that might apply to such a strange phenomenon. I shouldn't have been sceptical. After all, the study of physics would have been a good place to start.

By 1985, I had washed enough dishes, stacked enough mufflers, and delivered enough flyers in sub-zero weather, that I was quite ready for something to challenge my mind, instead of just my body. And I had heard about an amazing government program which gave out student loans (by this late stage in the game, the RESP was null and void…though my folks at least got their invested capital back). So I started going to night school to finish off my high school diploma. Chemistry was a breeze for someone who no longer wanted to wash dishes for a living. And in Social Studies, I nabbed an A for an essay on psychedelic drugs.[2] For an elective, I chose a course on world religions. It was a correspondence course, so I had to write the final exam (which arrived and departed in a sealed envelope) in a police station, but the cops were cool with the matted hair, and so, soon after that, I was accepted into the University of Calgary.

I arranged to stay in the traditional residences, where I met a few other wise and wonderful weirdos. There was Paul, who helped to organize a speaking engagement at the university for Timothy Leary.[3] There was the towering and geeky Chris,[4] who went into computer science and who later worked on the team that did the

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[2] It may have helped that for my main reference, I used a thoroughly balanced book on the subject (*Psychedelic Drugs: Psychological, Medical and Social Issues* by Brian Wells) which was distributed by a very reputable publisher: Penguin Education.

special effects for movies such as *Moulin Rouge* and *The Matrix Reloaded.* And finally, there was Dave, who combined a conspiratorial chuckle with an ambling, pigeon-toed shuffle, and later wound up consulting for the U.S. Department of Homeland Security on the subject of cyber-security.

During my first year, I wasn't sure what I wanted to study. So I took a wide variety of courses: calculus and biology, as well as comparative literature and Tibetan Buddhism. And I found that the old adage was true: a change is as good as a rest. If cell biology was starting to hurt my brain, I'd just switch over to Homer's *Odyssey.* Or vice versa. In that way, the sciences and the humanities complemented each other perfectly.

I was on Cloud Nine. If cycling back and forth from the frog pond to the candy store was the high point of my childhood, then the first year of university was the high point of my adulthood.

My vocational goals paralleled my zig-zag studying habits. I was torn between the sciences and the humanities. On the one hand, my voracious reading in the areas of eastern religions and mysticism pushed me towards the humanities. But on the other hand, I was also starting to develop an interest in Third World development. That got manifested in an interest in the hard sciences.

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[3] I remember attending and wanting to walk up to the audience microphone to ask Leary if he thought things might have turned out better if the popularization of the whole acid thing had been better left to the prim and proper Aldous Huxley, instead of himself (the implication being that Leary's somewhat outlandish "turn on, tune in, drop out" was just the sort of message that the establishment wanted to hear in order to justify an over-reaction). But I didn't. I was too nervous about the prospect of even this minor form of public speaking.

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[4] Chris and I got along well enough that we arranged to be room-mates the following year. And we stayed in touch. A few years after graduation, he asked if I'd be his best man. Unfortunately, the ceremony was 300 km's away and also right in the middle of final exams, so I had to decline. Did I "have" to? I likely could have arranged to take exams at another time, so I felt bad about it afterwards. But he obviously didn't hold a grudge, since he agreed to be the best man at *my* wedding about 15 years after that.

A few years earlier, it also got manifested in the first of many odd ventures, some of which I now look back on and cringe. It was a year or two after Terry Fox's remarkable run for cancer research, and I wondered how I could raise money in a similar manner for a Third World charity. However, unlike Terry Fox, I still had both of my legs. So I had to think of a suitable handicap. I was weightlifting at the time, and since I had fairly good upper body strength, I started walking on my hands. I practiced daily until I could walk about 25 metres at a stretch. I thought that perhaps I could walk the 300 kilometres from Calgary to Edmonton in this way. Even if I was only able to do a kilometre per day, it would at least be a spectacle that could conceivably pull in some money for a deserving Third World charity.

But the one thing I had not considered was that it is very difficult for an introvert to create a spectacle. I drove my car out to the Calgary city limits and steered on to the gentle side-slope of Highway 2. And then I froze. I watched the cars streaming by and I realized that I would look like a complete idiot if I started walking on my hands along the paved shoulder. I had matted hair that looked like Sasquatch penises sprouting out from my head, but I just couldn't force myself to go for that extra bit of weirdness...even if it was for a good cause. So I got back into the car and drove home.

But I digress. My interest in the sciences and Third World development led me to consider either an agriculture degree or a forestry degree (religious studies and the humanities were more interesting, but they had one severe drawback: abysmal job prospects).

Agriculture versus forestry. Hmm. I needed some sage advice. In the botany department, there was a certain Dr. Reid, who taught the introductory biology course in a huge lecture theatre in front of hundreds of students. Whereas most professors would rattle on in a monotone, knowing that the brighter students would somehow grasp what was being said, Reid was expressive; he used humorous anecdotes;[5] and he utilized projected transparencies of cell structures

[5] For example, one of his exam questions asked what one should do if one's cat had a habit of peeing on, and scratching one's cannabis plants. (I think I

like an analog IT wizard. His was one of the few classes where even the slackers listened to what was being said.

So I knocked on his door one day and asked what discipline (agriculture or forestry) might be more valued in terms of Third World development. He said forestry, and so that was that. I went into the transfer program which would eventually see me heading north to the University of Alberta in Edmonton.

In retrospect, it was perhaps not the best decision. You see, I soon found out that the forestry class was 90% male, whereas the agriculture class approached a much more even division between the sexes. Heck, I should have gone into nursing! What was I thinking? But on the other hand, maybe I made the right decision after all (that's a caveat, in case my wife ever reads this).

Around 300 years ago, Alexander Pope wrote *An Essay on Criticism.* In it, he said "A little learning is a dangerous thing..." It was dangerous for me, in that I would often convince myself that with the completion of a single undergrad course, I'd know everything I'd need in order to go out and change the world.

Economics 101 was particularly dangerous, in that it helped to convince me that what Thoreau said was invariably true: "That government is best which governs least". My dad, the lifelong NDP'er, nearly had an aneurysm when I repeated the quote.

Luckily though, I started taking advanced economics courses that poked holes in my libertarian ideology. One important concept was "marketplace externalities". For example, my car belches out CO^2, so Bangladesh and Florida will drown that much sooner. That's a negative externality. For a positive externality, we recently replaced the flammable plastic siding on our house with a fire-proof variety. It not only protects *our* house, but also creates a fire-break for neighbouring houses. Thus, government incentives (like tax

answered something about increased ethylene production and getting more fibrous plants, but it never occurred to me to mention the effect on the soil of the uric acid in the pee).

credits for fibre-cement siding) and disincentives (such as gasoline taxes) have the power to improve things over and above what the market is able to do.

Another inconvenient principle that libertarians seem unaware of is called "public goods". These are goods or services that are essentially free because it is impossible to stop people from benefiting from them. The text-book example is a lighthouse. It's impossible to charge individual boat owners who benefit from the signals. So private businesses have no incentive to build lighthouses. Same goes for health and education. Healthy people tend not to spread as many germs, but they can't very well charge others for the pleasure of not getting sick. And educated people tend not to commit as many crimes, but likewise, they can't get reimbursed from the folks they don't steal from. Therefore, it makes sense for governments to ensure that all citizens are able to access decent health and education services.

And finally, there are "common property resource dilemmas". How do you divide up a resource like fish in the sea? If I'm a free-rider, I'll catch as many as I can, as fast as I can. And so will everyone else. And before you know it, the fish are all gone (what Garrett Hardin called the "Tragedy of the Commons"). So it makes sense for all concerned to get organized and determine catch limits. That may take the form of a small cooperative in a coastal fishing village, or, at the other end of the scale, the International Whaling Commission.

Some folks say that it's just not worth it. They figure that governments are inherently inefficient and corrupt, so it's best not to even try. The ironic thing is that these folks probably took advantage of public goods by being born in a public hospital and by being educated in a public school. They may have even taken advantage of a government subsidized university education…though if they did, they obviously never got past Econ 101.

chapter ix: fighting fires and spotting smokes

In my third year of university, I transferred up to Edmonton, where the courses were a bit more challenging…especially Dendrology (the study of trees and shrubs). It gave students the infamous "twig test", during which we had to look at a series of twigs, and try to decipher which trees or shrubs they came from, as well as give their Latin names. "Dendro" was known as the "weeder" course, since it weeded out the weaker students. But somehow I managed to get through it.

At the end of the school year, I had four months off (May to August), which also coincided with the peak of the yearly forest fire season. So I was hired by the Alberta Forest Service, and subsequently found myself in the village of Wandering River, half way between Edmonton and the Athabasca Oil/Tar Sands.[1]

I was placed on an Initial Attack team, consisting of a helicopter pilot and three firefighters, and most days, we sat by a forestry radio, waiting for it to crackle to life and send us to a smoke. In a typical scenario, someone at a remote forest fire lookout tower would see a puff of smoke in the distance. Ideally, someone else at a different tower would then spot the same smoke, and from there, it was just a matter of stretching out two strings on a map: one from the first tower along the precise direction to the smoke, and the other string from the other tower along its direction to the smoke. The strings would then cross at a point where the IA crew – and its equipment[2] –

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[1] Technically, it's not tar, but bitumen. And euphemistically, it's not tar, but oil. Confused? It was called tar for about a century, but now, if you're trying to sell the stuff on the world market, "oil" sounds better than either "tar" or "bitumen".

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[2] Such as: 1) a chain saw (for cutting down smouldering trees), 2) a pulaski and shovel for dealing with smouldering organic soils, 3) a floating pump and some hose (in case a slough or lake or creek happened to be nearby), 4) some "piss packs" (back-packs capable of being filled with water, and having a hand operated spray nozzle), and 5) a collapsible "bambi-bucket" (with a capacity of 75 gallons or more) that could be slung underneath a helicopter and flown to the nearest water body, where the pilot would descend and dip the self-filling bucket into the water.

would be scrambled to.

It was an amazing job. Even if there weren't any fires, we would still go up and do a flight path on the hot days.[3] These paths would typically take us into the valleys and other areas which were either "blind" or too distant for the tower people to effectively see into. We kept our eyes peeled for smoke, not only for the potential excitement of dropping down on to a small fire and extinguishing it, but also because the first person to see the smoke would later be informally awarded a case of beer.

Yes, the Wandering River firefighters occasionally drank alcoholic beverages. And I was no exception. However, one morning after a typical celebration (which usually tended to happen after a widespread “precip event”), I had an epiphany. I realized that the "law of diminishing returns" applied not only to apples and economics,[4] but also to alcohol and hangovers. The first and second

[3] Lightning strikes would often leave smouldering fires either in the ground or in dead trees. Days or weeks later, when the temperature got high enough, the humidity got low enough, and the wind got strong enough, these embers would then ignite enough fuel to make themselves known in a very spectacular manner.

beers were effective social lubricants and they tasted great. And if left at that, their contribution to a hangover would have been zero. However, the third and fourth beers were then added to the equation. Their additional contribution to the social lubrication was minimal and they only tasted so-so. But more importantly, they now started to make themselves known the following morning. And the fifth and sixth beers only conspired to make the imbalance even worse.

So ever since that particular morning in 1989, I have never felt the urge to get truly shit-faced again. Now, after that first beer, I instead have the urge to boil up a cup of oolong tea (liberally laced with evaporated milk) and then contemplate whether a second beer might even be worth it.

I did that job for two seasons. But then I got restless. There was a woman at one of the towers who was just finishing up her master's degree in history. She spent much of her time at the tower reading…simply reading. Wow! I wanted in!

So, the next summer saw me at a tower. More specifically, I had arrived at Edra Tower (pronounced EED-ra).

It was colloquially known as the Garden of Edra, however there was a bit of sarcasm involved. Edra was about 150 km's north-west of Fort McMurray, right in the middle of the boreal forest. In other words, I was privy to a vast sea of stunted Black Spruce trees, and no shortage of mosquitoes and black flies. However, there was also an airstrip, at the end of which was a rudimentary fire fighter's camp with bunkhouses and a kitchen. So if there was a high fire hazard, my mail drops were somewhat more frequent than the drops at some of the other towers (mail drops for a tower person being roughly equal to Christmas morning for a toddler).

The site consisted of a 100 foot tall tower with a cupola on top, a

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[4] Also known in economic theory as the law of diminishing marginal utility. For example, the first apple tastes great. The second apple tastes OK. The third apple tastes...uh, *not* OK. The fourth apple is torture.

generator shed, a massive tank of propane, and a small cabin. The generator shed held a small, single cylinder Onan generator,[5] which was scheduled to run three hours per day – it's main task being to charge up the batteries for the radio transmitter/receiver.

There was a ladder attached to the tower. And it had hoops around it, so that if a person fell, he/she would only fall a few feet before getting tangled up. But nonetheless, I had a healthy fear of heights, and so I needed to memorize the location and function of every last nut and bolt on that tower before I could lean out of one of the windows without experiencing a gut-churning bout of existential dread.

The cupola was in the shape of an octagon, with a plywood base and fibreglass walls. It was about nine feet from side to side, but right in the middle of the floor was the "firefinder", which was a rugged stand with a big steel protractor perched on top. A rotating ring with a gun scope perched on the protractor, so that when a puff of smoke was lined up in the scope, the precise angle to the fire could be determined.

During my first day on the tower, I calculated the usable walking space to be less than five square meters (about the same as the average bath-room). So at the end of a twelve hour day,[6] my legs

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[5] Onan was the fellow in Genesis 38: 8-10 who committed the sin of premature ejaculation, which led to his dead brother's widow not being able to have children. In subsequent centuries, the term "onanism" became synonymous with masturbation. So why is a generator company called *Onan*? And why did it later form a union with a diesel company called *Cummins*? Apparently, some other people were wondering the same thing as I was: http://boards.straightdope.com/sdmb/showthread.php?t=619603

would stiffen up to about the same consistency as rotting logs.

But life in the tower could also be idyllic. There was a lush carpet of green as far as the eye could see.[7] And advancing across that carpet was the weather: amazing cloud formations, isolated thundershowers slowly gliding across the landscape, weird lightning bolts that seemed to defy physics, and "undercast" conditions in the mornings that made it look like I was floating on a sea of cotton candy.

At other times, it could be scary. Lightning storms were especially unnerving, since there was a lightning rod on top of the tower and the tower was usually the tallest structure for many miles around. I learned to keep a supply of earplugs on hand, and I also learned to keep perched on the wooden chair instead of leaning up against the metal fire-finder.

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[6] The hours required up in the tower varied with the fire hazard. On days with widespread rain, I would be down in the cabin most of the time. However, with dry fuel and hot temperatures, the opposite would be the case.

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[7] In later years, on a tower west of Swan Hills, I could literally look over one shoulder and see the Rocky Mountains, and then look over the other shoulder and see Lesser Slave Lake. That's a total distance of over 300 kilometres.

And then there were the animals: swallows (expert dive-bombers whose main target was my unprotected head), chipmunks (expert acrobats, who took bribes smothered in peanut butter), and bears…lots of bears.

I became used to them after a while. And I had little to fear, since I was mainly a vegetarian. The only interesting aroma that ever came wafting out of the cabin would have been that associated with the occasional tin of kippered herring – and that was soon eliminated with a bit of soapy water in the kitchen sink.

They were generally Black Bears (even the gal in the photo above, being a cinnamon coloured Black). Grizzlies were a rarity. In fact, during my eleven summers at various Towers, I only once had a visit from the hump-backed cousins.

It was early evening, and I saw a bunch of bears down at the far end of the lawn.[8] This was a rarity; up until now, all of the bears that

[8] Actually, the "lawns" at most towers were more like fields. At Tony Tower, I calculated that in order to cut the lawn once, I had to push the mower about ten kilometres.

came to visit had been solitary. But here were four of them. So I quickly grabbed my 110 instamatic,[9] opened the main door and snapped a shot through the screen door. They still hadn't seen me, and one of them came over to chew on the rain gauge, as the other three ambled over to investigate the Stevenson Screen.[10]

Finally, I opened the door. Now they saw me, and one of them stood up on its hind legs to get a better look. I took another shot, but it was shaky, since I had never seen a crew like this before.[11] And when I got back in the house and peered out the window, I noticed the tell-tale humps of *ursus horribilis*. However, they left quietly, the

[9] If a medium format camera with a digital back can be compared to a Ferrari, and if a DSLR can be compared to a Audi, and if the typical point-and-shoot camera can be compared to the cheapest currently available Chevy, then a 110 instamatic would likely be a Soviet-era Lada.

[10] A louvered white box containing instruments for measuring max/min temperatures and humidities.

[11] Most likely a mating pair with two two-year-olds, according to naturalist Ben Gadd (personal communication).

rain gauge survived intact, and after a few minutes, my heart rate settled down.

One evening, I was out in the shed, checking the oil level in the generator, and a call came over the radio. I rushed back into the cabin and grabbed the mike. I don't remember if the caller was from another tower or from the ranger station. I don’t remember what the conversation was about. And neither did I remember that I had been checking the oil level.

Anyway, after the conversation, I made supper, washed up the herring tin, and settled down to read a chapter or two of Don Quixote – by the light of a bulb whose current came from the generator that I remotely kicked into life.

That's when the cabin suddenly went dark. And that's when I remembered that I had been checking the oil level in the generator.

I sprinted out to the shed. Oil was everywhere...except in the generator. The piston had seized and now I had the embarrassing task of calling in the next morning to let the whole world know what an idiot I was.

A helicopter was hurriedly scheduled to bring in a replacement unit, and there was some friendly ribbing from the guys who lugged the heavy conglomeration of steel into the shed. But that turned to cursing when one of them slipped on a bit of oil that I had missed during the clean up. No broken bones, though.

A few weeks later, the fire hazard started to climb into the red, and I was spending more and more time up top. To fend off the boredom, I had a short-wave radio tuned to the “beeb” (or the BBC, as some prefer to call it), and lots of books. I would read a page, then scan the horizon for a wisp of smoke. Read a page, then scan. Read. Scan. Repeat. Except this time, I didn't look around fast enough. Dunston, my neighbour, spotted a smoke right under my nose. (OK, so it was 20 kilometres away. But it was on my side of the ridge). Embarrassing. The only saving grace was that there was no wind.

And no wind meant no conflagration and no million dollar campaign fire. Just two or three hours of helicopter time and a bit of practice for the firefighters.

A missed smoke is one thing. A seized piston is another. But disregarding the chain of command is quite another still. It goes back to the Alexander Pope quote: “A little learning is a dangerous thing...” I had just finished a degree in forestry. So I was smart. Really smart. But not smart enough to know what an idiot I was. I don't even remember what the issue was about. Something trivial. Something having to do with fire suppression that I thought could have been improved upon. In any case, I wrote a letter of complaint to the forest superintendent, instead of my immediate supervisor – a difference of several levels in the chain of command. So, the next thing I knew, there was a chopper on my doorstep. Seems that some of the folks back at the office just wanted to know if my head was screwed on correctly.

They were correct to have their suspicions. For some reason, the towers tend to attract, um...people who are different. For instance, there was the fellow who walked around with a tin foil cap on, hoping to attract UFO's. There was the gal who was anorexic and thought that the tower would be an ideal place to lose a few more pounds...until her knees gave out on her, and she couldn't climb the tower any more. And there was the guy who had a disturbing fetish for bear hides...as well as the requisite greasy frying pan and a rifle.

There were also some misplaced extroverts. They loved the idea of communing with nature, but they had never spent any extended periods alone. One of them, after less than a week, got on the radio to say “uh, sorry, but you've really, REALLY got to come and get me out of here...like yesterday!”.

And finally, there was the out-of-work truck driver with the impaired charge, who tried to order ten cases of beer along with his groceries. The ranger acquiesced with one or two cases, but the sot still wound up effectively AWOL for a day or two.

So, I was hospitable to the visitors who stepped out of the chopper for a quick cup of coffee, and they seemed to accept my

(truthful) explanation that I was just too dumb to realize what "superintendent" meant.

A week or two after that, I had my first "fire flap". Even before breakfast, the whole district could see the early warnings associated with altocumulus castellanus[12] clouds. These soon burned off in the heat, but by late morning, cumulus clouds started forming out of nowhere. And by early afternoon, they had grown to become the towering, anvil-like cumulonimbi. Lightning started to flash, and it quickly found the dry, spongy muskeg. By the time the thunder reached my ears, a small wisp of smoke caught my eyes. I quickly rotated the spotting scope to get a bearing, and made a rough estimate of the distance. Seconds later, I was on the radio to the ranger station.

A couple of helicopters with their Initial Attack teams had been dispatched earlier to the general area. They knew what to expect.

About half a dozen smokes were now visible in my area, and my adrenaline was pumping overtime. I could see that one of the helicopters was headed to the fire that I had first called in. But as the isolated storm cell advanced, sheets of rain smothered the fire that it had produced only ten minutes earlier. However, other smokes from other cells were still active, and I updated the pilot (and the ranger station), so that he could change course. This series of updates went on for most of the afternoon, and since I had the best view of the area, I felt a bit like an air traffic controller.[13]

The few Initial Attack crews that were available got put down at whatever fires were still burning. But as they were no longer up in

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[12] …looking just like the crenellated row of notches along the top of a castle wall.

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[13] In fact, a friend from another tower *had* been an air traffic controller. He found it ironic that he had quit his former job, thinking that he would leave all of the stress behind. Little did he count on the stress of dealing with a fire flap. Neither did he count on the constant stress of a 12 hour day up in the tower during high hazard, knowing that there was a decent likelihood that the lightning which had passed through a week or two ago, might have left a few smouldering embers in the fibrous ground.

the air, their radio signals couldn't reach the ranger station, and I had to relay accurate messages about fire behaviour, equipment needs, and estimated times for extinguishment. With all of the activity on the ground, in the air, and back at the office, there would often be traffic jams on the various radio frequencies. It was a delicate balance, knowing when – and when not to – step on other ongoing transmissions, and sometimes the poor guys out on the fire must have thought that I was ignoring them.

At the end of the day, however, all of the fires had been extinguished. I suppose I must have done OK, since a month or two later, my boss asked me if I'd be interested in coming back for the next season. The burned out generator, Dunstan's smoke, and the letter to the superintendent weren't mentioned. And by the next summer, I was one year older and slightly less stupid.

chapter x: women

A typical wild weekend in the 1980's: 1) Friday evening with the channel selector turned to PBS, where *Washington Week in Review* and *The McLaughlin Group*[1] were the hit shows, and 2) Saturday evening, a blur of lost time spent waiting for Saturday Night Live to come on around midnight.

I rarely went out to bars or nightclubs. The drinks were too expensive, and I was far too shy and weird looking to strike up conversations with women. However, if the music was good, and if the atmosphere was sufficiently bohemian…

I liked the earthy vibes that permeated places like the old National Hotel in Calgary. It would cater to garage bands and punk bands, and it wasn't unheard of for the grizzled old bouncer/bartender to shuffle up to the stage, single out one of the scruffy kids twanging away on the guitar, and haul him outside for being under the legal age.

Typically, if it was summer, I lived in my car (an ancient Subaru Leone, about the size of a kitchen table). I'd drive to one of the residential streets near the "Nash", park it, and if I had a bit available, I'd sneak a toke or two of pot. Then, I'd walk over to the bar, grab a choice table and order a beer. I also had reading material with me. If it was pre-1985, it might have been Thoreau or Huxley. If it was post-1985 (ie, university), it might have been calculus or Homer.

After a while, the band would start up. Sometimes, the music was terrible (but still better than the soulless techno-beat in the nightclubs). However, mostly it was at least interesting enough to tap my toes to. And sometimes, it was nothing less than stellar (I still haven't heard a version of *Fever* that comes anywhere close to matching the one I heard at the Nash so many years ago).

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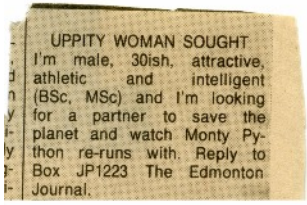
[1] I guess I wasn't the only person under 30 watching, since Saturday Night Live spoofed *The McLaughlin Group* more than once. In fact, Dana Carvey did such an eerily realistic John McLaughlin, that the real McLaughlin had to come on to the show and dispose of Carvey for a Halloween episode.

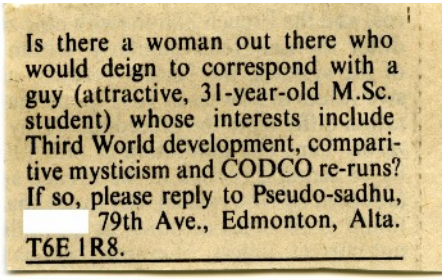
When the music was good, I'd put a little wad of toilet paper in each ear, and then get real friendly with the pounding speakers up near the stage. Not really dancing. More like a frenetic jig. So frenetic that I had to keep my eyes closed, since a flying dreadlock always threatened to take one of them out.

After my work-out, I'd slowly finish my beer and then head back to the car, where I'd flip the passenger seat back and struggle into my sleeping bag. In the morning, I'd wake up to the warmth of an already risen sun, and since there was no hangover to deal with, life was pretty good…though somewhat lonely.

I kept my hopes up with the personal ads in the newspaper. However, in the interest of transparency, I would always post ads which implied that I had very little interest in such proletarian pursuits as watching professional sports and "partying". Of course, that severely limited the field, so generally only one or two women would bother to answer.



UPPITY WOMAN SOUGHT
I'm male, 30ish, attractive, athletic and intelligent (BSc, MSc) and I'm looking for a partner to save the planet and watch Monty Python re-runs with. Reply to Box JP1223 The Edmonton Journal.



Is there a woman out there who would deign to correspond with a guy (attractive, 31-year-old M.Sc. student) whose interests include Third World development, comparitive mysticism and CODCO re-runs? If so, please reply to Pseudo-sadhu, [redacted] 79th Ave., Edmonton, Alta. T6E 1R8.

A date for a coffee might follow. If I was lucky, there was some mutual chemistry. If I was unlucky, there was mutual chemistry accompanied by an ideological divide. For example, there was Amanda. She was a young school teacher who was short, cute, brunette, and somewhat embarrassed to admit that she was unable to explain to a child how a ship made of steel could float. But I was hooked on her, and she also seemed quite happy to meet up for a few more dates.

Once, we went out to Banff for the day, and so we had a good chance to chat in the car. However, on the dash, I had affixed a

small, ceramic Buddha, which I had made when I was about ten years old. It was the type that was mass produced, just waiting for some kid to paint it, so that it could be glazed and popped in an oven. But in my case, the irony was that we painted those Buddhas in Sunday School.[2]

Amanda wasn't impressed. "That Sunday School teacher should have been fired!"

And it went downhill from there. That evening, we went to my sister's place for supper, and though Kathy was still very involved in the church we both grew up in, saying grace at the table was considered a bit of an anachronism. Not for Amanda, though, since she later told me that this serious omission was the final nail in the coffin.

Ideological differences were usually not an issue, though. More often, it was a simple case of stupidity…my stupidity.

I met Betsy via another personal ad, and the first date went well. For a second date, we went to a wine and cheese event put on by the university's religious studies club that I belonged to. She was fine with that.

But she had a tendency to wear brightly coloured polka-dotted clothing (I always wore muted earth tones). And she had bleached hair (too trendy). I should have given her a Nobel Prize for putting up with someone who had gigantic dreadlocks and an affinity for tattered lumberjack jackets.[3] But instead, I ditched her.

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[2] Or maybe it wasn't so ironic, given the ecumenical outlook of the United Church of Canada. For example, the church I attended a few years ago didn't shy away from inviting a native elder in, so that the congregation could learn a bit about the aboriginal faith.

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[3] At one point, I had the habit of wearing the jackets literally to shreds. If it developed holes, I would buy a new one and then wear the old crumbling one over top of the new one...until it fell off. Utilitarian, but not very stylish.

After the newspaper ads, came the matchmaking services. Once or twice a month, I found myself in a little room with a television hooked up to a VCR. Carmen was the manager of one of these companies. She would give me three or four tapes to view, and on each tape, a young woman could be seen telling the camera about herself...just as I had previously told the camera about myself. If I happened to like any particular woman on any particular tape, I would let Carmen know, and she would show the woman my tape. If the response was similar, phone numbers would get exchanged.

I didn't get a lot of responses. Even though I had, by this time, shorn my dreadlocks, I was still a tad unconventional. I suspect I had mentioned my interest in religious studies and mysticism, but possibly the real deal breaker was my interest in Third World development.[4]

Carmen was a few years older than me, but she was also quite attractive. And a flashy dresser. One day, I was alone with her in her office, and she complained about how hot it was. Then she kicked off her shoes and swung a couple of shapely legs up on to her desk. I thought to myself , "Hmm. That doesn't seem quite normal." At the time, I thought it was either a seduction or some sort of test. But in any event, my timidity forced me to play stupid, and after a few minutes, she put her feet back down on the floor.

On one of the visits, she introduced me to a female client, who was just leaving. This struck me as rather odd, since Carmen was usually fairly careful to segregate the visits. The young woman was quite attractive, and was accompanied by a child. She asked me about my university studies, and when I mentioned Third World development, she asked if I'd be spending a lot of time overseas. Though not really knowing one way or the other, I replied that I probably would be.

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[4] I think I also must've given off a particular pheromone which women could easily detect, and were repelled by. Of course I'm referring to that molecular arrangement commonly known as "desperation".

Whoops! Wrong answer! I never saw her again, and Carmen never showed me her tape. And as I look back, I don't recall getting a single date out of that service.

In keeping with the alphabetic theme, there was Debbie, an attractive bohemian intellectual who I had met at the U. of A…and for whom I had the hots for. So, after a summer on one of the towers, I called her up and we decided to go and check out Old Strathcona.

She wasn't quite ready when I arrived at her place. She said she had to shave her legs. Hmm. That's interesting. Very interesting. And as she did her business – with the bathroom door ajar – my hormones raced.

As we walked down towards 82nd Ave. on that warm September day, I noticed that she had done a fairly good job on her legs. And I also noticed that she was fumbling around in her pocket.

"Damn! How did I wind up with *these* in here?"

She pulled out a pair of panties, and I tried not to stare. I should have slobbered over them like a rabid dog, but instead, I commiserated with her on her silly mistake. I should have offered her a million dollars for them – or simply grabbed them and ran – but I just mumbled something, and we kept walking.

Charlie Brown, when

talking about the "little red-haired girl" famously said "...pretty faces make me nervous". But in those days, it was a quote from William Blake that haunted my thoughts:

"Better murder an infant in its cradle than nurse an unacted desire."

However, neither a clever quote by a 19th century poet, nor a heart wrenching admission from a balloon-headed comic book character came close to solving my problem.

So why were Chuck and I so petrified of pretty faces? I can't speak for him, but I know that in my case, it had a lot to do with being short, as well as the acne eruption that demolished my adolescent ego. Do you recall Timothy Leary's Eight Circuit Model of Consciousness? I have no doubt that my anxieties metastasized during the "imprinting" process associated with the "domestic and socio-sexual" circuit. In other words, even though I was shy around girls as a kid,[5] my teen years were the time when the crippling fear near a pretty face got thoroughly baked into my neurons. I just hope that if Charlie Brown ever becomes a teenager, he won't have to deal with that curse called acne.

Pornographic magazines took some of the sting out of the loneliness, however I'm not sure whether they were a positive or negative force in my life. A crutch can be used to help a lame person walk, but a crutch can also be used to delay the inevitable transition to when it can be thrown away. And was hard to tell the overall effect, since there wasn't any control group to compare to. There was no parallel universe in which I didn't have access to the

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[5] During the summer holidays, as we sat together on a transit bus headed to the mall, she whispered "You remind me of Spock". But I pretended not to know what she was talking about. We were both thirteen years old, but she had obviously hit puberty before I had . She was totally entrancing, with a dark blue halter-top, hair just like Marsha Brady, and a face to match. I had her all to myself, but I was scared shitless and still bereft of the hormones which would, in just a few months, make my face a mess.

magazines. In fact, with regard to pornography and the lack of control groups, a recent study in Montreal ran into problems because the researchers were unable to find *any* men in their 20's who did not either flip through the pages or pop in the DVD's on a regular basis.[6]

One day, I was asked about it by Ivan, who was a Chilean student working on a Phd in the humanities (I'm not surprised that it took a foreign student to ask such a delicate question; the average Canadian guy would prefer to talk about hockey stats). He simply asked what I thought about pornography. He perhaps wondered how I survived without women, when he, on the other hand, was so successful in that area. So successful, in fact, that our landlord had started to frown on the numerous visits to his room by his numerous female friends (well, maybe there were just two or three of them, but that was far more than either myself or the landlord could hope to attract). I told Ivan that I didn't have a problem with porn, except when my obsession with the glossy images threatened to take time away from other pursuits...like homework. He agreed, being very well acquainted with the latter.

The only time that it threatened to become an obsessive pastime was years later, when the internet suddenly appeared. Internet porn was free (much of it, anyway), and it was extremely abundant. And it was more fun than a barrel of monkeys. But it led to a computer having to be trashed, due to viruses.

It was addictive, and after about a month or so, I felt like the proverbial lab rat, that had two levers to pull. One lever gave food pellets, and the other lever gave cocaine. After a while, the rat would be found on the floor of the cage, dead as a doornail. White powder was everywhere, but the food lever had never been pulled. And internet porn was my cocaine.

Does pornography denigrate women? Does it cause us guys to devalue the average woman, in favour of the beauty contest winners? Perhaps. But I suspect that a million years of evolution, and the onset of hormones at puberty, has already had a bigger say in

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[6] http://www.telegraph.co.uk/relationships/6709646/All-men-watch-porn-scientists-find.html

the matter.

And then there is the so-called oldest profession. Even though, by this time, I was nearing the half-way point of my allotted three score and ten years without having known the joy of sex, I had never really seriously considered the prospect of going to see a prostitute. For one thing, I was shy. If it was impossible to start a conversation with a woman in a bar, then (as John McLaughlin would say) it was a "metaphysical certitude" that I would be unable to pick up the phone and dial one of the numbers listed beside a luscious face in the yellow pages.

On top of that, I always had the impression that sex with a prostitute would be an emotionally empty experience (certainly for her, and likely for me). I had even heard of Nevada brothels, where the rules stipulated that there was to be no kissing.

And finally, I was a student. I didn't have bundles of cash to throw around. The occasional Penthouse magazine was a lot cheaper and a lot quicker.

And finally, there was Emma. She answered a personal ad that I had posted in the Globe and Mail, and although she lived about a thousand kilometres away, she was gorgeous (we had exchanged photos by mail), she read Harper's, and my parents also happened to live at the end of that thousand kilometres. So, at the close of one of the fire seasons, I loaded up my rust-bucket and headed west.

The first date seemed to go well. We were both intellectually inclined, and we explored everything from the merits of populism[7] to the merits of Monty Python. And as I found out later, a fairly impressive bookshelf adorned one wall of her apartment.

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[7] She despised populism (for good reason, since it is generally associated with demagogues like Trump and murderers like Duterte). But she also – like many of the elites in our society – seemed unwilling to separate out populism from the more positive forms of working class participation, such as Deliberative Democracy.

I noticed some small laceration scars on her forearm that she admitted causing herself. She didn't try to hide them. But neither did she go into any detail about why she might have put them there. And I was too shy to pry.

One day, we went for a walk in a local park. And as we strolled along, I summoned up all of my courage, and asked if I could hold her hand. I was a bit stunned when she said "no", and my fragile ego didn't have the strength to ask why not.

A week or two after that, she invited me over to her place for a home-cooked meal...and she hinted that I might be able to explore some of that exquisite territory that I had been dreaming about for the past few weeks.

After the meal, we relaxed on the couch. Or rather, we parked ourselves on the couch, since she had on a short skirt, and my hormones were in a mad rush to get something done. I put my hand on her knee and she didn't brush it away. My hand strayed somewhat further. Still no objections. I found myself blurting out the somewhat preposterous suggestion that we might be more comfortable down on the carpet...and she agreed. Then, another preposterous suggestion. And another…until I lost my virginity. It was a couple of decades too late, but I didn't complain.

A few weeks after that, she told me over the phone that it was over, and that the only reason she let me in was because she felt sorry for me. That was Christmas Day. Certainly not the kind of gift I was hoping for.

chapter xi: more university

My early 20's were spent reading everything I could find on psychedelics, mysticism, comparative religion and anything else a young fellow might gravitate towards, knowing that he had been born ten years too late to attend Woodstock.

Fast forward a few years, and I was an undergraduate, consumed with the search for ecological and technical solutions for saving the planet. I gained a forestry degree, and I was convinced that something like agroforestry would be humanity's saviour.

And perhaps it still can be. But fast forward a few more years, and my studies at the graduate level showed me that something else was needed…something that existed in the areas of economics, sociology, governance and culture. As I wrote in a newspaper column not too long ago, "...I'm still convinced that even if we had a magic bullet that gave us all the energy and infrastructure we wanted with no polluting side effects, we'd still find some way to foul up our nest or wage war on each other."[1]

I often wished I had kept more items from my youth than I did. I find it amazing that something like a Dick and Jane reader from Grade One can conjure up the strong emotions that it does. However, I have very little from grade school that I can hold in my hands and look back on.[2]

From my undergraduate degree, I have none of my papers or assignments. At the time, I had neither the room nor the inclination to keep any of the hard copies with the professors' red ink scrawled in the margins. And as for the associated digital files, I was too lazy

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[1] Red Deer Advocate. November 3rd, 2010.

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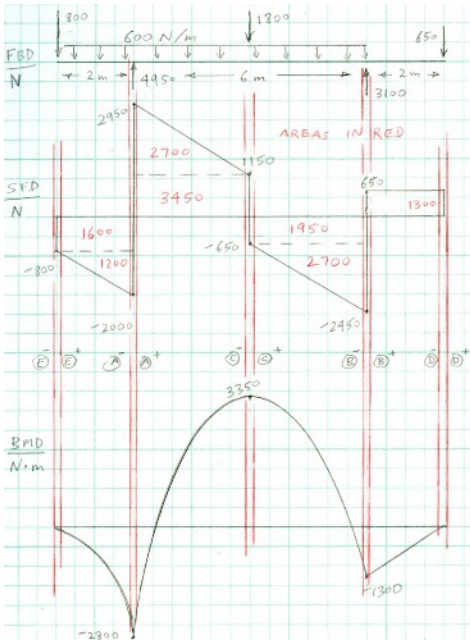
[2] A couple of precious exceptions are the Rand McNally World Portrait Globe, which my sister Kathy had the foresight to keep, and the 1958 Book of Knowledge children's encyclopaedia, which my sister Mary-Ann had the foresight to keep.

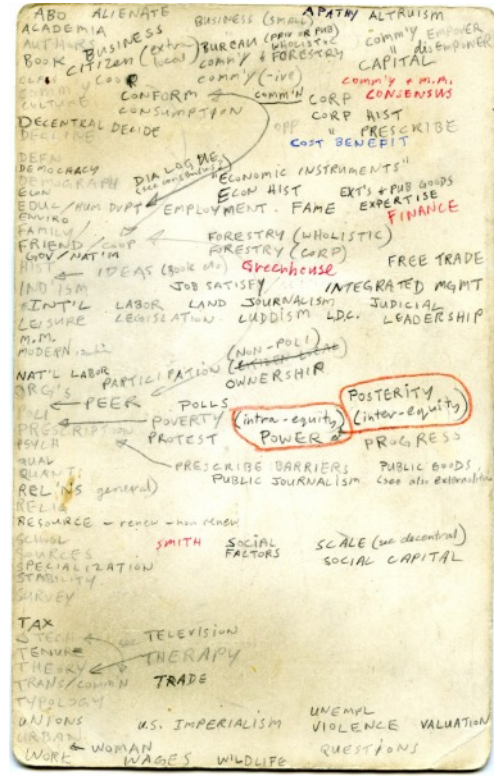


to copy stuff over when 5 ¼ inch floppy disks evolved into their 3 ½ inch offspring.

However, I did keep some of my university textbooks with my multi-coloured highlighting splashed throughout.

And years later, at tech school, I kept my engineering assignments, which have a muted elegance that seem even more pleasing than the rainbows of highlighting in my old botany textbooks.

The material I kept from my graduate studies is not quite so tidy. It consists of a large trove of 5" x 8" index cards, upon which I had scribbled notes and bibliographical information. I don't know what possessed me to keep these kernels of wisdom written down on an ancient analog medium – as opposed to digital text on my old 20mb computer – but surely I made the right decision, since I still have



the precious index cards secured safely away in our storage room.

As I flip through the cards, I see that I made a very rough index, with all of the various subjects listed alphabetically. From the index, I could find the general topic that I wanted to look at (let's say democracy). From there, I'd go to the 5" x 8" democracy card, where I'd see an entry I'd like to cite: for example, Yankelovich's assertion that in order for democracy to be valid, about 70% of the electorate need to actually *think* about an issue before they endorse it. The entry would then direct me to a particular 5" x 8" bibliography card, where I'd find that Yankelovich had been writing in the book *Changing Maps: Governing in a World of Rapid Change.*[3]

Perhaps not as fast as Google and Wikipedia, but in the world of the early 1990's, it sufficed. And unlike most of the digital files I've ever made, it still exists.

What follows might seem like a dog's breakfast. But it comprises the most important concepts that I learned in five years of graduate study. And in this world of Donald Trump and alternative facts, I find – on an almost daily basis – that it is these very concepts which hold the keys to our survival.

altruism

Does it even exist? It has been called Darwin's Dilemma, since it theoretically shouldn't. And these days, the survival of the fittest seems to be the dominant ideology in society. But there is also something called "inclusive fitness", which means that teamwork in groups and societies tends to confer success. And we know there is scientific backing for this, since chimpanzees (and bonobos even more so) have often been observed behaving cooperatively.[4]

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[3] Written and edited by Stephen A. Rosell et al. Published by Carlton University Press in 1995.

[4] See, for example, Chapter 2 in Alfie Kohn's book *No Contest: The Case Against Competition.* (Houghton Mifflin, 1986).

I suspect that the slide back to barbarism was fairly recent. In fact, I would pin it to the "Me Decade", also known as the 1970's. If the hippie heyday of the 1960's was the understandable backlash to the mindless conformity of the 1950's, then the 1970's took the navel gazing to the opposite extreme.

A few of us might remember the Great Depression, World War II and Norman Rockwell imagery as being a time when society pulled together. Neighbours had names, community still mattered, and together they formed the glue that overcame Nazi tyranny and that disturbing fellow with the ridiculous mustache.

However, the lessons of history are no match for cage fighting, *Grand Theft Auto,*[5] the Two Dons (Cherry and Trump), and the infinite universe of pointless media distractions.

citizenship

The phrase "private citizen" is an oxymoron.[6] And it was the book *Habits of the Heart* that woke me up to the fact that community is more than just a word in the dictionary. I'm not sure how or why I came across the book, but the message was a shocker, since a large part of me was still the young punk in the leather jacket that had the prohibition sign on the back of it, prohibiting a smaller prohibition sign underneath it. And like everyone else, I was well aware of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms, but not so much the Charter of Responsibilities (since the latter doesn't exist).[7]

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[5] …where players have been encouraged to torture prisoners (with knee-cappings and dental extractions), kill cops, and do away with prostitutes (in order to get some of their money back).

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[6] Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life, by Robert N. Bellah, Richard Madsen, William M. Sullivan, Ann Swidler, and Steven M. Tipton. New York: Harper and Row, 1985. P270-271.

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[7] Rights might have trumped responsibilities in the Old West, when the frontiers were endless, and Andrew Jackson's Trail of Tears gave White folks a bit more lebensraum. But on a finite planet, responsibilities should trump rights…especially when it comes to morons spouting off about micro-chips embedded in covid vaccines, while clogging up our hospitals, and causing people with malignant tumours to have their surgeries cancelled yet again.

After *Habits*, I stumbled upon the works of Robert Putnam,[8] who had been studying the economic regions of Italy for over twenty years. The north of Italy was much more prosperous than the south, and Putnam wondered why. He initially noticed that there were more choral societies and soccer clubs in the north. Was it because the relative prosperity in the north allowed for more social activities? Or was it the other way round? Was there, in other words, an economic advantage which arose from citizens being more involved in local community organizations? Putnam showed that it was the latter, and the key ingredient was trust. Groups that have trust can more easily share limited physical resources.

So there were *virtuous circles*, where trust fostered a growing economy, and which in turn, promoted institutions that nurtured trust. But in the southern regions of Italy (where the Mafia rules), there were *vicious circles* where "[d]efection, distrust, shirking, exploitation, isolation, disorder, and stagnation [served to intensify] one another in a suffocating miasma…"[9]

commons (tragedy of the)

The term "tragedy of the commons" was first coined by Garrett Hardin in the journal *Science* in 1968. However, the phenomenon was known since the days of Aristotle: "For that which is common to the greatest number has the least care bestowed upon it."

Sometimes, we are able to keep care of the commons. Our national parks are a good example. We enact rules to protect them and we enforce those rules. Mining, timber harvesting and hunters looking for furry trophies are strictly forbidden.

But the atmosphere and the oceans are another story. They are nearly impossible to police. Sometimes, the destruction is visible, as in the case of over-fishing and the subsequent decline in catches. But at other times, it is invisible, as in the case of the billions of tons of carbon dioxide that we loft into the air each year. And it is those

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[8] …highlighted in Chapter 5 of *Changing Maps*.

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[9] R.D. Putnam, in *Making Democracy Work,* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993a, p. 177. Also featured in his bestselling work *Bowling Alone.*

invisible molecules that are most susceptible to being incorporated into the convenient myth that says "my shit doesn't stink".

The academic term for “my shit doesn’t stink” is called the “free rider” problem. However, Michael Jacobs, author of *The Green Economy*, notes the obvious way around it:

> “...since no one knows whether, if they use less electricity, everyone else will also, and since if everyone doesn't, there is no point in their not doing so, they don't. If, however, everyone were forced to cut their electricity consumption by higher prices or taxes, the same people might accept this as the price of doing something about global warming."[10]

This is called "leviathan"[11] (or big government with a big stick).

communication

What a politician thinks is communication (from his or her constituents) is usually what Daniel Yankelovich calls "raw opinion". He notes that "...people tend to insist on having an opinion on any subject, whether or not they have thought about it, or whether or not they know anything about it."[12] Yankelovich thus formulated three tests to determine whether or not an opinion was raw:

- Does the answer to a question change if the question is worded a bit differently?

- Is there compartmentalization? For example, would I think one

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[10] *The Green Economy: Environment, Sustainable Development and the Politics of the Future.* Vancouver: UBC Press, 1993, p.215

[11] Leviathan was first introduced to us as a large sea monster in the Old Testament. However Thomas Hobbes, writing during the chaos of the English Civil War (1642-1651), used it in his book of the same name, urging people to accept a strong central government which would stop the “Roundheads” and the “Royalists” from hacking each other to pieces. (The Roundheads wore buzz-cuts, whereas the Royalists wore their hair in ringlets.)

[12] In Rosell et al, *Changing Maps,* p. 93.

way about taxes when it comes time to paying them, but another way when shown a school or a hospital?

- Is there a lack of knowledge about consequences?

If the answer is yes to any of the above, you can bet that there's some raw opinion being generated. And raw opinion is generally synonymous with our Dilbertesque democracy. As I mentioned in the Introduction, a voter may not know the difference between a methane molecule and a giraffe, but he/she will still give a pollster his/her opinion or shove a piece of paper into a ballot box.

However, Yankelovich also talked about "public judgement", where voters have had a chance to look at all of the subtle nuances associated with an issue. They may also have had a chance to talk to folks on the other side of the ideological abyss, perhaps finding that stereotypes about red-necks (on the one hand) and granola crunchers (on the other) aren't always true.

Public judgement isn't needed for all decision-making. But on some issues,[13] it is vital:

- When citizens are asked to make a significant sacrifice
- When a resolution of conflicting values is needed
- When public mistrust is high

Perhaps the best examples of public judgement were when B.C. and Ontario decided to look at the possibility of changing the "first-past-the-post" voting systems. Citizen Assemblies were formed from *random samples* of the population, and these people (if they chose to participate) were gathered in central locations for a series of weeks (or weekends) to deliberate on the various alternatives. They then made recommendations to the rest of the population, followed by province-wide referenda.[14]

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[13] in *Changing Maps, p.92.*

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[14] See: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Citizens%27_Assembly_on_Electoral_Reform_%

The B.C. vote was close. 60% was needed to change the constitution, and the result was 57.7%. The Ontario vote was not close. The recommendation to change the voting system to a "mixed member proportional" system lost. 63% of the electorate voted against it.

In my view, the flaw in each case was the referendum. The provinces already had the legitimacy of 103 randomly selected citizens in Ontario and 160 randomly selected citizens in B.C. The decision should have been left to them. Call me crazy, but I tend to trust the ability of my fellow citizens to think about issues if they put their minds to it. But a referendum? Call me crazy again, but I *don't* trust my fellow citizens to do anything other than make widgets, if all they're doing during their leisure hours is sitting in front of a bunch of pixels, watching either *The Bachelor* or NHL hockey.

community and mass media

Speaking of pixels, have you ever come across a weird channel that looked like it was produced in someone's living room with a camcorder? Kind of like *Wayne's World,* but with shorter hair and better grammar? If so, that's community cable. The big cable companies have to put 2% of their revenues into these local channels so that local groups are able to produce programs for local audiences.

Back when I was studying societal sustainability (ie, how to ensure that civilization doesn't collapse), I became interested in the possibilities inherent in community cable for enabling local dialogue about important issues.[15] So much so, that I volunteered at a local Shaw Cable Station, and sometimes found myself at minor league sporting events with a heavy TV camera perched on my shoulder. Thick wires came out of it, leading to an oversized van, parked outside, where technicians were feverishly twisting knobs and

28Ontario%29 and
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Citizens%27_Assembly_on_Electoral_Reform_%28British_Columbia%29

[15] I was primarily influenced by a book called *The Barefoot Channel* by Kim Goldberg. Vancouver, New Star Books, 1990.

making quick editing decisions.

Years later, while running in a federal election for the Green Party, I wound up in front of one of these cameras. But it was in a studio, and the person behind the camera obviously knew a lot more about the process than I ever did.

However, I wonder if anyone actually saw me on TV. Because when I pick up the TV guide that comes with our local newspaper, I see there aren't any programming listings for that channel. And when I look up the channel on our DVR, information is almost as sparse. It lists the weekly city council meetings, and there is a daily "interactive lifestyle" show. But every other time slot simply shows a generic tag of "community programming".

As I write this, I've just clicked over to the community channel. To my surprise, there is actually some interesting and relevant programming on: a short, locally produced documentary on the potential for our regional airport to get regular air service (something of interest to a lot of people here, since the alternative is driving 150 kilometres north or south to the major provincial hubs). But nobody would know about it, unless they were doing some aimless channel surfing. So our community cable channel is doing a dismal job of engaging the community.

Our local newspaper (the *Red Deer Advocate)* is doing a somewhat better job, with a daily circulation of over 10,000 subscribers (if my math is right, that's about one copy for every four households).

However, if both of these organizations could align forces – along with the political and economic power brokers in the city – just think what could be accomplished. They could facilitate a local version of a Citizen's Assembly. If there happened to be a very contentious issue that needed some backing in terms of legitimacy and transparency, the "barefoot channel" could certainly provide it.

consensus

Consensus. Agreement. Compromise. Cooperation. Solidarity.

Such strange concepts. Might these words, at some point in the future, quietly disappear from the dictionary? We live in a world of special interests, individual rights, a culture of entitlement, extremely thin skins, and bumper stickers that read "he who dies with the most toys, wins".

However, this is where public judgement and deliberative democracy come to the rescue. How would they work? One particular technique, known as a "future search conference" had its start in Britain, in 1960, when the two big aircraft engine firms of Armstrong-Siddeley (piston engines) and Bristol Aero (jet engines) were amalgamated. Different management processes, radically different products, and different strategic directions all had to be smoothly harmonized into the new Bristol Siddeley Aircraft Engine Company.[16]

The FSC process became so successful, that in later years it was used in endeavours ranging from determining the future of urban transport in Salt Lake City, to the organized demobilization of child soldiers in South Sudan.

Imagine any issue that has a lot of heat on both sides. How about climate change? It is a prime topic, since it is heavily laden with value judgements such as inter-generational equity and equity between have and have-not nations. Politicians may (or may not) still have to make the final decisions on such matters, but FSC facilitators know from decades of experience that deliberative processes by members of the general public tend to produce results that are well thought out, transparent, and prone to widespread buy-in. And members of the general public have one huge advantage over politicians. They can see further than the next election.

How does it work? Regardless of whether the participants are chosen from stakeholder groups, or whether they are from a random

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[16] All information on the FSC concept was taken from *Discovering Common Ground: How Future Search Conferences Bring People Together to Achieve Breakthrough Innovation, Empowerment, Shared Vision, and Collaborative Action*. [phew!] Edited by Marvin R. Weisbord and 35 international coauthors, and published by Berrett-Koehler Publishers. San Francisco: 1992.

sampling of the population, they are gathered together at one location for an extended period of time. As they are ushered into the conference area, they are each given a random number that corresponds to one of the various tables strewn around. Once everyone is seated, they are asked to look under their seats, where tags have been hidden, indicating who will be assigned tasks, such as chairperson, recorder, etc.

The conference schedule is divided up into 1) small group sessions at the individual tables, and 2) plenary sessions, where the output from the small groups is communicated to the rest of the participants.

Of course, technical experts make presentations during the plenary sessions, and in the case of climate change, they may have widely differing backgrounds, ranging from ecology to economics. They may have differing interpretations of the same scientific evidence, or differing stances on policy implications,

However, it is in the small group settings where the real magic occurs, because it's a lot harder to envision someone on the opposite side of an issue as being evil incarnate when you're sitting at the same table, discussing your relative backgrounds, and discovering potential common interests. And when you no longer see the person on the other side of the table as being the spawn of Satan, the problem at hand suddenly becomes less of a black-and-white dichotomy, and more like something that can be rendered in various shades of grey.

consumption

We can endure neither our vices, nor the remedies for them."

Titus Livius (59 BC – 17 AD)

In the documentary about Noam Chomsky (titled Manufacturing Consent), he mentions that if people spent half as much time learning about the political decisions affecting their lives, as they do watching sports on TV, the world would be a much better place. And during the sermon at church today, our minister mentioned

essentially the same thing with regard to "reality TV", the type of television that is so full of petty squabbles and meaningless games, that it has very little to teach us about reality (she then went on to say that it is the fictional accounts in the great works of classic literature that have much more to say about the real dilemmas we face day to day).

I sometimes stop and assess my current preoccupations (just like I did with that Hot Wheels set many decades ago). For instance, I have a love affair with a pair of sports cars – one 19 years old, and the other 30 years old. They're absolute gems…though not terribly quick (the joke is that either of them would lose a race against a soccer mom's minivan – and the soccer mom would be unaware that she is even in a race). But they go around corners like a kid's slot car on crack. And they grip the pavement so well, that if I run over a dime, I can tell if it's heads or tails.

And in the world of two wheels, I recently bought an electric motorcycle. The torque/weight ratio on that thing is insane. My last speeding ticket was in 1976, but I'm expecting my second one any day now.

My third preoccupation is with buying and selling old film cameras. I've spent uncountable hours (and dollars) on the internet, parsing the pros and cons of hundreds of makes and models, going all the way back to the hallowed Leica M3 (peace be upon it).

So I've mentally sneered at my buddies at work, as they've talked about their favourite sports teams. And I've often shook my head at some of the nonsense that my wife watches on TV. But am I any better, with my time-consuming (and expensive) hobbies?

When I was in my 20's, and all of my jobs consisted of drudgery and sweat (like washing dishes and delivering flyers), I raced home at night to read Solzhenitsyn and Huxley and all the other stuff that I mentioned in chapter v. There were no conflicts between my wants and needs, because I wanted to do exactly what I needed to be doing. The same thing occurred in university. I was idealistic, somewhat stupid, and gradually learning about the most important things in life (like botany and societal sustainability).

Everything was interesting, and I didn't have enough money to indulge in expensive hobbies.

But now, I sometimes cringe. Since I secretly know that the many hours and dollars I've spent on cameras and vehicles give me hardly any more satisfaction than what I can get from relaxing with a pint of bitter, while either reading a book about the Battle of Agincourt, or watching an old Kurosawa movie.

culture

Norway and Alberta: two jurisdictions with roughly similar endowments of population and fossil fuels. But there the similarity ends. Alberta has been stuffing away a portion of its oil and gas royalties for the last 36 years. Norway has also been saving (but only for the last 26 years). Alberta's rainy day fund is sitting at $16.6 billion. Wow! That's a lot!…isn't it? Except that Norway's is sitting at about $1.2 trillion.

So what gives? Why is Norway about seventy times better at saving for a rainy day than Alberta? Are we dumber than Norwegian's? Not according to Richard Lynn.[17] Apparently, the average Canadian's IQ is only one point behind the average Norwegian's. Do we elect dumber politicians? Perhaps. About ten years after Peter Lougheed made a very good start on our Heritage Savings Trust Fund, we elected a former football player (Don Getty), who proceeded to gut it. Then, we elected a guy with a drinking problem (Ralph Klein), who brought it back to life, but fed it on starvation rations. Then we elected a quick succession of seemingly smart people (Ed Stelmach, Alison Redford, Jim Prentice, Rachel Notley, and Jason Kenney) who nonetheless all worshipped at the altar of scandalous deficits (while pretending our province is so much better than all the other provinces that we alone can operate without a provincial sales tax).

But that only partially answers the question of why Alberta neglected to save for the future. I suspect it also has something to do with culture. I suspect it has something to do with the short-term,

[17] http://sq.4mg.com/NationIQ.htm

self-gratification mindset that filters up from our neighbour to the south. Remember: those are the folks with the $28 trillion dollar debt.[18] Those are the folks who allow the mentally unstable to buy assault rifles. And those are the folks who continually remind us that they are the finest nation in the world.

But Europe is different. Very, very different. To try and understand *how* different, read Marnie Carroll's essay on "American Television in Europe".[19] Carroll is an American living in Switzerland, and she eloquently writes about why Europeans are still fairly insulated from the bad cultural habits that often waft across the ocean:

> "…Here is my list of just some of the areas in which I've observed Europeans being simply and utterly NOT American: in approaches to work, to community, to sharing, to views of time, to eating, to drinking, to sex, to nudity, views of space and distance, views of individuals' rights, views of responsibilities, views of community, views of workers and customers, views of logic, views of inconvenience, views of personal space, views of friends, acquaintances, and families, views of independence and individuality, views of leisure and exercise, shopping and consuming, materialism, views of culture, language, art, music, views of being, embodiment, emotions, expression, gender roles, race, class, sexual orientation, views of absolutely everything."

I remember reading an account of a motorcycle trip taken by a bunch of Yanks in Norway. They were pleasantly surprised by everything about the country: the natural beauty, the people, the cleanliness, the efficiency, etc, etc, etc. The author gushed about how great the country was – not seeming to realize that he was describing the extreme polar opposite of his good old US of A. And

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[18] As I write this, in June, 2021. For a timely update, go to: http://www.usdebtclock.org/

[19] http://bad.eserver.org/issues/2001/57/carroll.html

with Orwellian proficiency, he noted that Norway must indeed be the 2nd finest country in the world.

decentralized decision-making

"In a civilized society it is indeed not so much the greater knowledge that the individual can acquire, as the greater benefit he receives from the knowledge possessed by others, which is the cause of his ability to pursue an infinitely wider range of ends than merely the satisfaction of his most pressing physical needs."

Friedrich Hayek (1899 - 1992)

"It is an injustice and at the same time a grave evil and disturbance of right order to assign to a greater and higher association what lesser and subordinate organizations can do"

Pope Pius XI (1857 - 1939)

Hayek is adored by the right, due to his analysis of the inherent strengths of capitalism. In his book, *The Road to Serfdom*, he emphasized the fact that knowledge was, by its very nature, dispersed, and thus Big Government could never be very efficient. Pope Pius, coming at it from a moral perspective, emphasized that if something could be done at the local level, then it *should* be done at the local level.[20] So, notwithstanding the occasional need for Hobbes' Leviathan,[21] both men understood that a large, centralized government is, by its very nature, ill equipped to be the all-knowing, omnipotent colossus as envisioned in Orwell's *1984.*

Hayek and Pope Pius XI didn't seem to have much in common,

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[20] Of course, both of the above quotes are mirrored by the Irish proverb at the very start of this book: "…the smartest person in the world…". And then there's the Telegu proverb: "The hunchback alone knows how he can lie comfortably."

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[21] As I mentioned in Chapter VIII, there are some things that only governments can do passably well, such as dealing with marketplace externalities, public goods, and common property resource dilemmas. And Hayek was aware of this, warning against "...the wooden insistence...on certain rules of thumb, above all the principle of laissez-faire." (*Road to Serfdom*, 1944, p.13)

since Hayek was an economist, and Pope Pius was, um...a pope. But they both agreed that the greatest efficiencies could be gained by leaving decision making at lower levels...when appropriate. But that's the problem, isn't it? How to determine at what level a decision should be made? The ideologically motivated among us would gladly take us down the slippery slope either way. On the one hand, there are the Hummer-driving, freedom-loving types who figure that rules are made to be broken, their shit doesn't stink, and that all society needs are cops and soldiers and lawyers to sort out the mess. And at the other end of the spectrum, there are the bone-headed, politically correct zealots, such as the local school board members who suspended a teacher who had the audacity to give zeroes for student assignments not handed in.[22]

So where does that leave us? Where should decisions be made? Well, obviously, the issue of what's for supper tonight should be made at the household or neighbourhood level. But for issues such as overfishing and climate change and international terrorism, perhaps a bit of Big Brother might be in order.

I know that Big Brother is not a popular concept in some circles. But perhaps that's because he often does things that the Hummer crowd finds inconvenient. He issues speeding tickets. He builds parks which they might not use. And he taxes their earnings so they can't as easily purchase their next shiny toy.

If Hayek is adored by the right, then Adam Smith is worshipped by them. But both men were open-minded intellectuals who understood that some government was necessary. In fact, just two years after Smith wrote his masterpiece, *The Wealth of Nations*, he became a government bureaucrat (a customs officer, to be precise).

democracy

"Rational ignorance."[23] That's what James Fishkin calls it, when

[22] http://www.winnipegfreepress.com/canada/teachers-stand-zero-work-zero-marks-156630735.html

[23] pp. 21-22 in *The Voice of the People: Public Opinion and Democracy.* Yale University Press: New Haven Conn. 1995.

you and I vegetate in front of the television, watching either the Bachelorette giving out roses, or a hockey goon giving out sucker punches. That's because it doesn't make much sense for us to educate ourselves about the important political decisions that affect our lives. Sure, we could put on our thinking caps, but if we only vote once every few years, and if that vote is only one in a few million, and if our elected representatives simply toe party lines (instead of listening to voters), then what good does that do us?

Maybe democracy needs a makeover. As Fishkin noted "...it is time for those of us in the world's freest press to become activists, not on behalf of a particular party or politician, but on behalf of the process of self government."[24]

Sound like a pipe dream? Well, actually we aren't as lazy or stupid as we sometimes make ourselves out to be. In fact, when given a chance, we *do* want to become involved in the decision-making that affects us. For example, in 1994, when voters were enabled by several local media outlets to shape the agenda for the senate debate between Ted Kennedy and Mitt Romney, they got *very* involved. How involved? Involved enough that the TV viewership ratings for the debate topped even the ratings for the Superbowl and the O.J. Simpson car chase.[25]

economics

My brother-in-law Jim is the quintessential uber-capitalist. When he sees any sort of government nonsense, it's always "bolshevik this" and "bolshevik that". But when I brought up an idea by the American sociologist, Daniel Bell, he had to agree wholeheartedly. Bell worked the idea up into a book called *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism,* the central theme being that "...capitalism—and the culture it creates—harbors the seeds of its own downfall by creating a need among successful people for personal gratification—a need that corrodes the work ethic that led

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[24] *Op cit* pp. 156-7. For more on how journalists can keep democracy from dying, skip ahead to the section on “public journalism”.

[25] Fishkin. *Op cit* pp 159-60.

to their success in the first place."[26] Steven Rosell put it a bit differently: "The totally unfettered operation of markets can undermine the very social capital on which their effectiveness depends."[27]

"Social Capital." That's academese for the simple concept of community. In the past, the community was held together by potlucks and sewing bees. Certain standards of behaviour were expected. But now, in the race to the lowest common denominator, capitalism has taken over that role. Now, we socialize our youth with video games such as *Grand Theft Auto,* which has the player earning points by stealing cars and shooting cops. Some might say that if played with a certain sense of ironic detachment, games such as this are harmless. That's a big "if". Who would you want babysitting your kids or running a local business? Someone who spends their leisure time shooting virtual police officers? Or someone who spends their leisure time...uh, doing pretty much anything *other* than shooting virtual police officers?

Capitalism, and the study of economics which bolsters its prestige, has little to say about such nagging details. That's partly because the study of economics is often divorced from the messy inconvenience of the real world. The Nobel Prize winning economist, Wassily Leontief analyzed a mountain of economic studies from the journal *American Economic Review*, and found that half of them were simply based on mathematical models that made absolutely no reference to any sort of data from the real world.[28] How's that for pointy heads in ivory towers? And they're the same pointy heads who have no clue that the greasy loser holed up in the basement next door is being subtly influenced by aggressively anti-social electronic messaging, courtesy of the nearest big-box store.

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[26] From the amazon.com synopsis of the Basic Books 20th anniversary edition, 1996.

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[27] From *Changing Maps,* p. 141

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[28] From *The Ecology of Commerce* by Paul Hawkin. New York: Harper Collins, 1993. p. 89.

government

"While all other sciences have advanced, that of government is at a standstill-little better understood, little better practiced now than three or four thousand years ago."

John Adams (2nd president of the United States)

Adams stated this about 200 years ago. However, anyone watching Question Period in the House of Commons can see that little has changed.

Rosell's roundtable[29] talked about government ineptitude extensively – and with authority. In fact, one of the roundtable members (Marcel Massé[30]) was initially the secretary to the federal cabinet for federal-provincial relations, and subsequently the minister for inter-governmental affairs.

The roundtable's conclusion on the status quo in government was as follows:

"...exaggerated conflict in a very unproductive way."

"...debate occurs in secret, either in caucus or in cabinet."

"...limits the extent to which people can see and understand how the various interests represented in Parliament are being articulated..."

"...that sort of covert process may no longer be sufficient."[31]

The real key is to take a few steps back and to ask what the *real* goal of government – and by extension, political parties – should be. Is it to get a majority and pass as much legislation as possible? Is it to be content with a minority and thus ensure (through

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[29] from *Changing Maps: Governing in a World of Rapid Change*.

[30] Not to be confused with Marcel Masse, the cabinet minister under Brian Mulroney from a few years earlier.

[31] Rosell et al. *Op cit.* p.88

accommodation with other parties) that more of the electorate is represented?

Sorry. None of the above. As John Kenneth Galbraith noted, the quality of any particular government is not so much a function of the calibre of its politicians; it is mainly a function of the calibre of the voters.[32] Governments and the electorate, now more than ever, need to be on the same page. This is no longer the 1950's, when energy was cheap, Rachel Carson hadn't yet written *Silent Spring*, and folks in the Third World only occasionally made their presence known in the pages of National Geographic. We now live in a finite world. We won't be able to deal effectively with the challenges of the 21st century if half of us say "no" simply because the other half says "yes".[33]

Shared understanding will only come about if we – and our so-called leaders – actually try to talk to each other and learn from each other. At the level of governance, some of this is already achieved via inter-party committees. But these have become an endangered species. Some of it might be achieved via some form of proportional representation…if it ever becomes anything more than an empty election promise (thanks Justin!). And sometimes, I think we should just abolished the entire party system. Voters increasingly realize how toxic it is. In fact, in the U.S., about 40% of voters now call themselves Independent.[34] And here in Canada, the territory of Nunavut gets along quite well without political parties. So it *is* possible.

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[32] In *The Culture of Contentment.* Boston: Houghton-Mifflin. 1992. p.18

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[33] …or if half of us become QAnon cultists, spreading lies like turds spread stench.

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[34] From an excellent article in *The Atlantic* by Mickey Edwards (14 years in the U.S. Congress): https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2011/07/how-to-turn-republicans-and-democrats-into-americans/308521/

greenhouse effect

Yes, that was the terminology I used on the index card (I don't think anyone had even heard of "climate change" back then). And I had only written down entries from two sources, whereas up until quite recently, I had a regular newspaper column that was primarily centred on the subject.

But I see that I noted down Paul Hawken's 1993 warning about horrendous feedback effects associated with methane from the thawing Arctic tundra.[35] I won't go into detail about this molecule that is *twenty one times more effective* as a greenhouse gas than CO^2, but I will invite any complacent Canadians – or, more specifically, Albertans – who happen to be reading this, to please google the terms "positive feedback" and "climate"…and bring along a fresh pair of underwear.[36]

individualism

> "...I see an innumerable multitude of men, alike and equal, constantly circling around in pursuit of the petty and banal pleasures with which they glut their souls. Each of them withdrawn into himself, is almost unaware of the fate of the rest."[37]

> "Despotism, which by its nature is suspicious, sees in the separation among men the surest guarantee of its continuance, and it usually makes every effort to keep them separate".[38]

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[35] *The Ecology of Commerce: A Declaration of Sustainability.* New York: 1993. Harper Business. P.30

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[36] And for a timely update on the matter, see *Canada's thawing permafrost should be raising alarm bells* in the June 12, 2021 issue of the Globe and Mail.

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[37] Alexis de Tocqueville in *Democracy in America* . Ed. J. P. Mayer. Trans. George Lawrence. New York: Anchor, 1969. p.692

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[38] *Democracy in America.* Henry Reeve translation, revised by Francis Bowen and edited by Phillips Bradley. New York: Alfred A. Knopf. 1945. p.102

About 175 years ago, the young Frenchman, Alexis de Tocqueville visited the United States. France and the rest of Europe had its kings and queens, but the U.S. had democracy, which fascinated him. He saw its potential. But he also saw where it could fail, which was via individualism on steroids. You see, the ideology of individualism was the true strength of the despot, since individuals are so easy to pick off, one by one.

The opposite of the individual is the community. And in the realm of the political, community is best exemplified by the grassroots organization.

So, what is the well-respected despot supposed to do, in the face of such a formidable barrier as a grassroots organization? It gets creative, of course. If grassroots and despots don't mix, then why not create something artificial...like astroturf? The astroturf organization will have a nice sounding name like "Americans for Prosperity".[39] It will have lots of cash shovelled at it, since the despot pulling the strings will have no problem finding a few million here and a few million there. And it will influence lawmakers to encourage pollution, discrimination, corruption and authoritarianism in the name of profit...even if the resulting policies hurt the folks that are supposedly being helped.[40]

leadership

Leadership should *not* simply mean "influencing the community to follow the leader's vision."[41] Rather, it should mean "…influencing the community to face its problems." Because let's

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[39] Largely funded by the Koch brothers, who, like Bill Gates and Warren Buffett, are insanely rich – but unlike Bill Gates and Warren Buffett, are not known for either their philanthropy or their regard for social and environmental issues. In fact, they are mostly known for their antagonistic stance towards social and environmental issues.

[40] See: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Astroturfing

[41] This and the following quote from *Leadership Without Easy Answers* by Ronald A. Heifetz. Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1994. p.14

face it: our leaders are human. And their visions are often about as realistic as the average opium dream. The Vietnam War. Weapons of mass destruction in Iraq. I could create a list. However, the historian, Barbara Tuchman already did.[42] Yes, she had a chapter on Vietnam. But she also had a chapter on Troy (the leaders letting the Trojan Horse into the city); another on the Renaissance popes (acting like debauchery and corruption were central tenets of Christianity); and one on 18th Century Britain (and its response to those upstart colonists in America).

So it makes sense to let the citizenry in on the important decisions that affect their lives. However, people-power can sometimes degenerate into populism and demagoguery. Heifetz also wrote: "Charismatic authority can generate a mindless following..." and "Focusing upward, people lose touch with their communities, markets, and personal resources."[43]

But then there was Churchill, who inspired the citizenry without resorting to demagoguery. How did he become the most effective leader of the 20th century? At a time when all seemed lost, he gave Hitler the finger (actually two of them, in a "V"), and sure enough, Britons rallied around him and then fought their way to victory. But how much of that was due to Churchill's leadership, and how much was due to the old men in the Home Guard, young men in Spitfires, young women in the Land Army,[44] and everyone else tending their Victory Gardens?

In 1941, George Orwell wrote:

> "England is the most class-ridden country under the sun. It is a land of snobbery and privilege largely ruled by the old and the silly. But in any calculation, one has to take into account its emotional unity, the tendency of nearly all its inhabitants to feel alike and act alike and

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[42] *The March of Folly.* Alfred A. Knopf. 1984

[43] Heifetz. *Op cit.* p.66

[44] An organization enabling young women to replace the farmers who were off fighting the Kaiser and Hitler in WWI and WWII respectively.

act together in moments of extreme crisis."[45]

Could we, in Canada, do anything remotely similar? Even if we had a Churchill? Does the average Canuck have any dedication to anything beyond his or her immediate family?

I'm hopeful that Canadians would be able to act together in a moment of extreme crisis. But since Orwell wrote those sentences, we have been through the Me Decade, the Culture of Entitlement, and the Charter of Rights and Freedoms (with no equivalent Charter of Responsibilities). And when an "extreme crisis" really hits, we have examples like the utter chaos after Hurricane Katrina. Somehow, I get the feeling that North American society in the 21st century would not be able to accomplish half of what Britons accomplished during WWII. This is not genetics; this is culture.

But there is a solution: deliberative democracy. For deliberative democracy not only improves governance; it also improves culture.

mass media

> "...the press and other institutions do a superb job of raising consciousness and of creating awareness. But what they do is get the public agitated and aroused, and then move on to another issue just when people are ready to engage an issue."[46]

Since those word were written in 1995, the situation has become even worse. The traditional media no longer has the hold on our consciousness that it once did. We now have an internet that enables people to search out only those views which they find comforting.

That has certainly been the case with climate change. If the science is inconvenient, then the easiest tactic is to pick and choose what to read (or what to view). A few years ago, the favourite storyline stated that if 1999 was cooler than 1998,[47] then obviously

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[45] From *England Your England.* Part III. Seen in http://orwell.ru/library/essays/lion/english/e_eye

[46] From Daniel Yankelovich in Rosell et al. *Op cit.* P.94

the world is getting colder. And if the next few years *also* turned out to be colder, then it's written in stone. And if a few inconvenient years (2005, 2007, 2010, 2014, 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018, and 2019) all turned out to be *warmer* than 1998, then it's time to forget that meme, and toss a totally different shiny bauble out towards the gullible souls who never did terribly well in high school science class.

There are *some* fora for real dialogue between different groups of stakeholders, but as Daniel Yankelovich notes, "The few institutions we do have that are intended to permit people to 'work through' issues...are designed to serve elites."[48] Anything else tends to be a case of like-minded folks chatting behind ideological barricades.

For example, I was invited to help organize a three day conference on sustainability. I was hoping that at least one of the keynote speakers would be from the oil and gas industry (after all, Alberta is at the centre of North American bitumen extraction), and that he or she would be able to speak on the subject of peak oil.[49] This would serve to bring in not only the folks who would be expected to attend a conference with the word "sustainability" in the title, but also a fair spectrum of people outside of that group. However, it was not to be. The conference simply became an event where the converted could preach to the converted.

organizations

There is a ton of data which shows that there are three things that people distrust: big business, big government, and big labour. That's because these three entities each have ways of avoiding the level

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[47] 1998 was an exceptionally warm year, mainly due to the strongest El Nino in recorded history (El Ninos being one of the primary methods that the oceans use to belch out excess heat).

[48] Paraphrased by Rosell et al, *op cit,* p.95

[49] I had David Hughes in mind. He had 32 years as a manager with the Geological Survey of Canada under his belt. He is a Fellow of the Post Carbon Institute. He contributed to the book *Carbon Shift,* edited by Thomas Homer Dixon. He was available. And his price was right.

playing field of the marketplace. However, people also recognize that business, government and labour unions are necessary elements in a sustainable society.[50] The trick is to keep a watchful eye over them. And who better to provide that eye than an informed citizenry?

However, an informed citizenry is an exceedingly rare commodity. We are addicted to pixelated nonsense. We are not very literate…or numerate. I'm reminded of Dave (with the ambling, pigeon-toed shuffle) who once expressed a desire for a t-shirt that shouted "Read a Book, Ass-hole!"

participation

I've nattered on and on about how participation is necessary in the political arena. But what about participation in the workplace? And I'm not just talking about suggestion boxes and employee stock ownership plans. I'm talking about co-operatives, where employees have a major say in how the company will be run.

How would that work? Would CEO's still earn an insane multiple of what the guys/gals on the assembly line earn? Nope. In fact, in the most successful co-op in history, the wage ratio between directors and workers ranges between 3:1 and 9:1. And it is the owners of the co-op (ie, both the directors *and* the workers) who decide, in a democratic vote, what that ratio should be.

The Mondragon co-op started making paraffin heaters in Spain in 1956. Now, it comprises the fourth largest industrial group in the country. It has its own university. Its latest figures show it having annual revenues of nearly $18 billion,[51] while employing over 81,000 people in the industrial, financial, retail and educational sectors.[52] It has operations on every continent except Antarctica.

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[50] Bellah et al. *Op cit.* p. 208

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[51] Just by way of comparison, that's more than the 2011 revenues of either CIBC or the Bank of Montreal. And about double that of CN Railway.

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[52] http://www.mondragon-corporation.com/eng/

And in 2009, the United Steelworkers made a deal with it to set up worker co-ops in the U.S.

How has Mondragon been doing during the global financial turmoil in recent years? Not great. Since 2007, revenues have declined by 24%, and the workforce has shrunk by 21%.[53] However, you can be sure that, unlike many other companies in turmoil these days, its top dogs aren't speeding away from the carnage in diamond encrusted Bentley's.

Mondragon does have one problem, though. Stupid people look at the words "co-operative" and "social" and see something that doesn't exist either in Richie Rich comics or under that thing that sits on top of Donald Trump's head. Forum comments to a recent article about Mondragon in the Guardian newspaper illustrate this perfectly.[54] One writer chides the author, stating that "Apparently you missed the story where the Russians tried this for seventy years and it did not work out too well for them." Hmm. Maybe he has a point, since the first two letters in both co-operative and communism are the same. And I bet that a lot of those 81,000 people that work at Mondragon have mustaches...just like Joseph Stalin!!!

politics

According to Bellah *et al,* there are three types of politics.[55] They call the first the "politics of community". This is the face-to-face variety most often seen at the municipal level, where personal attacks are rare, and agreements on issues are often achieved. This is seen in the Norman Rockwell painting, *Freedom of Speech,* where the rough-hewn worker with grimy hands and plaid flannel shirt

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[53] http://www.mondragon-corporation.com/eng/about-us/economic-and-financial-indicators/annual-report/#introduccion

[54] http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2012/jun/24/alternative-capitalism-mondragon The author calls Mondragon an "alternative to capitalism". However, Mondragon thrives in the capitalist marketplace, so there is a slight misconception going on.

[55] Bellah *et al. Op cit.* pp. 200-203

rises in a town hall meeting to voice his concern about the annual report.

The second type of politics is the "politics of interest". There is hardly ever any consensus at this level. It is typified by chest thumping, which then produces cynicism amongst those voters who are unlucky enough to have to watch the spectacle. There is never any attempt to resolve issues via dialogue. Instead, it often boils down to fistfuls of cash given to a candidate in return for favours after he or she is elected.

The third type is called the "politics of the nation". At certain times in history, problems become so intractable that the politics of interest are brushed aside in favour of a leader who can get things done and who is looked up to by the vast majority of the electorate. The example given by Bellah *et al* is Franklin Roosevelt's response to the Great Depression and World War II. Churchill would also fit the mould.

These days, we have to think long and hard to find an example of the politics of the nation. In the weeks following September 11, 2001, there seemed to be an opening. People took the time to ponder the big "why". Did the terrorists do it to the U.S. for what it was? Or did they do it in exchange for Uncle Sam poking its covetous nose into far-off places that had an abundance of fossil fuels?.

In an answer to that question, Bill Maher offered up his book *When You Ride ALONE, You Ride With Bin Laden.* The title was based on a WWII poster with the same title, but with "Hitler" instead of "Bin Laden". In WWII, gasoline was scarce on the home front because it was desperately needed for the war effort. In modern America, gasoline seems scarce because of an addiction for big vehicles and big houses in distant suburbs. The problem arises when the country with that addiction has to import 8 million barrels of oil per day...often from unstable countries.

polls

"Often the results are wrong, inadequate,

untrustworthy, unreliable, and self serving."[56]

> "Most respondents feel obliged to have an opinion, in effect, to help the interviewer out...[that is] opinions are invented on the spot."[57]

> "Polls can be a mirror or a window. On many issues, survey results merely reflect back what people have superficially absorbed from the media. Instead of peering into the minds of voters, reporters are sometimes merely seeing themselves in these survey results."[58]

None of that sounds very comforting, especially when a Prime Minister or a President bases practically everything he or she does on polling results. However, the news is not all bad. In fact, when a study looked at 115 referenda that were done over many years in California, it found that, compared to their elected representatives, voters were much more able to resist "quack nostrums" foisted on them by special interest groups and industry lobbyists.[59] And furthermore, when it comes to underlying values and attitudes, we're actually quite sane. We know nothing about policy details, but when it comes to the vague generalities about the type of world we'd like our grand-kids to inherit, we *are* fairly civilized.[60] So while we're

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[56] Lawrence K. Grossman in *The Electronic Republic: Reshaping Democracy in the Information Age.* Toronto: Viking (Penguin), 1995. p.59. Grossman, by the way, was the past president of NBC News and PBS.

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[57] James Fishkin. *Voice of the People. Op cit.* p.83.

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[58] Fishkin. *Op cit.* p.160-161.

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[59] Grossman (*op cit,* p.67) citing Albert H. Cantril, ed. *Polling on the Issues.* Bethesda, Md: Seven Locks Press, 1980. p.170.

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[60] Daniel Yankelovich *Coming to Public Judgement: Making Democracy Work in a Complex World.* Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 1991. p.20-21. This makes sense, because while we tend to think of the world our grand-kids will inherit, politicians tend to think about the next election, and CEO's tend to think about the next quarterly report.

definitely not Albert Einstein, we do have a bit of Mother Teresa[61] in us.

Population

"Are humans smarter than yeast?" (Richard Heinberg)

This is the biggie. This is the proverbial elephant in the room that nobody wants to mention in polite company. Actually, it's OK to mention it if you're just talking about the Third World. That's because their birthrates can be nearly as high as that of the Duggar family.[62] And the solutions to unsustainable birth rates *over there* (such as empowering young girls to have as much schooling as the boys) tend not to step on any ideological toes (except those which deserve to see the underside of a steam-roller). But to hint that there are already too many people in North America or Europe is akin to saying that motherhood is over-rated and apple pie is fattening.

After all, we *need* more people! Don't we? I mean, who's going to change my diapers when I have one foot in the grave? Forget about the fact that the decision to have a child adds more than 9,000 tonnes of CO^2 to the atmosphere.[63] And forget about the fact that the average immigrant coming to Canada immediately becomes just as wasteful as the average Canadian.[64] I need my diapers changed!

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[61] Even though the "towering and geeky" Chris reminded me of Mother Teresa's medieval stance on 20th Century problems, I'll still use her as a passable symbol for goodness.

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[62] A husband and wife who somehow managed to spit out 19 children, and then got the media to base a television show on their decision to follow Genesis 9:7 with a tad too much devotion.

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[63] Paul A. Murtaugh and Michael G. Schlax. *Reproduction and the Carbon Legacies of Individuals.* Global Environmental Change. Vol. 19 (2009) pp. 14–20.

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[64] Ryerson, William. 1998/99. "Political Correctness and the Population Problem." *Wild Earth 8* (4): 100-103. Not seen. Cited in Foreman, Dave. *The Great Backtrack* (p. 59, 64-66) in *Life on the Brink: Environmentalists Confront Overpopulation.* Edited by Philip Cafaro and Eileen Crist. University of Georgia Press. 2012.

As I drive around the rural parts of central Alberta, I see a lot of "empty space" (filled by crops or pasture). So, overcrowding doesn't seem to be an issue. But if I look at the labels on our gadgets and shiny toys, I see that most of them come from an already crowded part of the planet: Asia. And if I accept the elementary principle of cause and effect, I'm forced to see that I'm part of the problem.

Mongolia is the most polluted country in the world. In terms of airborne particulates, it is 21 times more polluted than Canada. At certain times of the year in the capital of Ulan Bator, breathing is considered an extreme sport. Mongolia exports a huge amount of copper, which is used in electronics. China is right next door. China makes a ton-o-electronic stuff, which we import. See the connection? Even a small Alberta hamlet of a hundred souls surrounded by endless fields of wheat might be considered to be complicit in the game of population overshoot.

Factor in peak oil, and you've got a whole new set of issues to deal with. Pretty much anything we do besides planting a backyard garden involves our personal allotment of hydrocarbon slaves. A barrel of oil has 6 billion joules of energy in it. That energy equates to 25,000 hours of human labour. An average Canadian uses about 20 barrels per year. See where I'm going with this? We are finding less and less easily extractable oil,[65] and so far, there are no magic energy bullets on the horizon. The only bright spot is that Canadians waste a tremendous amount of energy...so we have a lot of potential to conserve.

poverty

"You thought it would be terrible; it is merely squalid and boring".

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[65] We Albertans tend to be a bit smug with our bitumen inheritance, but it's *far* more expensive to pull out of the ground, *far* more expensive to transport, and *far* more expensive to refine than the conventional oil that we *used* to have. Now, we go around with a deer-in-the-headlight gaze, wondering why $60/barrel oil doesn't allow us all to drive around in Lamborghinis. Pipelines versus rail is just a side-show, compared to the loss of conventional oil, and compared to the fact that while Norway saved for the future, we pissed it all away.

George Orwell (from *Down and Out in Paris and London)*

Orwell also fought in the Spanish Civil War, so perhaps his definition of "terrible" was a bit more substantial than the average 21st century North American, who has a tendency to fume when the nearest big-box store runs out of the latest shiny toy.

To comfort us these days, we have "trickle down" economics, with the analogy of a rising tide that lifts all boats. But perhaps the more accurate analogy has proven to be the one of sparrows picking out undigested morsels of oats from the steaming stools left by the horse that has just passed.[66]

That might be fine for Gordon Gekko. But it is also a well established fact that relatively equitable societies tend to do well economically. Christopher Freeman[67] compared the development trajectories of various Latin American countries versus the so-called "Asian Tigers" (Hong Kong, Singapore, South Korea and Taiwan), and found that one reason for the phenomenal economic growth of the Tigers was the fairly high degree of equity in the their societies.

public goods

"…the staunchest defenders of capitalism are also its greatest ideological threat."

Daniel Drezner[68]

According to Drezner, the main challenges to market capitalism – which provides the prosperity that governments depend on – come

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[66] …given by John Kenneth Galbraith on an episode of William F. Buckley's *Firing Line.* Date unknown, but vividly recalled from the early years of Ronald Reagan's presidency.

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[67] Cited in Rosell et al, *op cit,* p.30.

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[68] …Professor at the The Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy (part of Tufts University). He is the lecturer for one of the Great Courses (www.thegreatcourses.com) titled *Foundations of Economic Prosperity.* The quote is from the 2nd last lecture in the course, titled *Ideological Challenges to Global Prosperity.*

from four different ideological camps (or R's as Drezner calls them). The first three R's are 1) the Romantics, like Thoreau, who we met in chapter v, 2) the Reactionaries, like Gandhi, who we met in chapter vii, and 3) the Revolutionaries, like Karl Marx. However, modern society generally hasn't supported any of these first three groups anyway, since market capitalism is very efficient at putting bread and butter on the table, and shiny toys everywhere else.[69]

It is the 4th R that Drezner sees as being the only real *remaining* challenge to the long-term effectiveness of capitalism. Ironically, that 4th R is Radical Capitalism (from proponents such as Ayn Rand,[70] Rand Paul and Paul Ryan…or Ayn Rand Paul Ryan for short[71]).

According to Drezner, Radical Capitalism (typically known as Libertarianism) is the biggest threat to present-day capitalism because 1) it sees little use for public goods (which are a necessary lubricant for the efficient workings of the market), and 2) it sees little need to guard against financial bubbles (the kind which brought us the Great Depression of the 1930s', and the Great Recession of 2007-2008).

So where does that leave us? Drezner summarizes by stating that we need a "Goldilocks Government" (not too big, and not too small).

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[69] I know what you're thinking. However, Drezner's 3rd last lecture is called *Global Prosperity and the Environment,* and he spends most of it talking about how climate change could put an existential damper on the centuries-long party that got started with Agrarian Capitalism in late 16th century England.

[70] A somewhat homely and boring author with a simplistic philosophy, who wrote about the virtues of greed and the corrosive effects of charity.

[71] A coincidental mish-mash (seemingly discovered by Warren J. Blumenfeld of HuffPost) consisting of Rand and two of her most ardent fans, one whom was hoping to be President in 2017, and the other being the Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives prior to Nancy Pelosi.

public journalism

"We are not just amused bystanders, watching the idiots screw it up."[72]

Robert MacNeil[73]

MacNeil made a normative statement, because much of the time, journalists *do* simply behave like amused bystanders. What he is making a plea for, is a type of journalism where the object is not simply to *report* on what's going on, but also to help the public get *involved* with what's going on.

Jay Rosen (journalism professor at New York University) notes the following:

> Traditional journalism assumes that democracy is what we have, and that information is what we need. Public journalism assumes that information is what we have, and that democracy is what we need. Traditional journalism assumes that people need to be informed, so that they can participate. Public journalism assumes that people need to participate, so that they can become informed.[74]

I once hinted to a former editor at our local newspaper that public journalism might be a good thing. He disagreed, saying that the paper's role is not to get involved in issues, but simply to report

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[72] Cited in *Getting the Connections Right: Public Journalism and the Troubles in the Press* by Jay Rosen. New York: The Twentieth Century Fund Press, 1996. p.2

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[73] Robert MacNeil was, of course, one of the two anchors on the MacNeil/Leher Report on PBS. He also happened to see a nervous fellow descending the stairs of the Texas School Book Depository on that fateful day in November, 1963. MacNeil was *ascending* the stairs in a breathless hurry, looking for a phone, so that he could relay the news of Kennedy's assassination back to his office.

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[74] Rosen, *Getting the Connections Right. Op cit.* p.83

on them. However, as Rosen notes, journalists are already "involved" the minute they decide what makes the front page.[75]

religion

"...the quasi-therapeutic blandness that has afflicted much of mainline Protestant religion at the parish level for over a century cannot effectively withstand the competition of the more vigorous forms of radical religious individualism, with their claims of dramatic self-realization, or the resurgent religious conservatism that spells out clear, if simple, answers in an increasingly bewildering world."[76]

Bellah *et al* interviewed loads of folks from different religious backgrounds: Catholics, Evangelical Protestants, Episcopalians, New Agers, etc. The common thread of their inquiry was how well (or how poorly) these different traditions fostered ties with the communities in which they operated.

Twenty or thirty years ago, I would have been lumped in with the "radical religious individualism" category mentioned above. I didn't go to church, but I eagerly studied the mystical cores of the various eastern and western religious traditions.

Altering one's consciousness is a universal quest. So don't tell me that as a child, you never spun around until you got so dizzy that you fell on the ground giggling. It seems to be wired into our DNA. And if that urge can be paired with a similar urge to attain experiential knowledge about the underlying nature of reality – as opposed to just getting blotto with a bottle – then perhaps humanity can make a bit of progress.

However, what the great religions have also pointed out, is that spiritual awareness is only half the battle. At the end of your "trip", you still have to make some lasting contribution to society.[77]

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[75] Rosen, *Connections. Op cit.* p.67

[76] Bellah et al, *op cit,* p. 238

[77] Bellah et al, *op cit,* p. 248

At the other end of the spectrum, there is a particular form of "quasi-therapeutic blandness" which is combined with gullibility and grift. I'm talking about Joel Osteen, who preaches the "prosperity gospel". It says that Jesus wants you to be rich.[78] So if you're not rich, you're either not buying enough of Joel's books, or you're not putting enough money in his offering plate. Theology professor, Michael Horton has rightfully called his message heresy.[79] But success sells, so perhaps there ought to be a new Olympic event. It would feature Osteen trying to coax camels through the eyes of needles.

Bellah *et al* closed off their chapter on religion with none other than Martin Luther King. No quasi-therapeutic blandness for him. Nor any mystical navel gazing. King got fully involved with the most divisive issues of his era: Civil Rights and the Vietnam War.

Contrast that with Osteen, the pre-eminent pimp for the status quo.

resources (non-renewable)

Yes, folks, they are non-renewable. Despite the feverish ravings of the abiotic oil[80] crowd or the Julian Simon[81] crowd, there is a

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[78] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Prosperity_theology

[79] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Joel_Osteen#Criticism

[80] The theory that petroleum isn't constituted from dead dinosaurs, but from natural forces during the formation of the earth. (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Abiotic_oil)

[81] The business administration professor who wrote lots of book about why limited resources weren't a problem because human ingenuity would always find ways to make more of them, or find substitutes, etc. Likewise, the environment was not important, because we could always find substitutes for it (hey, the Jetsons never had to worry about the environment). And here's a bizarre quote from Simon: "You see, in the end, copper and oil come out of our minds. That's really where they are." (from an interview with William F. Buckley). See: http://www.thesocialcontract.com/artman2/publish/tsc1303/article_1144.shtml

limited amount of petroleum under the ground. So, you'd think that if we gave a shit about our grandchildren, we'd leave a bit of it for them to use. But no. We prefer not to contemplate such scenarios. Instead, we let people like Julian Simon state that it's OK if we burn through our 300 million year endowment of fossil fuels[82] in a century or two, as long as we leave a few shiny toys for the grand-kids.

As Daly and Cobb[83] note, the three main orthodox arguments go as follows:

- Rapid advances in technology will allow us to increasingly do everything more and more efficiently. Then, presumably, at some point, we'll be close to getting everything for nothing. Woo-hoo! Party on, Dude!

- We'll leave future generations with lots and lots of machinery. We've already done the hard work of getting the ore out of the ground and refining it and making it into stuff. Therefore, our grand-kids can sit back and take it easy. Woo-hoo! Party on, little dudes!

- We can use discount rates. Discounting means that a dollar in the hand right now is worth more than a dollar in the hand ten years from now (because you can invest it and make a bit of money during that time). But human lives can also be discounted.[84] If discounting makes sense for money, why not transfer the concept to inter-generational equity? So we can say that you and I in 2021 are worth far more than those pathetic unborn losers from the year 2121. Woo-hoo! Party on Boomers! Party on Gen-X'ers! Party on Millennials!

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[82] ….the number of years it took the earth to make the coal, oil and gas in the first place.

[83] *Op cit.* p.408

[84] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social_discount_rate

But, as Daly and Cobb note, there are a few holes in those arguments. For example, can we *really* do things more efficiently? Certainly, information technology has made tremendous strides. When Daly and Cobb's book came out in 1989, something like Wikipedia was just a kooky sci-fi wet dream. However, we've also seen $60 per barrel of oil during a global recession (as was the case in 2009). Thirty years ago, that would have seemed an equally foolish science fiction plot. And there's the rub. Even increasing efficiencies can't account for the fact that we now have to dig deeper and deeper into the ground to get the fossil fuels that enable society to survive.[85]

On top of that, there is Jevon's Paradox, which happens when increasing efficiencies merely lead to a higher rates of consumption.[86] We see this with vehicles. They get more efficient, but then we just give them more horsepower, and drive them more often.

What about the argument that it'll be OK if we just leave enough stuff (ie, capital goods) for our kids? First is the obvious retort that maybe they might want a bit more energy and bit less stuff. After all, a lot of stuff uses energy to run properly. And secondly, stuff deteriorates over time. A hundred years from now, the shiny widget that's used to make other widgets might not be quite so shiny. But energy left in the ground, on the other hand, is like money in the bank. So we just need to leave our kids a few widgets with which to dig it up on a rainy day, and they'll thank us.

Finally, there's the argument that the welfare of Canada in 2121 is less important than the welfare of Canada right now. I would just note that unless you belong to the Ayn Rand School of Ethics, that is

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[85] The concept of "energy return on investment" (EROI) is perhaps the single most important concept for the survival of civilization. Sixty or eighty years ago, in Texas or Saudi Arabia, the ratio of the number of barrels of oil that could be pulled out of the ground by the energy in a single barrel of oil was huge (about 100:1). But now we're now forced to sift through tar/oil sands, where estimated EROI's range from 5:1 to less than 2:1. And shale oil is only slightly better, with ratios between 5:1 and 10:1.

[86] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jevons_paradox

a thought best left to small cliques of university students who form societies that nobody else knows the purpose of.[87]

sustainability

Many summers ago, I sat up in a tower and listened to a radio call-in show host interview his guest: then Alberta Environment Minister, Ralph Klein. The host asked him what the definition of sustainable development was. A simple enough question, especially for an environment minister. But Ralph fumbled and bumbled and finally blurted out that sustainable development was "development that's sustainable". Smart guy. I guess if someone asks me what a turbocharged engine is, I can say that it's an engine that's turbocharged.

This was a short time after the Brundtland Commission report came out (a huge thing back in 1987), and subsequently popularized the term "sustainable development". So if Ralph had bothered to read any of it, he would have found out that its definition was *development that meets the needs of the present generation without compromising the development needs of future generations*.[88] In other words, there is a element of inter-generational equity, and it is definitely *not* a vision of development that grows and grows like a cancer cell.

A couple of decades later, we had Stephen Harper. This guy wasn't such a fumbler and bumbler, but he seemed to dislike the environment with an equal passion. So much so that he abolished the National Roundtable on the Environment and the Economy. Former Conservative MP Bob Mills (Red Deer) commented on Harper's decision:

"I've always said that if you're smart you surround

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[87] I remember walking past their Objectivist booths, where a lonely student sometimes sat, hoping to entice someone to pick up a brochure that tried to mask the central theme of pure greed. See http://atlassociety.org/

[88] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Brundtland_Commission#Modern_Definition_of_Sustainable_Development

yourself with really smart people. And if you're dumb, you surround yourself with a bunch of cheerleaders."[89]

Television

When I created this category a quarter of a century ago, it seemed perfectly apt. Now, in the age of the internet, it seems a bit quaint. However, culture is culture. And notwithstanding McLuhan's dictum that "the medium is the message", plot lines and themes are still just as important as they were in the days of Homer (the dead Greek guy, not the bald Simpson guy).

So, what about violent plot lines? Do they affect our kids? Have they affected us? According to industry executives and other "experts", graphic violence on the screen doesn't affect us at all. The bullying and road rage that we see in real life comes from...um, somewhere else. Um…genetics. Yeah, that's it.

That argument might hold...*if* those same industry executives didn't turn right around and spend billions on broadcast advertisements. Advertisements, we are told, have a main effect, which is to persuade us. So, according to the exec's, it's just the ads that persuade us; not the violent bits in between.[90]

Don't get me wrong. I'm not automatically against the viewing of graphic violence – even for kids. In fact, my favourite set of DVD's has the deadpan monotone of Laurence Olivier wryly commenting on scenes of frozen German soldiers littering the battlefields of the Eastern Front. And matchstick Jewish corpses being tossed into a pit. But there's a context. I am learning something about the human condition. I'm not being conditioned by some soul-less corporate worm who simply wants to empty my pockets.

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[89] http://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/story/2012/06/07/pol-nrtee-round-table-environment-economy-mills.html

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[90] Frank Mankiewicz and Joel Swerdlow in *Remote Control: Television and the Manipulation of American Life.* New York: Times Books, 1978. p.51

chapter xii: more university (in rhyming verse)

…and here are the same essential concepts from the previous 37 pages stated in a slightly different manner (assembled during a particularly damp tower season, many years ago).

Dick Diddled Sue

I've written a poem...perhaps a bit long.
It speaks of a future when things go quite wrong.

Oh, I know technocrat optimists spewing out drool,
tell us "Don't worry! The future is cool!"

And laissez-faire bus'ness types spewing out fiction,
say that the market will cure all affliction.[1]

But what about cod stocks and weapons at school?
And third world dictators who kill as they rule?

There's terrorist scum who're unleashing such dread,
that Mohammed himself must be shaking his head.

And cee-oh-two warming and frogs in decline,
and weapons-grade nuke-juice sales east of the Rhine.

There's covid and AIDS and the H5N1.
Will they mow us all down like Attila the Hun?

Yes, we need answers. We need them quite soon.
'Cuz from stone cold extinction, we just ain't immune.

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[1] The marketplace sometime's somewhat of a stale cure.
In economist's textbooks, there ARE "market failures".

Market failures conveniently group into 3.
One includes fighting o'er fish in the sea.

It's the other two though, which should be understood.
One's "market externals", and one's "public goods".

Now SUS-tain-a-BIL-i-ty should be defined,
when looking at nat'ral and civil decline.

It means vigour and health in our grandchildren's time.
A vigour and health from a new paradigm.

A new paradigm that is really quite old.
de TOKE-ville described it, but now it's lost hold.

It's the balance of power twixt three social forces.
A balance of power that each one endorses.

As it stands now though, one's in decline.
I'll let you guess which, as each I define.

The first is the "Prince"...well, government really.
The one that, at times, has been spending too freely.

But for neat stuff like schooling and health and defence,
it is something with which we can never dispense.

It's true! It's true! It's not bolshevistic!
Some sphere's just have public goods char'cteristics.[2]

The next social force is best known as the "merchant".
It trades where "invisible hand" is emergent.

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[2] Goods that are public can be misconstrued,
so to grasp the essentials, remember one clue.

It's their output! Yes, output! It's free to us each.
If anyone wants some, they just have to reach.

The perfect example in matters marine,
are lighthouses signalling hazards unseen.

See? It's their output! Yes, output!...for which oftentimes,
providers have trouble collecting a dime.

And if markets have trouble in selling the stuff,
there's no rationale for supplying enough.

But really there's two; there's "Big Merch" and "Small".
It's Small Merch we like. Big often appalls.

Big lays people off, while Small tends to hire.
Big often leaves town. Small stays in the shire.

And then there are times when Big kisses the Prince.
The Prince kisses back and the rest of us wince.

Have you guessed the third force in our so-sigh-eh-tee?
Why yes. But of course. It's SIT-i-zin-ree!

But we're now very flabby. We sit on our ass.
We give up too soon. We just let it pass.

The problem is cultural. That I am sure.
The culture we're fed spews straight out of the sewer.

It portrays us consuming, with but little else.
It neglects us producing, for that never sells.

Thus even in civics, we're passive consumers.
Getting involved? That's just some weird rumour.

Once every few years, we go to the polls
and leave all the rest for elites to control.

Another great flaw in our cultural prism
is far, far too much individualism.

Freedom expressing oneself to the rest?
Oh no! I mean *greed* and beating one's chest!

Our buddy de TOKE-ville first saw it a bit.
Said dictators love it when people are split.

We've been brought up on myths some economists claim.
Like ALL-truism ain't part of the game.

But ask an ecologist if competition's
the only thing life-forms have as their ambition.

"Of course not!", she'll say, "There's co-op-er-AY-shun".
"Even Darwin acknowledged such qualifications".

There's another concern that has caused much frustration.
It's that culture has suffered so much fragmentation.

Culture at one time was fairly wholistic.
Our hopes and our dreams were much more realistic.

We thought about fam'ly. We thought about friends.
We thought of ideals that we'd die to defend.

We thought about death. We thought about birth.
We thought about life on this vast village earth.

But now that our earth is much more like a city,
our culture, it seems, issues forth from committees.

We know if some jock, to a million said "nope",
and if Dick diddled Sue on the afternoon soap.

It's trivial crap that is usually boring.
It's trivial crap that we should be ignoring.

But 500 channels are aw-f'lee compelling.
This, even with crises we should be out quelling.

Sure, there's the value of COM-une-i-CAY-shun,
but garbage transmissions bring mental castration.

Sure, there's a switch that we all can turn off.
If you think that's the answer, I'll jeer and I'll scoff.

Let's be realistic. Let's use common sense.
Let's ask how our debt got so bloody immense.

Trudeau? Mulroney? Sure; they did their part.
But what of us peons? It's here you should start.

They frittered our billions, but what held our gaze?
Loud morons on game-shows in shameful displays.

And what about me? Did I protest at all?
Uh...well, no...but I did see Stallone in some ass-kicking brawls!

Thus citizens shackled by cultural junk
have all their potential so utterly shrunk.

This just will not do. We cannot survive
unless the grass-roots is enabled to thrive.

Economists mention in didactic journals
some curious stuff they call "market externals".

They're side effects really...not the main aim,
yet still they can maim and inflame and cause shame.

The common example is industry's dirt
or my car, out of which sickly smoke thickly spurts.

But what of the dirt on the idiot box?
Shouldn't some writers be thrown in the stocks?

Mind you, there's the contrast of our CBC
...Uh...well...for certain their radio; that I'll agree.

And yes; PBS. It uplifts and enables.
And grassroots control of community cable.

So in fact, there are two types of media ware.
Either buckets of crap or the good stuff that's rare.

The good stuff will often use taxpayer's cash,
while cess that is ceaseless shows ads full of flash.

And one can presume that the Hollywood hacks
at least pay some nominal burden of tax.

So the bad pays for good. A few bucks are collected.
Will that get cathodic corruption corrected?

Their market external's so bloody immense
that surely there should be much more recompense.

And their public goods assets? So bloody minute
that a skull full of grey matter quickly transmutes.

So how should we curb the worst sins of such stations
that speed the erosion of civilization?

And the video games that pretend that it's fun
to go out and steal cars and shoot cops with a gun.

What we need is a magnet. Something to pull
the people away from the worst of the bull.

As for magnets, there's two that I much recommend.
If we give them a chance, then our sheep-walk will end.

One deals with culture and social reforms.
"It takes a village..." being one of the norms.

The other's political. Spreading control.
Jane and Joe Lunch-box will now have a roll.

But Jane and Joe Lunch-box with boosted IQ's,
discussing the critical things in the news.

Bombast and rhetoric no more will sound.
For DEE-lib-ur-AY-shun's where answers are found.

My poem is over. There's no more to say,
except a brief wish that we turn out OK.

chapter xiii: guatemala

I had finished all of the required courses for my graduate studies, but now came the hard part: writing a thesis. I knew it would be about Third World forestry, but that was about all I knew.

Luckily, I didn't have to apply for funding, which would have entailed lots of background research and rigorous analysis and constructive criticism from grey-haired professors. I made enough money on the towers each summer to enable me to dispense with such formalities. So I simply told the professors that the purpose of my initial trip was to learn a bit of Spanish and sniff around for a topic to study. I guess they must've agreed, since the next thing I remember was the descent into Mexico City...or as Carlos Fuentes called it: Make-Sicko City.

I had a tightness in my gut. Except for a family holiday in the 1970's that ventured as far south as Ensenada, this was my first time in a Third World country. I wasn't sure what to expect.

But Customs went well, and visions from the movie Midnight Express (profuse sweat, a pounding bass beat, and swarthy guys with automatic weapons casting suspicious glances) never materialized . So within an hour, I found myself in a crowded bus station with a ticket to San Cristobal de las Casas.

Shortly after that, I was sitting in a fairly modern bus, as it rumbled south in the warm, humid night. However, I had recently heard about buses being held up by bandits, and I was thinking about the valuables that I had brought with me. Traveler's cheques in my secret pocket. A silver ring on my little finger from the Canadian Institute of Forestry. Probably worth a peso or two. Would they just cut my finger off if I couldn't remove it in time?

The paranoia was quickly overtaken by traditional folk music wafting from the funky speakers bolted to the dashboard. And as the miles rolled on, and as daylight started to make itself known, I was able to make out the colourful interior decorating that is a staple of buses in Latin America: Madonnas and Spanish blessings side by side with rock and roll iconography. I no longer felt so uneasy.

The next morning, we descended from the main plateau that covers much of Mexico. Forested highlands were replaced by sand and heat and cacti and grubby towns that looked much like the Ensenada that I remembered from years ago.

But later in the day, we ascended once more into mountainous terrain. I'm not sure why I headed towards the southernmost state of Chiapas. Maybe it was because the agro-forestry books that I had been reading mentioned it so much. Maybe it was because of the high percentage of indigenous peoples (and thus, colourful culture) in the state. Or maybe it was simply because I much preferred life above 2,000 metres to the humid heat of the lowlands.

Toward evening, we pulled in to San Cristobal de las Casas, a city of about 125,000 people. The bus station was a bit funkier than the one in Mexico City, and it had a shrine with fresh flowers dedicated to one of the patron saints of safe travel. This made perfect sense, based on the the condition of the roads, the speeds traveled, and the condition of some of the vehicles.[1]

I took out my trusty *Lonely Planet* guide and found a suitable (ie, cheap) hotel for the night. There was another shrine in the lobby, but it was presumably to the patron saint of innkeepers. And in my room, there was a monstrous cockroach in the waste-basket, which I could hear fumbling around until well into the wee hours of the morning.

At 5:30 a.m., a cock crowed. San Cristobal was a city, but it was a city with no shortage of hobby farmers…if ensuring that one

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[1] …and the attitudes of some of the drivers. A few weeks later, I was on a city bus, descending a fairly narrow road at about 50 kph. Dead ahead, there was a cow, which was in no hurry to vacate the asphalt. Neither was the driver in any mood to come to a complete stop (since that would have wasted precious momentum and gasoline). So a bit of braking was employed, but only enough to reduce the speed of the bus by half. Which was enough for the cow to halfway vacate the road. But not fully. The corner of the bus hit the ass end of the cow with enough force to spin the poor beast around about 180 degrees. I glanced back through the rear window. The cow was still standing. Still chewing its cud. The driver briefly glanced in the rear view mirror, and the other passengers barely looked up from their routine reveries.

obtained enough dietary protein could be called a hobby.

The place was a delight. With mountains all around, and small shops selling trinkets and fast food, it was a Third World equivalent of Banff. But with a centuries-old cathedral and cobble stone streets, it might just as easily have been Old Quebec City or medieval York. Indigenous women sold yard goods with patterns so colourful and intricate that nature seemed drab in comparison. This was not the grimy, dusty Mexico that I had come to expect.

Even back in Canada, I had heard about a place called Na Bolom. It was an old monastery-turned-hotel, built and run by a renowned archeologist and his wife.[2] It was one of those places that reeked of history. Ancient wood, stone and plaster combined with culture and nature and caring hands to create a veritable museum.

I did some work in the attached tree nursery, in exchange for meals. It wasn't the case that I needed to work for my meals, but I was able to learn a bit more about the forests in the area...and I managed to befriend an attractive German woman who seemed to derive some pleasure from stuffing soil into little fabric bags.

I met another tourist who had cycled down from Vancouver. It was a remarkable accomplishment – especially for someone with only one foot. Actually, he had three feet: one made of flesh, a second, which was a life-like prosthetic made of some kind of

[2] Frans and Trudi Blom, who studied and aided the Lacandon natives of the lowland jungle region of Chiapas. The Lacandon were the only Maya who were never conquered by the Spanish. Frans was also one of the first archeologists to unearth the Mayan ruins at Palenque.

plastic, and a spare, which he strapped on top of his bike panniers. It was the third foot which had a tendency to raise eyebrows at border crossings.

I had heard that living in Guatemala was even cheaper than living in southern Mexico. So, instead of spending an exorbitant $5 per night for a hotel, I could pay a much more reasonable $3 per night.

Guatemala had a reputation. In the 1980's, I had read the many accounts of right-wing militias and army groups exterminating whole native villages. But that was then. Now, it was 1992, and so surely the bloody massacres were just a historical blip.

At the border, the bus lurched to a stop, where there were uniforms and automatic weapons and vivid memories of the movie *Salvador* (with a wound-up James Woods as the mouthy journalist). However, things went smoothly. I collected another stamp in my passport book, and in return for a crisp American $20 bill, I received an official receipt for $10. I didn't argue...even if that extra $10 could've bought me another three nights of accommodation.

We shuffled on to another bus, which was a step down from the Mexican variety. It still had sayings such as Via Con Dios plastered all over it, but instead being a cast-off Greyhound, it was now an old school bus. As we headed further south, more and more peasants piled on, until there were three of us on the single seat which used to hold two school children. The young American sitting next to me must have been a basketball player, since his knees were jammed up against the seat in front of us, almost level with his shoulders.

We chatted about this and that, until the conversation came around to climate change (still called "global warming" in those days). He was quite concerned, but when I mentioned that methane from the warming tundra would make the Industrial Revolution look like a tea party, he groaned and shook his head. Now, 29 years later, I also have to shake my head, knowing that our so-called "leaders" have only made things worse.

The border area was verdant lowland jungle, but now we climbed higher and higher to drier and drier elevations. There were numerous hair-pin turns with rock faces on one side and gut wrenching drops on the other. The rock faces were plastered with the symbols of the various political parties, and later that day, my blood froze when I saw a Rios Montt campaign sign painted on the side of a building. Throughout the 1980's, I had read about this genocidal maniac[3] and was astonished that he was still allowed to run in an election.

The bus arrived in Huehue[4] that afternoon, and I made my way to the central square with its attractive colonial architecture, shade trees, and wooden benches. Another young American was sitting and nonchalantly chatting with some locals. So, obviously his Spanish must've been fairly decent.

"There's quite a few family-run language schools in Huehue, but the one I'm at is pretty good. Clean; good food; and the woman who runs it is no-nonsense and friendly. Here, I'll write down the address for you."

So I went down one of the side streets, knocked on a door, and a smile greeted me. An older lady with a few extra pounds (mostly muscle, I guessed) ushered me in, and I gave her an absurdly small amount of money for a week's worth of Spanish instruction, as well as room and board. She then got on the phone and a short time later, a fellow came by in a car and drove me to a small town a few kilometres to the north, called Chiantla. On the outskirts, at the top of a small hill, was a handsome house with a

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[3] ...and personal friend of evangelical superstars, Pat Robertson and Jerry Falwell. And called by Ronald Reagan, "...a man of great personal integrity and commitment..." And as I wrote this sentence for an earlier draft, awaiting trial on charges of genocide against the indigenous population of Guatemala. See: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rios_Montt

[4] Pronounced Way Way. Otherwise known as Huehuetenango, the major city (population of about 80,000) in western Guatemala.

high, wrought iron fence and shrubbery all around it. This was to be my home for the next few weeks.

The house was a significant cut above the surrounding houses, so maybe that's why it had the iron fence all around. The tall, skinny fellow who drove me there was the father. His wife – short and plump – was a school principal (all the better to ensure that any verbs I might learn would have the proper tenses). They had a young son who was outgoing and friendly, as well as a small puppy, who was ironically named Rocky.

I was shown to my room, which had the typical pastel paint on plaster walls, as well as a small window looking out to a well-kept yard. Slumping down on the bed, I leafed through a Spanish comic book that I had picked up in San Cristobal. A short while later, there was a knock on the door, and the young son appeared. He asked me something, but the blank look on my face prompted him to try again. Just one word this time.

"Co-Mare?"

Another stunned silence.

"Co-Mare?", he repeated, but this time, gesturing with his thumb and fingers close to his mouth. Still nothing. So, with a frown, he said "eat?", and I finally figured it out.

I'm sure there was a lot of variety, but I mainly remember a lot of chicken soup (plucked, but with the occasional foot still floating around) and something called pan. In a Spanish dictionary, pan means bread. But in Guatemala, it seemed to mean a light cookie or pastry. This was a common theme: sugar. Sugar in the bread. Sugar pre-mixed in the coffee urns at restaurants. Sugary drinks in bottles being fed to babies on buses. After a while, I started getting headaches, and in hindsight, I'm sure it was from the sugar that saturated everything except the chicken feet. The headaches got more persistent. I was certain I was getting a brain tumor. After all, I had smoked a fair amount of pot back in Canada. Bob Marley smoked pot. Didn't he die from a brain tumor?[5]

[5] Nope. It was skin cancer. And I was much luckier. A few weeks later, I traveled

On an average day, the school principal would make me conjugate verbs for an hour or two. This would've been fine, if it weren't for the fact that the couch in their living room was made of plywood hiding under a thin film of cushion. After a few hundred conjugations, I felt like my butt bones had permanently fused to the plywood underneath. So the next day, I asked if I could take my lessons in the kitchen. No problemo, Senor.

Phew! Now my buttocks could recuperate. However, I could no longer enjoy the mute company of their stuffed quetzal,[6] which sat on a perch in the corner.

On some days, I would walk down the hill from the house, cross a bridge over a small river, and ascend the other bank, into the tiny town of Chiantla. Occasionally, a group of soldiers would be stationed at the bridge, with sub-machine guns slung over their shoulders. I was a bit nervous, wondering if any of them had participated in the gruesome killings a decade earlier. "Hola!", I said with a smile and a nod. "Hola!", they called back, and gave a friendly wave. They were likely aware that the nice house on the top of the hill often had Spanish-challenged gringos staying there.

There wasn't much in Chiantla. Another dusty square with colonial architecture. A bus stop for the route into Huehue. A general store with more sugary goodies. And a post office bereft of any higher-denomination stamps, necessitating envelopes entirely carpeted with stamps, minus a tiny hole in the middle for my parents' address.

For a few days while I was there, Chiantla celebrated with a fair. It was not quite on a par with the Calgary Stampede. The merry-go-round was a hand cranked affair which utilized a differential gear-set

to Guatemala City to get a cheap head x-ray at one of the hospitals. Nothing was found, except for the usual grey matter and some other useful bits.

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[6] A parrot-like bird with fancy, iridescent tail plumage. It was thought by the ancient Mayans to be divine. It adorns the Guatemalan currency, the Guatemalan flag and the Guatemalan coat of arms. It is also officially considered a "threatened" species...presumably not entirely due to habitat destruction, but also due to the rather unfortunate tendency of sometimes finding itself stuffed and sitting on a perch in someone's living-room.

from an old vehicle. The ferris wheel was also hand cranked and had a grand total of ten seats. And vendors sold rough bowl-shaped stones which the women used to laboriously grind corn into meal. It was definitely rustic. But the kids were happy, the music wasn't oppressive, and nobody was puking. I'd take it over the Stampede any day.

Quite often, I'd take the short bus trip into Huehue, where I could cash traveler's cheques and scout out some of the Spanish comics[7] in the bookstore. On one of those trips, another couple of gringos climbed aboard and sat behind me. So I eavesdropped a bit. They were talking about a tree nursery. Trees? Naturally, I turned around and introduced myself. I found out that Barbi and Mike were in the U.S. Peace Corps, and they were headed back out to the middle of nowhere after a short break in Chiantla for a few urban essentials. They were both quite friendly, and once they heard about my background in forestry and my interest in Third World development, they quickly invited me out to their real home, high up in the Cuchumatan Mountains.

So, about a week later, I packed up my stuff and boarded a bus heading west. Sitting at the back of the bus was a woman with a

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[7] Not crap like *Archie* and *Superman*, but substantive stuff. On my shelf, I still have three *Hombres Y Heroes* issues from February, 1992: one about WWII's Operation Barbarossa, another about the Lewis and Clark expedition, and a third about Gordon Wasson, the famous ethnomycologist who has two species of magic mushroom named after him (*Psilocybe wassonii* and *Psilocybe wassoniorum*). That's right, a kid's comic book about magic mushrooms.

large pig sitting on her lap. She had one arm wrapped around the pig's body, and her other hand was clamped down securely over the pig's snout. She seemed to be a fairly strong woman, but the pig was also strong. And every so often, it managed to wriggle its head out of her grasp and the resulting squeal tore through the bus like a banshee. Wheeeeeeeeeeeeee!!! The bus driver would glance up into the rear view mirror and give the woman another stern look. She desperately fumbled for the pig's snout, and for a short while, there was peace.

After about an hour of this entertainment, we arrived at San Sebastian, which was the main market town for the surrounding rural area. I grabbed my back-pack, stepped off the bus and wandered into the market, which was full of colourful woven yard goods and stacks of plump produce. In the meantime, Barbi and Mike had descended from somewhere in the surrounding mountains in order to do their weekly grocery shopping. We spied each other, and after loading up with vegetables, a few pounds of rice, and some precious eggs, we headed up toward the tiny villages of Chelom and Chejoj (pronounced chay-HOH, but with a sound at the end like someone trying to clear mucous out of their throat).

There were no roads. The initial pathway was shaded by tall trees, but we quickly advanced to higher elevations, dominated by a cruel sun and parched earth.

I was struggling and I tried not to ask "are we there yet?"

We met other folks coming down the path. One old guy carried a massive (but silent) pig on his back. A group of serious looking young dudes with one or two ancient rifles gave a curt "Hola" and for a short while, they chatted with Barbi and Mike. The leader held what looked like a ceremonial staff in one hand. It had a brass ball on one end and it looked vaguely menacing. When they continued on down the mountain, Mike mentioned that the group was one of the civilian patrols. They kept an eye out for guerilla activity. And if some of the men weren't in a particularly good mood, it was likely because they didn't have much choice about whether or not they were there. The patrols were forcibly concocted by the army as a means to keep the largely indigenous population under its heel.[8]

We continued on. After what seemed like forever, we reached the tiny, dusty village of Chejoj. It was all built on a crazy angle, except for the cemetery, out on a flat-topped promontory. We stopped at the village store (a glorified lemonade stand) and purchased warm sodas. Barbi and Mike said that there was generally no agricultural surplus in the area, so heaving bottles of pop up from San Sebastian may have been one of the few methods of making a tiny profit.

The cemetery held a bunch of above-ground tombs, which looked to be made of whitewashed clay, and there was a small hole in each, presumably in order to allow the soul of the deceased to travel back and forth. A fellow was wailing and sobbing over one of the tombs. He was entirely sauced, and when he saw us and started over, Barbi warned me to not allow him to shake my hand. No luck, however. He soon had me in his grasp. He was blubbering about something, but it was in the local Mam dialect, not even related to Spanish. He had my hand in a firm grip and shook it up and down for several minutes. I looked into his eyes, trying to figure out what he was trying to tell me. Maybe he sensed that I was sincere. Maybe he just wanted to get back to the tomb and do some more wailing. But when he finally let me go, Barbi said that I had gotten off lucky.

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[8] http://www.culturalsurvival.org/publications/cultural-survival-quarterly/guatemala/civil-patrols-armed-peace-northern-huehuetenango

Most recipients had the pleasure of his company for much longer.

Barbi and Mike's place was a two room concrete box with a small veranda. One room was the bedroom, and the other was a kitchen about the size of a large broom closet. The sole luxury was a small propane canister, which Barbi and Mike would occasionally pay a local to haul up from San Sebastian.

That evening, I went out on the porch. The Milky Way was easily visible, but what really held my attention was music wafting down from further up the mountain. Homemade marimbas were common, but the clarity of this one in the surrounding silence, as well as the technical proficiency of the player, took my breath away.

The next morning, we headed out to the nearby village of Chelom (pronounced chay-LOME), where the tree nursery was. Barbi and Mike spent their time in three different villages. Chelom and Chejoj were relatively close to the wider world, but the third (pronounced tweets-KEY-sill[9]) was tucked away much further up in the mountains. Supposedly, some of the villagers there had made vague threats on the lives of my American hosts, but Barbi and Mike

[9] I went on Google Map, but neither Chejoj nor Chelom nor tweets-KEY-sill showed up (except for another much larger Chejoj further to the west). I could zoom in to the aerial photos and see individual plots of land and buildings, but jurisdictional names and boundaries were totally absent. I wondered if the Guatemalan government gave much thought to these distant outposts...other than to what may have been their potential to foster guerilla activity.

didn't seem too concerned.

The topography continued to be alarmingly lop-sided. And with the distinct lack of perennial vegetation, I wondered what was to stop the whole side of the mountain from collapsing during the upcoming rainy season. Occasionally, however, we saw bundles of corn stalks, which had been laid down parallel to the contours in a pathetic attempt to hold back the brown dust that masqueraded as topsoil.

More heartening were the sprinkler systems that we sometimes saw, which brought water down from the higher elevations in a controlled manner. The 1" plastic hose that fed these systems must have been a valuable commodity in the area, since there were just as many set-ups using hollowed out agave stalks.

But I wondered where, in this parched corner of the planet, water could have been hiding. We did encounter fog while crossing one of the higher passes, but that was the extent of it.

After a short while, we arrived at Chelom. The nursery was a small affair, with sticks and thatch being used as a shelter against the blistering sun. But the seedlings seemed quite healthy.

Eventually, however, they would need to be transplanted – preferably into a place that could hold a bit of water, and where the surrounding dirt wouldn't be washed away during the intense rainy season. In other words, bundles of old cornstalks laid on contours wouldn't help them one bit. They needed stones. Rocks. Something solid placed on the slopes with a bit of engineering and forethought.

The engineering was provided by the ancient Egyptians: an A-

frame level, comprised of three pieces of wood fastened into a big letter "A". A small stone dangled down on a piece of string, and when it lined up with a mark on the cross-piece, the ground was level. Using this low-tech gadget, Barbi and Mike helped the Mam farmers find the contours of their land. And once the contours were marked out, lines of rocks could be laid out to capture moisture and retain topsoil.

I stayed for several days at Chejoj, but a case of giardia (a common intestinal parasite) put Barbi and I out of commission (Mike escaped the infection), and we decided to hike back down the mountain in a quick quest for 20th century medicine and some much needed rest. So I spent the remainder of the day in my hotel room, listening to flatulence echoing off porcelain.

I stayed a couple more weeks in Guatemala, attempting to improve my Spanish. I spent some time in Guatemala City, where guys with sub-machine guns stood guard at the local Kwiki-Marts, and where groups of little kids sat on the sidewalks, sniffing bags of solvent. But then I traveled back north to San Cristobal, and finally to Mexico City and the flight back to Canada. I figured that I had found a potential subject for a graduate thesis. I would return to Guatemala and somehow shoehorn the Chelom tree nursery into a suitable subject that my thesis committee would approve of.

But on the way back, I wondered how Mike and Barbi did it:

living for years on end in an ecological and economic hinterland. I had the same ideals as they had, but nowhere near their optimism and endurance.

chapter xiv: india

In 1963, Richard Alpert was fired from Harvard University for giving a then-legal psychedelic drug to an undergraduate student. However, Harvard, at the time, *was* allowing some rather unorthodox research to take place. For example, in a double blind study (where neither the researchers nor the subjects know who is getting the real drug and who is getting a placebo), theology students were given psilocybin (the active ingredient in magic mushrooms). It was Good Friday, just before the students went to attend a church service at Boston University's Marsh Chapel. After the event, the students were asked to write about their experiences, and according to the Wikipedia entry, "Almost all of the members of the experimental group reported experiencing profound religious experiences, providing empirical support for the notion that psychedelic drugs can facilitate religious experiences."[1]

Alpert wasn't directly involved with the Marsh Chapel experiment, but he and a number of other researchers were working with Timothy Leary to see if psychedelic drugs could be useful in reducing prisoner recidivism rates, as well as in treating alcoholism.[2]

After Alpert was fired for his slip-up, and after Leary was fired for not adhering to his classroom teaching commitments, they both realized that the use of double-blind studies and peer-reviewed journals to analyze such powerful tools as magic mushrooms and LSD was not the fastest way to change society. So, accordingly, they dropped out and began proselytizing. And the result was the 1960's.

Alpert changed his name to Ram Dass, and became a prolific author. And like Orwell, he wasn't given to flowery prose and 100-word sentences, so I managed to read several of his books.

The first one was *Be Here Now*, which, in large part, was an admonition to live in the present (instead of fretting about

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[1] See: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marsh_Chapel_Experiment

[2] The results were inconclusive, though a similar study four decades later showed very positive results. See: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Concord_Prison_Experiment

tomorrow's deadlines or moaning about yesterday's mistakes). And in this book, Dass wrote about the time he met an old bald guy wrapped in a plaid blanket who completely changed his life.

I would've liked to have copied, word for word, Dass's 4-page narrative[3] about the meeting, since his writing style is infectious: "I was traveling with a young Western fellow in India. We had come to the mountains in a Land Rover I had borrowed from a friend, in order to find this fellow's guru to get some help with his visa problem. I was in a bad mood, having smoked too much hashish..."

But copyright laws dictate otherwise. So I'll paraphrase. (Sorry, but I have this inexplicable urge to paraphrase like I'm a cross between James Dean and William S. Burroughs.)

So Dass smoked too much hash. And he's travelling with this surfer dude...in a Land Rover. It ain't his Land Rover. Or his, either. Anyway, the surfer dude wants to see this guru. Dass doesn't. But they arrive at this spot where there's some hippies and some Indians and some old bald guy in a blanket. Everyone's crazy about the old bald guy in a blanket...except Dass. Everybody wants to touch the old guy's feet...except Dass. What the f___ is going on? he thinks. The surfer dude starts crying, while the old bald guy occasionally looks over at Dass. The old bald guy gives a picture of himself to Dass like it's a bloody Ming vase or something. Dass isn't impressed. The old bald guy looks at the expensive Land Rover and asks if Dass will give it to him. The surfer dude says SURE! No effing way, Dass thinks. Everybody laughs at Dass. The old bald guy asks Dass if he makes a lot of money. Well, yeah, sure, Dass says (lies a bit). More stuff about money. Then food comes. The old bald guy says that Dass was out under the stars last night, thinking about his mother. Uh, yeah, I was, Dass admits. (What the f___?). Old bald guy can't speak a word of English (just Hindi), but blurts

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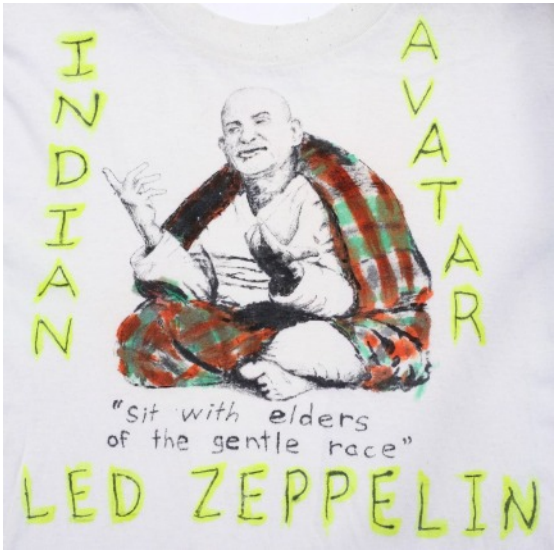
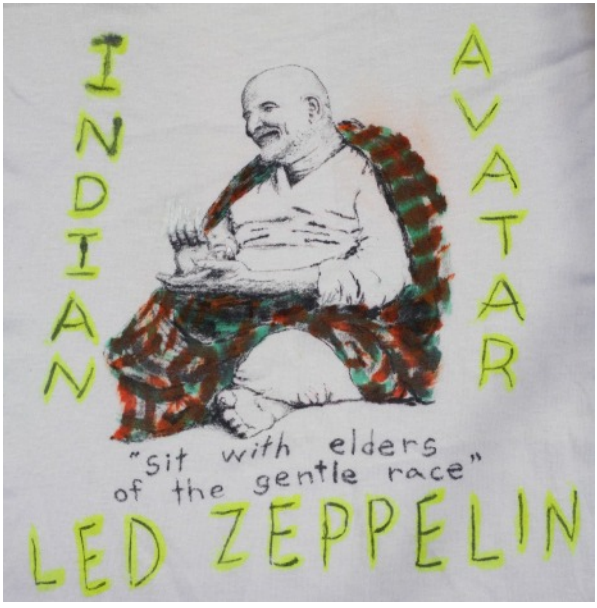
[3] ...seen in *Be Here Now* still in print, and *Miracle of Love* available in a Kindle edition.

out "spleen, she died of spleen". Dass's head explodes...well, not literally. The End. Well, not really. Dass then writes a book about the old bald guy.



Trust me, Dass's version is a narrative worthy of an O. Henry short story. An inflated ego meets a source of omniscience wrapped up in an old blanket. A bunch of neurons short-circuit. And finally, he's "home".



It struck a deep chord with me, and from *Be Here Now*, I went to another of

Dass's books called *Miracle of Love: stories about Neem Karoli Baba.* This had the same account written in it, but there were an additional 410 pages crammed with similar accounts given by some of the hundreds of people who had come in contact with the old fellow during the decades between his birth (circa 1900) and his death in 1973. A page-turner, in other words.

To this day, if I was on a desert island, and I was only able to have one book, *Miracle of Love* might be my first choice. Of course, it would be competing against the Bible, a rich source of epic literature, history, morality…and gross immorality (for example, the genocide, mass rape and slavery perpetrated by Moses against the Midianites[4]). So how's that for great literature? Moses versus Jesus. Rape and genocide versus the Sermon on the Mount. Pulitzer Prize winning material, for sure.

But where does the old guy in the blanket figure in all of this? Well, for one thing, knowing there was someone who recently walked the earth, while supposedly having powers similar to those of Christ, really had the effect of allaying any doubts I had about Christianity. It meant that perhaps Jesus was something more than just an old Jewish hippie with a trending philosophy. And that would mean that the world is not just a materialist arena for the survival of the fittest. And therefore, Ayn Rand (the old hag) should deservedly be toppled from her pedestal.

Do I *know* this stuff about Neem Karoli Baba? No. Do I *believe* it? No (more on that in a later chapter). But I *think* it,[5] since most of those 410 pages fared quite well against my BS meter (which has always tended to work overtime, since the meter reader has a degree in science and a diploma in engineering).

I hear the sceptical gears grinding away in your head. And that's good. Scepticism is good...to a point (again, more on that in a later

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[4] Numbers, Chapter 31: http://rarebible.wordpress.com/2009/12/15/genocide-slavery-and-rape-of-the-midianites/

[5] …possibly like Julia Roberts, Steve Jobs, and Mark Zuckerberg thought it (google their names and Neem Karoli Baba)…though that last guy on the list seemingly didn't learn much from his pilgrimage).

chapter). But just as an experiment, try reading all 410 pages of *Miracle of Love* and see if your BS meter is still registering off the charts.

But I digress. There was a problem. I was reading about NKB in the early 80's. He had already been dead for about a decade. There was no longer the option of going over there to get his "darshan" or blessing.

At about this time, however, I came across another “Baba”: Sathya Sai Baba. In appearance, Sai Baba was outrageous. Whereas NKB was just an old bald guy wrapped in a plaid blanket, Sai Baba had a huge afro and always appeared in an orange gown that was bright enough to do double duty on a construction site. He was also purported to have done miracles. But unlike NKB, there was no 410 page book, full of testimonials from many different people ; just a couple of slim hagiographies written by two devotees. But it was enough for me, since the guy was still alive.[6]

And he seemed quite successful. I won't bore you by recounting all of the hospitals and schools and other splendid infra-structural items that his organization has built over the decades. But suffice it to say that his reach was global, and when I was working on my Master's thesis in Edmonton, there were several hundred devotees in that city alone.

The question now became one of how to visit India, in order to see this guy. So I quickly abandoned my previous intention to go back to Guatemala and study the tree nursery. Now, I would go to India with the intention of studying the village development program of the Sai Baba organization. I would try to determine whether the decision-making associated with this program was bottom-up or top-

[6] I'm so embarrassed that I wore that painted jean jacket (seen above) on campus for a day or two, that I’m reluctant to even show it. Once, a carload of kids drove by, and – mistaking him for Hendrix – yelled out "Jimiiiiiii!!!!

down. Were the peasant beneficiaries involved in the decision-making? Or were the Sai Baba folks simply in the villages to apply a cookie cutter approach to development? For it was during my grad studies that I quickly learned to appreciate the benefits of the former over the latter.

Once again, I met with my thesis committee. Stern professors tried to assess whether I was wasting my time...and theirs. One introduced me to Eric Hoffer's book, *The True Believer.* Hoffer looked at religious beliefs, political beliefs and all of the other isms that can degenerate into Orwellian hells. But the professor needn't have worried, since my preoccupation with Sai Baba and his wild afro was, at the time, no more intense than my preoccupation with Third World development and the substantial benefits of grass-roots participation in decision-making. Plus, I was using my own money, so academic objections at that point were, to me at least, just another pile of isms.

So I grabbed a plane ticket and packed.

On the descent into India, I felt the same unease as I did on the descent into Mexico. But instead of sultry smog, I gazed upon a million pin-pricks of light in the darkness of night as we flew over the sub-continent. From above, it felt cold, though I soon found that Bombay (not yet known as Mumbai), even at nighttime in January, was fairly warm and humid.

The airport had a distinct griminess and lack of cultural décor that left me empty. And in the one of the ubiquitous three-wheeled cabs that careened through the streets, I passed slums which stank of charcoal smoke and several other unfamiliar odors. But finally, I arrived at a clean hostel which took small sums for decent dorm beds. And in the light of morning, after a satisfying breakfast of crepes and various spicy dips (that, in total, cost the equivalent of 25 cents), I headed off to the nearest train station.

I purchased a ticket to Bangalore, but on the way to the platform, a destitute woman grasped my arm and silently pleaded. People stared. I assume that any Indian would have simply swatted her away like a fly. But I just kept walking with this embarrassing

appendage, and eventually she gave up. And I made up various rationalizations for not giving her anything.

In order to get to the main inter-city station, I initially took a commuter train. It was packed solid, but then more and more people pushed their way on. Eventually, when guys started clinging to the outside of the carriages, we headed off past the never-ending slums. And as we passed through, we were often treated to the sight of other guys squatting by the tracks and defecating. No gals, though. They were expected to hold everything until the onset of darkness.[7]

The only thing to be heard over the clatter of the train and the chatter of the passengers was the crisp, sweet singing of two small girls, who elbowed their way through the dense crowd, in the hope of attracting a few rupees for their efforts. They were in perfect tune, and for a rhythm section, they had large, white castanets which looked as though they had been carved out of dense chalk. Their charming melody was the only thing of beauty in this smoggy wasteland, and I hoped that they might be able to make it over to my area of the railway car, so that I could unload a few coins.

When the train arrived at Victoria Station (its architecture so grand, that it is now a UNESCO World Heritage Site), I found a ticket booth, where I snagged a second-class passage to Bangalore. However, there was a bit of a wait, so I sat on a bench in the stale gloom (being unappreciative of architectural glory at that point in my life). Darkness then followed.

When I was finally able to board, I found an empty compartment. But it wasn't empty for long. A raucous bunch entered, and one fellow offered me a swig from a small bottle. I declined, and I wondered if I would still have all of my belongings in the morning.

I needn't have worried. They quickly simmered down, and as we sped out of Bombay in the darkness, the cots swung out from the

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[7] …and, of course, the danger of rape, as the developed world is hearing more and more about in the news. And, as Sallie Tisdale mentions in *The Magic Toilet: Providing sanitation for the world's poor* (Harper's Magazine, June, 2015), health problems, such as kidney and bladder infections.

walls and each of us fell asleep, lulled by the movement of the train and either exhaustion or alcoholic stupor.

The next day, we awoke to the sights and smells of the Deccan Plateau, which wouldn't have been out of place in a 1950's Western movie: a reddish desert, punctuated by vast rock outcroppings painted in a similar hue. Settlements of any type were few and far between.

I met my traveling companions. The loud drunk from the night before turned out to be very polite and quick to offer a smile. And as luck would have it, his mother used to work in the Sai Baba ashram, so he was a good source of information. The second not-so-loud, not-so-drunk companion turned out to be equally friendly. And the third turned out to be an old man, who was probably a teetotaler. I don't remember their names, so I'll call them Tom, Dick and Harry.

Tom and Dick must've known each other, since they easily joked among themselves. Old Harry was very quiet, only speaking up to occasionally remind me that "It takes 200 drops of blood to make one drop of semen".[8] Or was it 300 drops? No matter. Ancient Hindu nostrums were no match for a lifetime of intermittent ecstasy, courtesy of Hugh Hefner and Bob Guccione.

Quick stops along the way allowed vendors to hawk their goods from the railway platforms. We just opened the window and exchanges were made for items such as freshly roasted peanuts and

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[8] Obviously a reference to the Hindu belief that spiritual energy can be boosted via celibacy. But as for the math, is it 200 drops of blood or 1,600 drops of blood? The Wikipedia entry on Dhat Syndrome records "an old Hindu belief" that it takes 40 drops of blood to make a drop of bone marrow and 40 drops of bone marrow to make a drop of semen. But that's nothing compared to what the South-Asian Scientific Specialist Centre for Sexual Health states: " 40 meals is equal to 1 drop of blood, 40 drops of blood is equal to 1 drop of bone marrow, 40 drops of BM is equal to 1 drop of semen." (http://www.sexualhealthindia.com/lose-of-semen). Wow! Do the math. Based on three meals per day, that's 58 years to make one drop of semen. No wonder these folks are so upset: http://stopmasturbationnow.org/morals/how-to-spot-a-masturbator/

cans of pop and juice. There were also small plastic bags filled with kool-aid-like drinks, but I didn't want to push my luck.[9]

After about twenty hours, we reached the station nearest the ashram, where Tom and Dick and I piled into a three-wheeled cab (old Harry had left us at an earlier stop). The cab sputtered and bounced the last few miles into the town of Puttaparthi, where Sai Baba had gradually amassed not only the ashram, but an "Institute of Higher Medical Sciences", the "Sri Sathya Sai University", a huge sports stadium, and an airstrip capable of handling jumbo jets.

It was getting late in the day, so Dick and I headed over to the ashram to check in (Tom headed home, but apparently Dick wanted to tag along for a day or two with the young westerner).

At the main gate, I gave a few rupees to a beggar, even as the uniformed guard shook his head and frowned at me. Hmm. Perhaps the vast Sai organization had so many social enterprises for the poor that the stricken fellow in rags was just pretending to be something that he wasn't…or maybe it was the case that this Shangri-La was so perfect that begging was not officially recognized as an actual phenomenon.

After the check-in procedure, we headed to the male dormitory and dropped off our stuff. Then, over to one of the huge dining halls, where we gave a ticket stub for a fairly nourishing and reasonably tasty vegetarian meal. Invariably, the meals in India consisted of something wet (a vegetarian gruel) with something dry on the side to dip into the wet stuff. No cutlery, and since the food came on a huge leaf that served as a plate, there were no dishes to wash up afterward.

[9] A much better choice was fresh coconut milk, which I later found at road-side stands. The vendor picked up a big green orb, and deftly made a couple of chops with a machete, leaving a mouth-sized hole. The milk was cool and invigorating, and after satisfying my thirst, I tossed the empty nut on to a vast pile, waiting to be harvested for its valuable fibre.

Everything in the dorm was well organized. We slept on rudimentary cots, and for a very small fee, we left our dirty clothes to get laundered the next day. Nobody seemed to snore, there was no alcohol inside the gates, and as soon as the time for "lights out" arrived, I slept like a stone.

Early the next morning, we rose to the incessant cawing of hundreds of crows that had darkened one of the massive trees in the compound. The air was hazy, and it carried the spicy smell of breakfast.

After our gruel, we went out to explore the town. Surprisingly, it seemed about as crowded and grimy as any other Indian town. I guess I was expecting some of the utopian influence from Sai Baba to have filtered into the streets.

I headed over to one of the shops that specialized in batik wall hangings, thinking they would make great gifts for the folks back home (while taking up the least amount of luggage space). Dick made sure to let the shop owner know that I would be paying Indian prices, not inflated Western prices.

Back at the ashram, I prepared for the daily ritual of glimpsing – and perhaps even being able to give a prayerful letter – to the afro'd godman in the orange gown. Dick declined. Perhaps he didn't believe in such nonsense.

I proceeded to a large outer courtyard, which was open to the scorching sun. Luckily, I had by now abandoned my western clothes for the loose-fitting white cotton which most Indians wore to ward off the heat. But it was still a matter of forming up in a dozen or two lines, and then sitting on the hard ground to wait...and wait. Finally, an old elf of a man came out, carrying a small cloth bag. It was full of scraps of paper with numbers written on them. He walked to the front of each line in turn, and stooped over so that the first fellow (gender segregation still being in effect) could gingerly reach in the bag, and slowly pull out a number. 17! Terrible! Groans went out from the rest in that line. The elf then went to the front of the next line. Another hand went in the bag and carefully drew out...a 3! A muted cheer went up. And so on.

Several of the lines consisted mainly of sinister looking little dudes in black pajamas. Dick earlier told me that they were Kali[10] worshipers. As the elf allowed the line with the lucky number "1" to proceed to the inner courtyard, several of the Kali worshipers tried to follow unnoticed. But the elf was neither stupid nor lenient. He quickly ran after them, yelling and swatting, until they plodded back to the line with the inconveniently large number on its scrap of paper. And then the process repeated itself with line number two – and a few more black pajamas idiotically trying to blend in at the back.

This went on for several days, during which the guys at the front of my lines invariably drew numbers which were up in the stratosphere. So we filed into the inner courtyard, but we had no chance at all to hand Sai Baba our personal letters (he could only reach so far into the crowd to grab our grubby envelopes filled with our trivial pleas).

But one day, the guy at the front of my line drew a 2! Wow! I had a chance! And sure enough, I managed to hand my envelope to

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[10] Kali, the consort of the god, Shiva, is described in Wikipedia as follows: "Her eyes are described as red with intoxication, and in absolute rage, her hair is shown disheveled, small fangs sometimes protrude out of her mouth, and her tongue is lolling. She is often shown naked or just wearing a skirt made of human arms and a garland of human heads. She is also accompanied by serpents and a jackal while standing on a seemingly dead Shiva..."

the incarnate deity. Unfortunately, as I realized later, I handed it to the godman with my left hand.[11] Yikes!

But as I briefly looked into his eyes, I saw nothing. Just a guy who seemed somewhat bored with the whole proceeding. And as he handed bundle after bundle of envelopes to one of his helpers, trailing alongside, I wondered how he might have the time to read them all. And at the close of the event, I wondered why he left in a flashy new Mercedes-Benz. If he was a deity – or even if he was a very highly advanced human – surely he would have made a point of traveling in an old Toyota rust-bucket…or a bicycle. For the latter mode would have surely made a fitting statement about "moths and rust" and all the other religious injunctions against vanity and corporeal impermanence. And the highfalutin Indian fat-cats who followed him might have made some attempt to moderate their lifestyle and give a few glancing thoughts to the ninety-nine percent of the Indian populace who still struggled in the shadows.

I remembered Neem Karoli Baba, the old guy in the blanket, who mockingly asked Richard Alpert for his Land Rover. He would have seen a Mercedes not only as an encumbrance, but also as a modern Golden Calf for the gullible to prostrate themselves before. In Alpert's book, NKB either walked the dusty roads, hitched a ride with a devotee, or traveled by rail.

Anyway, I was still going to make an attempt to study the development program, as per my thesis direction. So I made a few contacts, wrote down a few addresses, and I purchased a rail ticket to Madras (now called Chennai). Whereas Puttaparthi was a town of about 10,000, Madras was vast web of over four million souls, perched on the Bay of Bengal. I never did venture to go and see the bay, but instead went back and forth a few times to a school that taught traditional Indian dance. It was there that one of the main contacts lived.

I never managed to meet the contact, but I did retain a few memories of the big city: nearly getting flattened while jay-walking

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[11] In Indian tradition, the left hand is impure – reserved for toilet paper duties and other necessities associated with getting filthy things slightly less filthy.

across a teeming street that seemed to have no intersections or cross-walks; reviewing mosquito bites each morning, and wondering how soon I would contract malaria; seeing a beggar lying on the sidewalk with a tumor the size and shape of a football growing out of his side; and marvelling at the sight of a destitute man and his young daughter, who were happily playing some sort of game on the sidewalk, using just a piece of chalk to draw the board and a few small stones for playing pieces.

After several pointless days, I looked at the second contact on the list. This person lived in Ooty, a "hill station" in the Western Ghats.[12]

I took the train out from Madras, and several hours later, it stopped at the foot of the Nilgiri Hills, where we abandoned the diesel-electric locomotive for steam power. We went higher and higher into the hills, until the grade got so steep that the locomotive had to pull itself up along a third middle rail with cogs notched into it. All the while, cinders from the burnt coal drifted back to us through the open windows of the carriages. We passed tendrils of small waterfalls cascading down from the heights above. And higher still, there lay the rolling carpets of tea plantations, where women with bulging sacks hunched over to pick leaves.

Finally, we reached Ooty. It reminded me a bit of my earlier stay in San Cristobal in southern Mexico: a Third World equivalent of Banff, but without the high-end shops or the low-end, plastic junk.

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[12] A hill station is a resort town situated at higher elevations, where the colonial English went to escape the heat of the plains. The Western Ghats are the main mountain range along the western coast of India. They are not true mountains and they have an average elevation of only about 1,200 metres.

But my room that night reminded me that I was definitely *not* in Banff. It reminded me that I wasn't even in San Cristobal. It was only $3 a night, but it was also just a concrete cell measuring only about 50 square feet. And it had no window.

However, the next night, I stumbled upon some sort of Evangelical retreat which operated like a hotel. It also cost the equivalent of $3. However, it was the poster child for Victorian opulence. Freshly laundered sheets. A large window with a view out to one of the local parks. A small fireplace. Lace doilies on hardwood furniture. And, of course, a bible in one of the drawers.

The next morning, I took a stroll out on the street. There wasn't nearly the extent of poverty that I saw in Madras and Bombay. In fact, I don't recall seeing a single beggar. There was a sadhu on the sidewalk who collected rupees in a copper bowl, but like a busker on a Calgary street, he performed a public service. He stood on one leg, while his other leg was wrapped around his neck. And his tongue protruded outwards, due to a small metal trident piercing it in a manner which seemed to defy the laws of physics.

He served a symbolic purpose, for both his matted hair and the trident were items associated with the god Shiva. A passing Hindu could derive some sort of psychological or spiritual salve by dropping a rupee or two into the bowl.

This contrasted with the beggar that I saw a few weeks earlier in Puttaparthi. His legs curled about like spaghetti, creating an image that was far more grotesque than a trident in a tongue. He would have started life normally, but at some point in childhood, his legs had been intentionally broken in several places, and forced to heal at

crazy angles. All this to create a pathetic soul deserving some pity and a few rupees.

I hung around Ooty for a couple of weeks, since it was far more picturesque than any of the other Indian towns and cities that I had been in. But I still wasn't having much luck contacting the local Sai Baba devotee. No matter. I was slowly coming to the realization that Sai Baba was just a con artist.[13]

I had also come to another, more fundamental realization. Whereas before my India trip, I saw global poverty as something to be solved with a better widget or a more sustainable and productive ecological balance, I now saw the whole mess through a cultural lens. I now saw that the main reason that the Third World was so screwed up, was because its leaders were trying desperately to become just like us. And if *we* were still stuck in the mode of conspicuous consumption and trying to keep up with the Joneses, then *their* delusions were having an even tougher time butting up against the uncompromising wall of social and ecological limits.

Back at the Bombay train station, I once again saw the two little girls with the dazzling voices and the chalk castanets. They asked

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[13] And that's probably just the tip of the iceberg. Many people have accused him of sexual abuse, for instance. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sathya_Sai_Baba#Critical_examinations

me for some money. But for some reason, I didn't give them anything, and to this day, I don't know why. Did I not recognize them until a split second after I had waved them away? I don’t recall. But it was another one of those unfathomable decisions that betrayed some combination of selfishness, stupidity, or just plain obliviousness.

At the time, though, I didn't dwell on it. And within a few hours, I found myself back in the grunge of the Bombay airport, waiting for a flight home.

chapter xv: old hymns and medieval drinking songs

Throughout my formative years, I hated going to church. Even though we were far from the U.S. border (and thus there weren't any Sunday morning cartoons that I was missing), I still detested the boring moralizing that went on. The Christmas Eve service was exceptionally bad, since the church was crowded, and Mom and Dad tended to stay longer than usual after the service.

And the carols were torture. They gave me a heavy feeling in the chest. Sort of like peanut butter on white bread with nothing to drink. *Oh Little Town of Bethlehem* was the worst. It was musical quick-sand.

But I survived. And by my mid-teens, my parents had quit trying to drag me through the doors of McDougall United Church.

About a decade later, I was driving down Memorial Drive, listening to CBC radio, which was playing a series of medieval drinking songs. And one of them hit me like a freight train. Even though the melody was unrecognizable, something else about it resonated with a very strange intensity. I felt as though I had listened to it (or sung it) hundreds of times before.

I should have pulled over to the nearest phone booth and asked for directory assistance to CBC in Toronto. But I let the opportunity slip. A few years later, I went to the music library at the U. of C. and asked for any vinyl they might have with medieval music on it. I spent an afternoon listening to tunes, but nothing resonated like that tune I heard on Memorial Drive. A decade or so after that, I ordered CD's from Amazon with titles like *Songs From the Taverne* and *Songs & Dances of Medieval & Renaissance Times.* But still nothing. So I suspect I might never be able to evoke that feeling again.

A few years after the Memorial Drive incident, I was in one of my favourite bookstores (Munro's in Victoria, owned by the Nobel Prize laureate). And there I spied a book called *The Presence of the*

Past.[1] It was an intriguing title, so I looked at the back cover: "...from protein molecules to...human societies, this ground-breaking work suggests that nature operates less by fixed laws than by its own kind of memory." It had a dense, 20 page bibliography, and it was published by Random House (a respected company that tends not to publish home-spun drivel). And the author (Rupert Sheldrake) had a Phd in biochemistry from Cambridge University. So I bought a copy.

One of the things that Sheldrake emphasizes is just how little science actually knows about the fundamental elements of existence. Like a chicken embryo in an egg, for example. You would think that scientists would have long ago figured out how the information in DNA makes a chicken wing...or a human hand or an eyeball. But it doesn't. In fact, there's a bet going on between Sheldrake and the scientific establishment (in the person of Lewis Wolpert, a biology professor from University College, London) over the issue. Wolpert has bet (and the winner will receive a case of "fine port, Quinta do Vesuvio 2005") that by May, 2029, "...given the genome [ie, genetic information] of a fertilized egg of an animal or plant, we will be able to predict in at least one case all the details of the organism that develops from it, including any abnormalities."[2] In other words, we don't presently know exactly how an egg gets to be a chick.

Sheldrake's theory, which he has been working on for more than thirty years, is that much of what mainstream science thinks is governed by mechanical and chemical forces (such as my thoughts about which words to place where in this sentence) is actually governed by fields that have formed in the past. So the way in which my brain sorts the various possible word orders in this sentence has a lot to do with how my ancient ancestor, Drog the caveman, did it after first feeling a need to place one grunt in front of another.

These fields are what enable much of life to operate in the way it does. They operate on the molecular level all the way up to the

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[1] Subtitled *Morphic Resonance and the Habits of Nature.* 1989. New York: Vintage Books (a division of Random House).

[2] From: http://www.thecnj.com/review/2009/081309/feature081309_01.html

societal level. They provide a theoretical mechanism for how a chick forms in an egg, just as they provide one for how consciousness and memory works in a human brain.[3] They also provide a mechanism for Jung's concept of the "collective unconscious" (which I described back in chapter v).

"Morphic" fields don't replace mechanical and chemical processes, just as they don't replace the cultural factors that have shaped societies over time. But they do provide a theoretical mechanism for some of the gaps which science can't explain.

For example, a massive amount of scientific research with rats and mazes was done in the 1920's in order to try and figure out how evolution worked. Was it via Darwinian selection?[4] Or did Lamarckian inheritance[5] provide the mechanism?

William McDougall (a psychologist at Harvard) therefore started what Sheldrake called "[t]he most thorough of all the investigations on the hereditary transmission of learning..."[6] Over three decades, and many, many, many rats later, he and other researchers in other

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[3] …memory being another area where science is having a tough time in figuring things out. See the following quote in http://science.howstuffworks.com/life/inside-the-mind/human-brain/human-memory.htm "This doesn't mean that scientists have figured out exactly how the system works. They still don't fully understand exactly how you remember or what occurs during recall. The search for how the brain organizes memories and where those memories are acquired and stored has been a never-ending quest among brain researchers for decades."

[4] Darwinian selection states that millions of years ago, some giraffes (for example) were born with slightly longer necks, and others were born with slightly shorter necks (due to random mutational variations in DNA). The ones with longer necks could more easily reach leaves on trees, and therefore had a better chance at surviving and producing offspring.

[5] Lamarckian theory states that by stretching their necks to reach leaves, the earliest giraffes developed slightly longer necks during their lifetimes, and somehow that got passed on to future generations. The DNA dice roll supposedly had nothing at all to do with the process.

[6] *Op cit.* pp. 174-175.

universities[7] examined how it was that rats seemed to get smarter and smarter over time *without* any selective breeding (ie, *without* any scientist ensuring that superior maze-running male rats mated with superior maze-running female rats[8]).

The first generation of McDougall's rats were pretty dumb. On average, they each made 165 errors before they were able to get out of the maze. But by continuing (for decades) to breed the little critters and putting each generation through the maze, he found that by the 30th generation, they only made 20 mistakes on average.

Remember, he *didn't* do any selective breeding to make the rats smarter. In fact, in some side experiments, he bred some of the dumbest rats together to see what their offspring might do. Darwinian theory would say that dumb rats making dumb rat babies would eventually make a rat so stupid that it would *never* escape the maze. But that didn't happen. Even the offspring of the idiot rats got progressively better and better at traversing the maze.

Hmm. Both the Lamarckians and the Darwinians were getting a bit nervous. This wasn't supposed to happen. So F.A.E. Crew at the University of Edinburgh decided to have a go at it.[9] He obtained a totally different bunch of rats from the rat supply store. Their DNA would then represent the the totally average rat DNA. And presumably, they would start off doing the maze with about 165 errors, just like McDougall's rats started doing.

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[7] For example W.E. Agar in Melbourne, Australia: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wilfred_Eade_Agar However, Agar was a Darwinian, whereas McDougall was a Lamarckian.

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[8] Selective breeding, an artificial form of Darwinian evolution, has been the main mechanism for domesticating animals throughout history. You want a race horse? Then you get a stallion that's fast and a mare that's fast. And then you let them do what comes naturally. What Darwin was able to infer from looking at finches on the Galapagos Islands, was the same mechanism that humans had been imposing on cats and dogs and cows and horses for thousands of years: improving DNA.

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[9] Crew, F.A.E. 1936. A repetition of McDougall's Lamarckian experiment. *Journal of Genetics* 33: 61-101. Not seen. Cited in Sheldrake.

But that didn't happen either. The first generation of rats averaged just 25 errors. And some of them got through the maze without any errors at all. It made no sense to either Darwinian theory *or* Lamarckian theory. Unrelated rats all over the world were getting better and better at doing a particular maze. And no one could say why...except Sheldrake about a half century later.

From rats, we go to humans. More specifically, Japanese nursery rhymes.[10] Sheldrake enlisted the help of a Japanese poet (Shuntaro Tanikawa) to find a rhyme that Japanese children had chanted for generations. Tanikawa then made up two other poems similar in structure and rhyming cadence to the real one – one of them with meaningful phrases and the other one just full of nonsense. So there was 1) a real, old poem, 2) a real, new poem, and 3) a new nonsense poem.

Sheldrake then got volunteer subjects with non-Japanese backgrounds to chant each of the poems a fixed number of times. And then, a half hour later, they were tested on their memory of the verses. You would expect that, on average, each test subject would remember each poem about equally. However, Sheldrake found that 62% of the volunteers found the ancient nursery rhyme the easiest to recall (not 33%, as would have been expected).

All very interesting. But the rats and the nursery rhymes take up less than four pages in Sheldrake's book. What's in the other 400 pages or so? More of the same. Scientific evidence that science can't explain.

Stuff happened in the past (rats ran a particular maze and kids chanted a particular nursery rhyme). Morphic fields formed. And then subsequently, maze running and rhyme memorization became much easier to accomplish. Sounds crazy, yes. But back in 1935, that's also what Einstein thought about "spooky action at a distance".

[10] Sheldrake, *op cit.* P.189-91

I've always watched a lot of Monty Python. One of my favourites is the sketch where the newlyweds are in a department store, buying a bed. However, they are cautioned by one of the staff that the salesman is a bit crazy. If he hears the word "mattress" he puts a paper bag over his head and goes catatonic. The only remedy is for everyone around to sing the old hymn *Jerusalem.* If enough join in, then he can take the bag off his head and continue to sell beds. Complete nonsense, but also insanely funny. And it also introduced me to William Blake, who wrote the lyrics to *Jerusalem* more than 200 years ago, as well as Sir Hubert Parry, who wrote the music more than 100 years ago. It has been called the "unofficial anthem" of England. It was made the official anthem of the England football team in the Euro 2000 competition, and it was sung at Will and Kate's wedding. Etc, etc, etc.

And it was also unceremoniously turfed from the latest edition of the United Church of Canada's hymn book for being politically incorrect. That's because it makes references to certain articles of war, such as a bow, some arrows, a spear, and a sword.[11] Of course, it was all allegorical. After all, how functional would a bow be if it was made of "burning gold"? Or arrows made of "desire"? The physics don't quite work.

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[11] And did those feet in ancient time
Walk upon England's mountain green?
And was the holy Lamb of God
On England's pleasant pastures seen?
And did the countenance divine
Shine forth upon our clouded hills?
And was Jerusalem builded here
Among those dark satanic mills?

Bring me my bow of burning gold!
Bring me my arrows of desire!
Bring me my spear! O clouds, unfold!
Bring me my chariot of fire!
I will not cease from mental fight,
Nor shall my sword sleep in my hand,
Till we have built Jerusalem
In England's green and pleasant land.

But I had one of the earlier U.C. hymn books at the forest fire lookout towers, where I amused myself by playing a few songs on either an alto or a soprano recorder. Iron Butterfly's *Inna-Gadda-Da-Vida* worked well on the soprano instrument, but I had to use the alto recorder to reach the one really low note when *Jerusalem* hits the word "green".

It was in that period, not only with *Jerusalem*, but also with a few other old hymns, that I noticed some not-so-subtle signs of emotion welling up. And I got to thinking about the Sheldrake book that I had recently read. And then it clicked. A lot of the old hymns would have been sung millions and millions of times over the centuries. They would have built up some fairly strong morphic fields (and when I e-mailed Sheldrake about it, he certainly didn't discount the possibility).

But why just the old hymns? Why not Beatles' songs? Or in my case, why not Led Zeppelin's *Physical Graffiti*? When Dean and I haunted the neighbourhood in my old orange Vega, it was always the leading contender from the stack of grimy 8-tracks we had stuffed in the glove compartment. We played it so much in the 70's, that I actually got sick of it, and I had to figuratively bury it in the 80's and 90's, only to resurrect it in the next millennium. I would've heard *Kashmir* (third track on Side 2) many, many more times than any hymn I had ever heard in church.[12]

But my eyes don't well up with tears when I hear *Kashmir*. And even when I secretly sing[13] the lyrics to Frank Zappa's *Valley Girl*, it does nothing other than give me a few chuckles, whereas Jacob Neander's exquisite little ditty *Praise to the Lord, the Almighty* (written in the year 1680) never fails to make me wonder where the hell that lump in my throat came from.

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[12] …especially *Jerusalem*, which I have *never* heard sung in a church. The first time I had ever heard it sung would have been in the Monty Python skit (1969), and then from the movie *Chariots of Fire* (1981). It's in Emerson, Lake and Palmer's vinyl masterpiece *Brain Salad Surgery* (1973), but I didn't own the album until much later in life.

[13] (not in the shower, but in my car, and only when I'm quite sure that no one is looking)

Could it have something to do with the lyrics of the old hymns? Not likely. The old hymns often bring up topics which can only be described as medieval nonsense (creation, for example…or the notion of an omniscient, omnipotent deity who stands idly by while Syrian children are gassed).

No, I've come to suspect that the big difference between *Kashmir* and *Jerusalem* is that the latter has been sung – passionately – millions (or billions) of times in the past. And via morphic resonance, I'm benefiting from this ancient passion.[14] It's a form of time-travel/mind-meld. So, forget the bread and wine stuff. For me, the *real* Communion comes when I'm packed into a pew, and I'm singing (to use another particularly strong example) a 17th century musical adaptation of the 23rd Psalm[15] (…uh, no, I'm not getting emotional; there's just a cinder in my eye).

So where does quick-sand and *Oh Little Town of Bethlehem* re-enter the scene? I see now that the "heavy feeling" in my chest was just a suppressed urge to emote. Emotions and tears for a fourteen year old guy were supremely inconvenient, so I didn't allow them to surface. They just festered in my gut.

Something else from my childhood makes me think about the possibility of morphic resonance. I used to have a recurring nightmare whenever I caught the flu.[16] I dreamt that I was hiding, and I could hear a vast army marching past. The sound of its rhythmic feet filled me with terror. And that was the extent of it. And there was nothing in my actual childhood experience that could have come close to resembling that nightmare. I lived in a

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[14] I've found that it only works if I *sing* it. I can *hear* it on Emerson, Lake and Palmer's *Brain Salad Surgery*, and there's no reaction in my brain. I can hum along with it, and there's still nothing. But if I sing it – or even "sing" along with it in my imagination – I can feel the resonance.

[15] *The Lord's My Shepherd,* composed by Jessie Seymour Irvine in 1871, while she was still in her teens.

[16] Curiously, it was only when I had the flu; colds and other sicknesses had never brought it on. And I never had nightmares when I was well (dreams of being caught naked in public don't count).

comfortable, 1960's, suburban setting, and the scariest experience that I had up to that point was watching the flying monkeys in *The Wizard of Oz*.

So was it a shred of memory from the collective unconscious of humanity? Surely, throughout history, there have been uncountable instances of individual humans being filled with terror by the sounds of massed boots marching close by.

I think it must be the *strength* of emotion which helps to reinforce a collective memory. Either the profound emotion of joy brought on by a favourite hymn, or the profound emotion of terror brought on by the countless wars and pogroms that have occurred throughout history.

If morphic resonance is real, then it holds immense implications for the future of the human race. It means that cultural influences can be solidified much more easily than what might be expected by mere words on a page or pixels on a video screen. Just think: due to all of the pimply faced kids shooting imaginary cops on *Grand Theft Auto*, there must be a fairly strong morphic field set up by now for that type of anti-social aggression. And what about all the wars in history? Have morphic fields been established for that type of *real* aggression? Have they been somewhat balanced by the morphic fields from all of the young men shivering with fear and disgust in foxholes? Or what about the morphic fields fostered by the countless small acts of selflessness in their cities and towns and villages back home? It's hard to say. But it is reasonable to hope that the human race can foster more and more of what Alexis de Tocqueville long ago called "habits of the heart".[17] Since it is with these type of cultural and psychological assets that this fragile thing called civilization can be preserved...whether or not you happen to think that morphic resonance is real.

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[17] Sound familiar? It's the title of the Bellah *et al* book that I quoted extensively from in chapter xi. And Bellah *et al*, in turn, borrowed extensively from Tocqueville's book, *Democracy in America.*

chapter xvi: science and religion and death...and sasquatches

Belief and faith. Useless words. The concepts are important, but the associated words in the dictionary? Nope. Let's just get rid of them. We can get along just as well – if not a whole lot better – if we use the words "thought" and “conviction” instead. So, rather than saying "I believe in the resurrection of Jesus Christ", those of us who are so inclined can say "I think that Christ got resurrected". That leaves us an easier exit if evidence comes our way that is, um...inconvenient.

However, the corollary is that we also need to abolish the word "disbelief". "Doubt" works just as well, and it's a bit easier to abandon if we – like Thomas – find a side to stick a finger in.[1]

But if we quit believing and start thinking, that still leaves us a few cards shy of a full deck. What we still crave is experience...and preferably a religious experience. My experience with certain old hymns and one particular medieval drinking song has led me to think that the mundane reality we see through our eyes and hear through our ears is only part of the story. Something else seems to be going on. Something that doesn't quite fit into the realm of classical physics. I think back to the LSD trip and the hydraulic excavator analogy. And the orbiting needle above the cardboard pyramid. And the "small orb of energy" mentioned in chapter iii. All totally anecdotal, but much of it mirrored by the the types of experiences related by innumerable others throughout history.

Am I grasping at straws? Perhaps. But at least I’m not grasping at thin air…like the materialist crowd would have us do, if they want to try and make sense of Einstein’s “spooky action” or McDougall’s lab rats…or a flat-lining brain accurately recalling conversations in an operating room (more on that later on in the chapter).

But back to the topic of Christianity: what is a Christian

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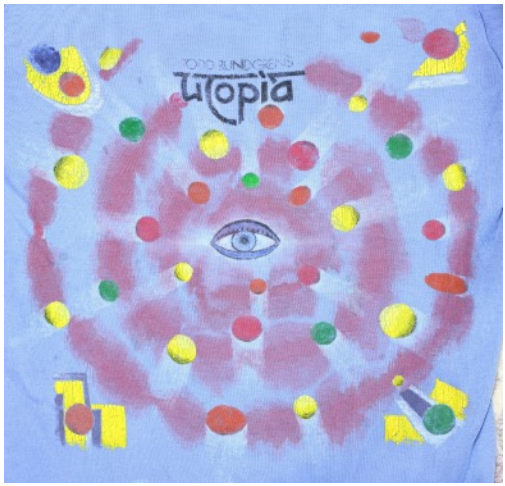
[1] From John 20: 24-29. (“Except I shall…thrust my hand into his side [where the Roman spear pierced Jesus], I will not believe.”). Also: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Doubting_Thomas

supposed to believe – I mean think? That there's a god who created stuff? Nope. Whew! Good thing, too, since that's a pretty hard one to swallow. After all, if God created the universe, then what created God? At least with the Big Bang theory, you only have to postulate something out of nothing once. And then, with 14 billion years to play around with, you have a theoretical mechanism (and a ton of evidence to back it up) for the development of stars and planets and life.



So no, we don't need a magician called God.[2] My dear old dad (with a doctorate in theology) says that all a Christian has to think is that Christ got resurrected. And based on what I've read over the years, I suspect that Mary Magdalene and the apostles sensed *some* sort of punctured apparition on the road to Galilee. In fact, it's significantly more difficult for me to think that the author of the earliest gospel (Mark) and the earlier material associated with the Q Source[3] just made that stuff up for a good story.

In the first place, the writings of the near-contemporary historians Tacitus (a Roman) and Josephus (a Jew who was in league

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[2] However, for me, it does seem appropriate to postulate something similar to Jung's Collective Unconscious, which might have evolved along with higher life forms. Even before I came across references to Jung, Dean's sister introduced us to an exquisite Todd Rundgren album that featured this concept in a half-hour long song titled *The Ikon*. This complex and musically flawless album (*Utopia*) would certainly be with me on my archetypal desert island.

[3] Thought by most scholars to be the earliest oral tradition depicting the life of Christ, and later to be combined with the written gospel of Mark to form the gospels of Luke and Matthew. See: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Q_source

with the Romans) confirmed the basic framework of Mark's gospel (ie, that someone called Jesus lived, made a name for himself, and was crucified at about that time).

In the second place, one has to ask why his followers would have stuck around and founded a completely new religion based on the activities of a *failed apocalyptic prophet*[4] who wound up being skewered on a couple of posts like a common criminal? I suspect that the disciples stuck around because even though he failed to give the Romans a damn good shit-kicking, he was a genius at composing anti-establishment parables, and he (supposedly) performed the occasional miraculous feat;[5] Otherwise, they would have just gone back to fishing the next day.

And finally, we have reams and reams of 20th century material on a 20th century figure (Neem Karoli Baba) which shows – me, at least (you'll have to read the book yourself) – that the stuff of legend doesn't necessarily have to be mere legend. And legend, in the pejorative sense of the word, usually establishes itself fairly readily if you Google something, and words like "fakery" and "deception" pop up in the hit list.

I tried such a search using "Neem Karoli Baba" combined with "fakery", and the only relevant site that popped up was www.strippingthegurus.com (named after a book written by Geoffrey Falk). It was all very well researched, and the chapter on Sai Baba (the afro'd guy in the orange gown) confirmed what I had suspected during my trip to India. However, when it came to NKB, there was very little dirt. In fact, the worst that Falk could find

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[4] Google "failed apocalyptic prophet" for more background on that. But in a nutshell, the evidence suggests that Jesus and his followers thought that the end was near, the Romans were toast, and that the true believers would inherit some sort of kingdom in the *very short term*. Also Google "Jesus" and "this generation" for the numerous Bible passages where Jesus defines the "short term" (he may have been good at other stuff, but he was a crappy fortune teller).

[5] And before the materialist crowd chimes in, I would ask them to cultivate a tiny morsel of humility…based on their complete inability to explain away the decades of evidence for "spooky action".

consisted of three paragraphs taken verbatim from Dass's own book (*Miracle of Love*).[6] It was about the relationship between NKB and a female disciple, and although she looked upon it as a positive experience, obviously Falk didn't see it in the same light.

It was three paragraphs taken out of a total of 400 pages. Actually, it was three paragraphs taken from a life which was very well known in India for most of the 20th century.[7]

The three paragraphs remind me of the work of Professor Bart Ehrman of the University of North Carolina. He is a religious studies scholar, who has written vast amounts on the subject of the "historical Jesus" (meaning that which we know about Jesus via historical evidence, as opposed to belief and faith).

In his course titled *The Historical Jesus,* he relates three criteria[8] which have helped historians to figure out which events and sayings associated with Jesus are most likely nonsense, and which are most

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[6] Actually, there were four paragraphs concerning the episode in *Miracle of Love.* But for whatever reason, Falk decided to leave out the forth one…perhaps because it wasn't sensational enough? Or maybe because it helped to explain the whole puzzling episode?

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[7] …and who was widely acknowledged to be instrumental in the eradication of smallpox in India – and thus the world – simply because he said that it *would be accomplished*. That's because doctors all over India, *up until they heard about this pronouncement*, would not help out with the vaccination campaign (they knew that it would be an impossible task). However, they also figured that since NKB seemed to be omniscient (during the Sino-Indian War of 1962, he told the nation that the invading Chinese army would call a cease-fire and retreat…which they did), maybe they should pitch in and help. For more info on this, Google "Neem Karoli Baba" and "smallpox". The 2013 Commencement Address for the graduates of the Harvard School of Public Health (about half way down the Google page) is a particularly good read on the subject (the speaker, Larry Brilliant, currently on CNN – big time – for his expertise on the coronavirus, is also the young hippie doctor who NKB told again and again to pester the World Health Organization office in Delhi about getting the massive vaccination process started).

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[8] From lectures #9 and #10. This is another one of *The Great Courses*, by *The Teaching Company* (www.thegreatcourses.com).

likely factual. They are:

- Independent Attestation (ie, multiple independent witnesses or authors saying roughly the same thing)
- Criterion of Dissimilarity (ie, something that works against the vested ideology of the subject being studied – as well as the ideology of later adherents[9])
- Contextual credibility (ie, an event which can plausibly be placed in the era that it was supposed to have occurred)

To give an example, historians are quite certain that Jesus got crucified, since the event passes all three criteria with flying colours. It passes the test of independent attestation, since all of the gospels, as well as the Roman historians (Tacitus and Josephus) mention it. It passes the test of contextual credibility, since the same thing happened to many, many other Jews under Roman rule. And it passes the test of dissimilarity, since the earliest Christian cheerleaders were not too pleased that their guy died like a common criminal, instead of giving those Romans a damn good thrashing!

So can we apply the same three criteria to NKB? Certainly.[10] But it is the criterion of dissimilarity which I find most interesting in this case.[11] And who else to provide the best example, but Geoffrey Falk

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[9] Think of it: there are two salespersons. Who are you most likely going to believe? The one that tells you that the widget for sale is absolutely flawless, and that all previous buyers are in constant orgasmic heaven? Or the one that admits that the very same widget is a fairly decent widget, but that it is made of cheap plastic, so that it can easily break if misused?

[10] But I won't delve into NKB's purported miracles, for the same reason that Ehrman didn't delve into the New Testament miracles: "…even if one concedes that miracles can happen, historians cannot demonstrate them." (From Lecture # 18). And even though there is a fair amount of film footage of NKB available on youtube, there are 1) no miracles shown, 2) the concept of miracles was always downplayed by him, and 3) when others talked about his miracles, he would often berate them (eg, "you are all talking lies!" from p.131 of *Miracle of Love*).

[11] …and independent attestation and contextual credibility aren't nearly as

and www.strippingthegurus.com? After all, it is in Falk's interest to show that NKB is a phony (with the three damning paragraphs). And it is in the interest of the disciples of NKB to show that he is *not* a phony. So why would the disciples of NKB include the three damning paragraphs in *Miracle of Love*? Probably for no other reason than that it *actually occurred* (as Erhman said, when he looked at some of the unflattering stuff written about Jesus in the New Testament).

And there is no shortage of unflattering – or just plain puzzling – stuff in *Miracle of Love*. For example, Larry Brilliant (the hippie doctor and CNN coronavirus expert who I mentioned in a footnote a few pages back) related an incident that seemingly showed a hypocritical side of NKB. The old guy had numerous Western disciples who had taken LSD in the past (probably every single one of them), but when some other Western visitors showed up at the ashram, he accused them of also having taken LSD in the past, and he kicked them out of the ashram. Brilliant pleaded on their behalf, but to no avail. He later wrote "I don't understand anything about that incident!"[12]

But even with all of this unflattering dissimilarity, the book (with hundreds of testimonies, some going back to the early part of the 20th Century) *was* assembled. *And* (get this) it was only published *after* NKB had first approved the final draft. He initially demanded certain specific changes (because "You are printing lies."[13]). And he got those changes made in time for publication. But the passages showing clear cases of dissimilarity were obviously kept in. Maybe he knew that a historian or two would be leafing through the pages at some point in the future? Or maybe he was just *really* into that ancient anachronism we call truth?[14]

problematic for a figure who died only a few decades ago, and for whom many of the witnesses are still alive today.

[12] *Miracle of Love,* p.236

[13] …about which benefactor built a particular temple (*Miracle of Love,* p.200)

[14] More relevant than ever in an age where "alternative facts" and "fake news" battle against inconvenient science and the lost wisdom of Walter Cronkite.

*"*MEN WILL HATE YOU FOR TELLING THE TRUTH. THEY MAY EVEN KILL YOU, BUT YOU MUST TELL THE TRUTH. IF YOU LIVE IN TRUTH, GOD WILL ALWAYS STAND WITH YOU."

and

*"*CHRIST DIED FOR TRUTH.*"*[15]

So, what about this thing called death? I mentioned Raymond Moody's work in an earlier chapter, with the typical white light, the tunnel, feelings of bliss, etc. It all sounds quite pleasant.

But is it real?

Ancient cultures all report something similar to the "near-death experience". Gregory Shushan studied the writings of ancient Egypt, Babylon, Vedic India, pre-Buddhist China, and pre-Columbian Mesoamerica, and found that even accounting for cultural differences, the nine main features associated with the phenomenon were all mentioned.[16] But the culture most associated with the exploration of the afterlife was probably that of medieval Tibet, where much of its resources were given to the theocracy, which in turn, spent most of its days and nights meditating and venturing into other realms of consciousness. One of the results became the Tibetan Book of the Dead.

The main difference between the Tibetan Book of the Dead and the Christian view of the afterlife, is that whereas in the latter, fortunate souls pass into a realm of permanent bliss (ie, sitting on a cloud and strumming a harp), the former sees souls *approaching* a

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[15] In all-caps in the original. Both are quotes from NKB himself (from the chapter titled *About Truth* p.199).

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[16] Shushan, Gregory (2009) Conceptions of the Afterlife in Early Civilizations: Universalism, Constructivism and Near-Death Experience. New York & London, Continuum. Cited in Wikipedia: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Near-death_experience#cite_note-95

realm of permanent bliss, but then getting drawn back down to earth to seek the process of rebirth. Only a relative few who have psychologically prepared themselves (via meditation) are able to dive head first into the ego-destroying void of the pure white light. I'm not sure which is more enticing. Losing your entire identity, but being able to exist in a realm of bliss? Or getting reborn – possibly into a Third World slum? Or sitting on a cloud with Jesus and strumming a harp?

I sometimes wonder if the "clear light of the void" (as it is often described) is not merely a devolution of consciousness down to the sub-atomic level (related to Timothy Leary's theory about the eight circuits of consciousness mentioned in chapter iv). But I prefer to think that it is something more along the lines of the Tibetan or Christian conception of the phenomenon. Or it may be a combination of the above. Certainly, a sub-atomic awareness by itself would not explain some of the other typical aspects of the experience (as listed by IANDS[17])

- Incredibly rapid, sharp thinking and observations

- Encounter with deceased loved ones, possibly sacred figures (the Judges, Jesus, a saint) or unrecognized beings, with whom communication is mind-to-mind; these figures may seem consoling, loving, or terrifying

- A life review, reliving actions and feeling their emotional impact on others

- In some cases, a flood of knowledge about life and the nature of the universe

What is certainly the case though, is that *some* of the attempts by *some* of the scientific establishment to reduce everything to neurons and photons make about as much sense as pearly gates and harps. For example, I picked up a copy of *The Spiritual Doorway in the Brain: A Neurologist's Search for the God Experience* by Kevin

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[17] International Association for Near-death Studies: http://iands.org/about-ndes/characteristics.html

Nelson, M.D. It was a fairly interesting read, but some of the mechanisms he thinks are responsible for the near-death experiences are obvious nonsense.

Take the bright light, for instance. It is invariably described by the people who have seen it as extraordinarily bright...like no other light they had ever seen in their earthly existence. For example, Renee Paraslow relates her near-death experience, when, as a child, an allergic reaction swelled her body until she went unconscious. After the usual observance of her body and its surroundings from above, she encountered "...a sea of light...as if every atom in the universe had been electrified with colour and light..."[18]

But Nelson hypothesizes that the light is from the same source as that which we see during the dream state. I don't know about you, but my dreams are somewhere on the dull side of the light spectrum. Another source of light, he figures, is that tiny bit that makes it through our closed eyelids (which would be even duller). And as for the tunnel that people talk about travelling through as they go towards the light? Nelson offers the explanation that it's just the eye's retina being starved for blood and responding by losing peripheral vision.[19]

So go ahead. Read a dozen or so anecdotes from people who have been pronounced clinically dead. Then read Nelson's book. Then wonder why you spent $33.50 on it.

A much better read turned out to be *Erasing Death* by Sam Parnia M.D.[20] He is a resuscitation specialist and researcher who regularly gets people back on their feet after they've been physiologically dead (no heartbeat, no breathing, and often no brain function) for minutes and even hours. So he's heard a lot of anecdotes from folks who have returned from the other side.

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[18] From: http://www.spiritualtravel.org/OBE/rparaslow.html

[19] pp. 212-213 in *The Spiritual Doorway* New York: Dutton. 2011.

[20] With Josh Young. New York: Harper Collins. 2013

But aside from the usual stuff, like patients recalling accurate details of surgical instruments which weren't present either before their brain decided to flat-line, or after resuscitation, he delves into the more basic physiological issues which need to be resolved before science is able to figure out what's going on. The main problem is that electrical activity in the brain ceases after about ten seconds into physiological death. So with brain functioning totally gone, people should not be able to "...report highly lucid, detailed, and chronologically accurate memories and accounts of the experience [including]…surprisingly accurate observations…they could only have seen while out of their bodies."[21] But they do.

Also very interesting was Parnia's chapter on the AWARE study (AWAreness during REsuscitation). Twenty five medical centres throughout the world have signed up to participate in something which might provide firmer evidence that something weird is happening. At these centres, small shelves have been installed at heights of at least 6' 5", and random pictures have been placed face-up on the surfaces, so that they can only be seen by looking down at them. The theory is that when someone has a near-death experience, they might see the image as they (typically) float above their body, while watching the doctors and nurses desperately trying to bring them back. And if, after resuscitation, they recalled the image, it would provide evidence of some sort of non-physical perception.

At the time the book was published, about 4,000 cardiac arrests were noted at the participating medical centres. But of these cases, only 16% survived. And many of the events occurred in rooms without shelves, and some of the patients were discharged before they could be interviewed by the researchers. So, all in all, only two near-death-experiences were recorded. Neither of these patients saw the images on the shelves, but in the case of one of the patients, the "visual and auditory awareness" of other events in the operating room "could be corroborated".[22]

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[21] Parnia and Young. *op cit.* pp. 140-141

[22] From the Wikipedia entry on Sam Parnia.

An even more remarkable book came out in 2012. Titled *Proof of Heaven: A Neurosurgeon's Journey into the Afterlife,*[23] it detailed Eben Alexander's struggle with a meningitis attack which left his spinal fluid so full of pus that it was off the charts. A healthy person's spinal fluid has a glucose concentration of about 80 mg/dl. Someone with meningitis has a concentration of less than 40. Someone on death's door is sitting at about 20. Alexander's concentration was hovering around 1. Nobody knows how he survived – least of all, the infectious disease specialist, Scott Wade M.D., who analyzed the pus, and called his recovery "miraculous".[24]

A couple of things set Alexander's experience apart from other accounts of after-death. The first relates to the time frame and the severity of the illness. Whereas most after-death experiences occur shortly after a heart attack or a stroke or immediately after a traffic accident, and then last for several minutes before resuscitation, Alexander's lasted six days. He was in a coma. So he had much more opportunity to explore the other side. And the resulting details that he recounts are that much more extraordinary.

The second difference is that a year after publication, another author set to work to debunk Alexander's assertions. Luke Dittrich, in *Esquire* magazine, implicitly accused him of making it all up in order to cash in (and deflect attention from several malpractise suits[25]). But he never thought to interview Dr. Wade, the guy who analyzed the pus. That was convenient, since the core of Dittrich's argument was that the coma was drug induced, rather than pus (ie, meningitis) induced.

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[23] by Eben Alexander M.D. Toronto: Simon & Schuster, 2012

[24] Alexander, *Op Cit.* P.183

[25] On www.healthgrades.com, there is one malpractice claim and two professional reprimands listed for Alexander. However, the U.S. National Institute of Health found that neurosurgeons faced the highest rate of lawsuits of any medical field (on average, almost one suit per doctor every 5 years). http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3204310/

Dittrich also dragged the Dalai Lama into the mess. He wrote that his holiness "[wagged] a finger at Alexander" and gave him a quick lesson on telling fibs.[26] Really? Well, it's all on Youtube, so I couldn't resist having a look.[27] And what I found was that Dittrich seemed to be the one who was playing fast and loose with the truth. Have a look. It's obvious that the Dalai Lama trusted that Alexander "truly experienced"[28] what he saw and felt on the other side. But I guess if one's aim is to sell a few more *Esquire* magazines, then a keen sense of sight and hearing can sometimes be inconvenient.

From the somewhat superficial *Esquire*, we go to the very well grounded *Atlantic Monthly* (founded in 1857). For in it, we read Gideon Lichfield's exceptionally balanced article titled Solving the Riddle of Near-Death Experiences. Lichfield doesn't come to any hard-and-fast conclusions for either myself or for the confirmed sceptic. However, in his final paragraph, he quotes the *renowned atheist*, Susan Blackmore, who states that "…NDEs can be wonderful, life-changing experiences that shed light on the human condition and on questions of life and death.[29]

Confused? Think of it this way. When Trump had covid, was it best that he quickly recovered? Or would it have been better if he had slowly died with an intubation tube sticking out of his obnoxious trap? Well, in fact, neither. For he would have done the world an immense favour if he had had an NDE filled with glorious epiphanies, so that he could have then come back to apologize and tell us all what a sorry son-of-a-bitch he had been all his life.

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[26] http://www.esquire.com/features/the-prophet

[27] On Youtube, search "Dalai Lama" and "Eben Alexander" and click on the *Life and After Life* video. Then fast-forward to the bit between 46 and 49 minutes into the video. Alexander is seated over on the far right.

[28] At 46:53 into the video.

[29] April, 2015 edition. Page 86.

That's why this stuff is so important. Even if you think that everything in this chapter is mumbo-jumbo, it's a fact that certain experiences have the potential to change lives for the better…and therefore, potentially change society for the better. In my case, it was my first LSD trip. After that, I quit urinating in inappropriate places, puking up booze and bowing down to peer pressure. Instead, I started haunting the local public library, so I could search out books on mysticism, religion, psychology and history.

Science asks questions. Science gathers evidence. And when enough evidence emerges, a theory is formed. And on some theories, we are able to base our entire civilization for a hundred years or more. Electro-magnetic theory, for example. But that's a robust one, for which there is no shortage of evidence (your cell-phone, for example), and for which no one has yet won a Nobel Prize trying to disprove.

Consciousness, on the other hand, has a lot of competing theories. Just type "consciousness" and "theory" into Google and you'll see what I mean. On the first page, I found neuroscience theory, quantum theory, field theory, and electro-magnetic theory...plus a few others with bizarre names, and with probable origins in chic establishments that sell crystals and incense and homeopathic[30] placebos.

To guard against some of the inevitable nonsense, I sometimes check out the magazine rack at our local bookstore to see what the current issues of *Skeptic* and *Skeptical Inquirer* have to say about various gullibility traps. They comment on matters ranging from creationism to homeopathy to a supposed conspiracy on the part of the U.S. government to blow up the World Trade Center. The sceptics (ie, the scientists) take a critical and entertaining look at the nonsense, and write up their thoughts in order to try and reduce the

[30] The bizarre notion that a substance diluted in water so many times that no molecules of it would be left, could still impart some sort of memory on to the water. See: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Homeopathy

amount of idiocy in society. And they do such a good job of it, that I've twice subscribed to *Skeptical Inquirer.*

But even though I've learned a tremendous amount from the two magazines, I still have to retain a bit of my own scepticism when reading them. Take the subject of Sasquatches, for example. Now I'm fairly sure that most Sasquatch sightings – and most UFO sightings – are either purposely faked or can be ascribed to something other than big, hairy hominids or little, green men. But sometimes the evidence is a bit harder to sweep under the rug.[31]

I remember, as a kid, when I first saw the famous Patterson-Gimlin footage of what was purported to be a Sasquatch. I nearly fell out of my chair. There was the initial footage with the shaky camera (I think *I* would have just dropped the damned thing, and then ran towards the nearest source of clean underwear). And the creature, which was about 25 metres away, looked like no other primate I had ever seen – or any Hollywood rendition of a guy in a primate suit.

I hadn't thought much about it in the intervening decades...until I saw the subject of bigfoot being featured occasionally in *Skeptic* and *Skeptical Inquirer.* Their articles tend to focus on the notion that Patterson wasn't a very honest guy, and nobody has ever found Sasquatch bones, etc. But I think they're all missing something very important. They shouldn't be trying to pick apart Patterson or

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[31] Witness the recently released report on UAP's (ie, UFO's) by the U.S. Office of the Director of National Intelligence. Some might scoff at the grainy images shown on 60 Minutes and other news shows. But the report mentions that most of the 144 events studied were not just based on sightings, but were also corroborated by "radar, infrared, electro-optical [sensors and] weapon seekers…". And the behaviour of many of the UAP's could not be explained by natural phenomena. Many could travel against the wind, "maneuver abruptly, or move at considerable speed, without discernable means of propulsion." Some even showed "acceleration or a degree of signature management." (Signature management, according to the report, is indicative of "Advanced Technology".) And if you think the Russians or the Chinese are an order or two of magnitude ahead of the U.S. in military technology, then I have a bridge in Brooklyn that I'd be willing to sell you for real cheap.

Patterson's film. They should be trying to pick apart the Wikipedia entry on the Patterson film.

For one thing, Wikipedia entries are written by different people with different backgrounds, and at the end of the day, they have to come to some agreement about which sentence to insert or leave out of the entry, or which word to insert or leave out of any particular sentence. The result is called "inter-subjectivity", which in many areas of life not associated with fruit flies in petri dishes or rats in mazes, is about the closest we'll ever get to the truth.

Contrast that with some of the bigfoot advocates, who often have a bias. And contrast that with the *Skeptic* and *Skeptical Inquirer* editors, who might also have a bias (associated with making money by selling magazines).

In the case of the Wikipedia entry on the Patterson film, we are confronted with some interesting assertions from the likes of anthropologists and Hollywood film makers:

> "I can see the muscle masses in the appropriate places... If it is a fake, it is an extremely clever one."
>
> "...a suited person could not mimic this [shoulder] breadth and still have the naturalistic hand and arm motions present on the film."
>
> "...the knee is regularly bent more than 90°, while the human leg bends less than 70°. No human has yet replicated this level lower leg lift while maintaining the smoothness, posture, and stride length (41") of the creature."
>
> "...if Disney personnel were unable to duplicate the film, there is little likelihood that Patterson could have done so."
>
> "...effectively rules out a man-in-a-suit explanation for the Patterson-Gimlin film without invoking an elaborate, if not inconceivable, prosthetic contrivance

to account for the appropriate positions and actions of wrist and elbow and finger flexion visible on the film."

Of course, the Wikipedia entry also details the arguments of the various researchers and witnesses on the other side of the issue:

"...it's a guy in a bad fur suit, sorry!"

I guess that last bit of technical analysis was enough for the folks at *Skeptical Inquirer*.

The real lesson, however, is that no matter what we look at, whether it's Sasquatch, the resurrection of Christ or climate change, we have to be willing to cast aside our "beliefs" in favour of the more humble-sounding "thinks". And then we have to be willing to look at *all* the evidence, whether it happens to be the behaviour of CO^2 molecules in a laboratory, the "spooky action" associated with thousands of photons from a couple of ancient galaxies a billion light-years apart, or the criterion of dissimilarity as it applies to a 2,000 year old failed apocalyptic prophet.

chapter xvii: ottawa

As the thesis about Sai Baba and the village development program fell apart, I started to look around for other ideas. And since I was no longer hooked on Third World development, I began looking at forestry in the the First World. And that is where I came across more and more references to harvesting practices that were smaller in scale and more sustainable.

…which led me to an old guy on Vancouver Island by the name of Merve Wilkinson. He was renowned for how much quality wood he could grow on 136 acres, all the while improving the health of his tract of land, by leaving 5% of the growth (or "interest") to rot and decay on the forest floor.[1] He did this by selective logging, as opposed to the predominant method of clear-cutting. And I later learned that over a period of 67 years, he had logged more than 2.5 times the original volume of wood, while at the end (he died at age 97), there remained 110% of the volume he started with.[2]

Inspiring, but somehow I found myself back in Alberta, where I stumbled upon a much different thesis topic: the Foothills Model Forest, in Hinton, which was industrial-scale in its operations. And it was looking for someone to help with socio-economic research.

It would be different this time, though. Now, somebody would be paying me to do research. So I couldn't very well get distracted or bored half-way through.

The research involved interviewing a wide range of people in the area on the subject of forestry. And forestry in Hinton meant Weldwood, which had a gigantic forest lease and a fairly impressive pulp mill (which gave the town its unmistakable odor of prosperity). I had a list of about 60 people, and another list of about a dozen questions, which I wanted to ask them. I pretty much had free reign, except that I wasn't supposed to ask anyone what they thought of the

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[1] Loomis, Ruth and Wilkinson, Merve in *Wildwood, A Forest for the Future.* Gabriola, B.C.: Reflections Publishing, 1990. p.9

[2] Obituary: Eco-forester changed tone of logging debate. Victoria Times-Colonist, Sep 2, 2011. p.A2

prevailing forest tenure system, which had a tendency to favour the large corporations in the province. I talked to a Weldwood silviculture expert, a union leader, an environmentalist, a trapper, a church leader, a worker at a women's shelter, a big game hunter, a log house builder, an ancient fellow who had been in the area for many decades, a young guy who raced ATV's, and a lot of other folks who were somehow dependent upon the long-term health of the community.

I stayed at the local hotel on the main drag, and the manager thoughtfully placed me at the end furthest from the nightly racket coming from the bar. And it was in this small cubicle with a bathroom down the hallway and with a small window that looked out towards the snow-capped Rockies that I read book after book in the evenings, trying to figure out exactly what the word "sustainability" meant.

In years previous, I had been reading a lot about climate change, and I still had a huge interest in agroforestry. But now I was delving more and more into the social sciences. Now it was the previously mundane matters of community and dialogue that started to grab my attention. I began to realize that all of the gee-whiz technological advances in the universe could never stop us from dehumanizing each other at the local level, spouting ideology at each other at the national level, and killing each other at the global level.

As luck would have it, I travelled to Victoria that Christmas to see my folks, and while there, I again stopped in at Munro's bookstore, where I came across another idiosyncratic book that I likely wouldn't have found anywhere else. It was a slight paperback from Carleton University Press with a relatively unimaginative title: *Changing Maps: Governing in a World of Rapid Change.* The back cover had the usual effusive praise, but it was from very obscure figures, such as the Secretary of the Treasury Board, the President of the Public Service Commission, and the former Clerk of the Privy Council…z-z-z-z-z-z.

But when I opened it up and looked at the table of contents, I saw intriguing chapter headings, as well as a couple of names that I *did* recognize: Amitai Etzioni, founder of the communitarian

movement, and Daniel Yankelovich, the go-to guy on matters of public opinion and deliberative democracy. And when I sampled a random paragraph or two, I found that the book was – wait for it – very readable. I mean a total absence of academic jargon. It even had some cool nautical symbols for the various futures that humanity might be headed toward. Would civilization end up being like the fractious HMS Bounty? Or perhaps the energy efficient windjammer? How about the high-tech starship? Or would we ultimately follow the path of the Titanic?[3]

So I read it. And I found it to be the *only* book[4] which extensively delved into both elements of what my research had shown to be the main prerequisites for a sustainable future: communitarianism[5] and deliberative democracy.[6]

Just like Guatemala, India and Vancouver Island, I never finished the research in Hinton. Partly, it was due to a nine month wait between being told that there was some research that needed to be done, and then being told that I could go and do it. Partly, it was due to the fact that I had bumped into the end of the five year time limit for graduate research. And partly, I had simply had enough of

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[3] The Titanic section is eerily prescient. It warns "As the social fabric continues to fray, there is an increase in racial and regional scapegoating, and extremist groups gain adherents." And then "Demagogues emerge preaching simplistic solutions."

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[4] Even to this day, a quarter of a century later, I have yet to stumble upon a book that so eloquently explains the precise reasons that our civilization is so thoroughly messed up. The recent *Too Dumb for Democracy* by David Moscrop is a serious contender for the title, but Moscrop is just one person, whereas *Changing Maps* had input from at least *fourteen* brilliant intellects.

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[5] The philosophy which states that community responsibilities are just as important as individual rights.

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[6] The philosophy that states that in order for democracy to function properly, it needs citizens who are aware of more than just tonight's TV line-up, and in order for citizens to attain that level of awareness, dialogue and grassroots power need to become the order of the day. However, it also warns that grassroots power *without dialogue* is the perfect recipe for nightmarish scenarios associated with demagogues like Donald Trump .

university. It had been a truly amazing time, but as a solid decade of it rolled by, I started to look for the nearest exit.

I became obsessed with *Changing Maps*. I called up people in the media to tell them about it. After all, this was a book which advocated revolutionary changes in the process of governance, and yet one of the contributors to the book (Marcel Massé) was a cabinet minister under the then-current government of Jean Chretien. Surely that was news...wasn't it?

Apparently not. I don't know whether it was the message or the messenger, but nobody was interested. Finally, at some point, I called the local CBC affiliate and told them that I was several days into a hunger strike, trying to get some coverage for the book. I was simply told that they would "do their best *not* to cover the story".

Hmm. I propped myself up on the bed in the tiny room that I was renting. What to do?

Then my eyes rested on the old 15-speed Norco Magnum bicycle that I had once used to circumnavigate the Glenmore Reservoir each day. It was about 15 years old, and it rested in pieces at the foot of my bed. But it was free of mechanical issues, and it was reinforced in just the right spots for it to be a competent, long-distance touring bike. So I decided I would cycle to Ottawa in a quest to give a copy of the book to Jean Chretien. I called up CBC to let them know my change of plans, and I was told to let them know when I got closer to Ottawa...

edmonton to regina (october, 1996)

I made this crazy resolution shortly after I had returned from one of the lookout towers, so I once again packed and heaved my worldly possessions into the tiny storage locker where they had just come from. I said good-bye to my landlady, and I headed with the bike and some camping gear to a friend's house on the outskirts of Sherwood Park, where I was able to park my car. Then I stuffed the gear into the panniers and started pedaling north to Highway 16.

It was a grey day. The sky was grey and my mood was grey. I

pondered various unknowns. How long might it take? Could I even do it? The drudgery ahead was difficult to contemplate. I had cycled long distances before, but on those times, I could easily stop and find the nearest bus station. However, this time, I was going for a cause. So defeat was a bit more difficult to contemplate.

I nearly took my first spill as I headed east along 16. It was on the descent of a significant grade and the front end of the bike was so heavily loaded that the handlebar started to vibrate in a vicious feedback cycle. In the motorcycle world, it would have been referred to as a "tank slapper". But I managed to get the beast under control, and after I came to a stop, I shifted some light stuff to the front, and some heavy stuff to the back. Calamity averted.

That evening, I arrived at Mundare...or did I? It was 25 years ago, and one of my big mistakes on the trip was not keeping a diary.[7] So, as I write, I have to rely on hazy memories, various photos that I took, the average distance I would have been able to cycle each day, and some simple detective work. I see that I took a photo in broad daylight of the Vegreville egg. I couldn't have cycled that far in one day from Sherwood Park, so that means my hazy memory of Mundare must be correct.

I remember eating at a cheap Chinese restaurant (seemingly left over from the days of W.O. Mitchell), and then pitching a small overhang of plastic tarp behind a hedge in a secluded park. Under the tarp, I had the old bivy sack that I used on my trip to Berkeley 17 years earlier. But since it was October, and I didn't have to worry about mosquitoes, I had the

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[7] What I should have done was made arrangements with the CBC station to mail them regular updates (and any quirky observations which might have been of interest to their listeners). But at least I took along a disposable camera.

luxury of leaving open the netting part of the sack. It was colder that way, but at least I could breath.

When dawn broke, I shook the frost off the tarp and bivy, and looked around for a spot to eat. Breakfast invariably consisted of immense amounts of fat and protein at whatever truck stop was handy. Bacon and eggs, and toast slathered with peanut butter and jam were the usual delicacies chosen from the menu. Then, to burn off those calories, I wound my way through a succession of small villages that sounded like they had been transplanted from Scotland: Ranfurly, Innisfree, Kitscoty.

Over the border into Saskatchewan, and I was in for a rude awakening. In fact, as I went from province to province eastbound, the roads got progressively worse – especially for a cyclist. Either four lanes went to two, or a paved shoulder went to gravel, or a 10 foot wide shoulder became a 1 foot wide shoulder, or all of the above. So I spent less time thinking about my aching wrists and more time glancing in my rear view mirror.

The third night was spent in the middle of an undeveloped road allowance about a hundred yards off the highway. Trees had colonized both sides of the right-of-way, so I had a bit of privacy, and I curled up in the bivy on what might have been a rough trail in earlier decades.

It was another cold night, and I contemplated the trade-off between the lighter bivy sack and the heavier pup-tent (sitting back in the Edmonton storage locker), as well as the extra pound or two associated with an insulated outer shell for the sleeping bag. And the next day, it wasn't until mid-morning before my hands started to warm up. Neoprene gloves covered by fingerless leather work gloves didn't seem to be working too well.

It was in North Battleford the next night, where the bitter cold at the local campsite took its toll on my optimism. But there was sunshine the next morning, and I lingered on a mug of cocoa at McDonalds. And even those pathetic little egg and bacon concoctions tasted like they had just come out of the kitchen at the Waldorf Astoria.

The going was good all the way to Saskatoon, where I splurged and got a room at the local hostel. Technically, it was a hostel, but technically, it was also an old inner city hotel with common washrooms down the hall and head throbbing "music" that didn't quit until after midnight. But at least I wasn't shivering.

In the morning, I pointed myself in a somewhat southerly direction. First, across one of the many bridges over the South Saskatchewan River, and then through some suburbs to Highway 11, where Regina beckoned. There was no sun, and there was a fairly stiff headwind. And as I wandered into one of the gas stations along the highway, I had to wonder what I'd say if someone were to offer me a ride. But that choice didn't come up.

I wasn't cold. Burning through a fat-laden breakfast meant that I had to expose a bit of skin so that I wouldn't perspire. But the incessant headwind made things miserable. And the word "drudgery" often came to mind.

But later in the afternoon, the wind died down, and I started to make better time. I even started to enjoy the scenery – if interesting signage can be defined as scenery. One of them said “Findlater 1”. And sure enough, 1 km later, I did find Findlater. But I didn't find a hotel – even though the hour was getting late. Another 17 km's to Bethune, and according to the map symbol, it might have had a population of as much as 500...and a hotel. But no luck there. A warm bath was in order, but now it was starting to get dark. I had a small flashing red light that I attached to the back of my helmet, but it was designed for the relatively slow speeds in the cities. Vehicles whizzing past at well over 100 kph wouldn't have seen it until I made some sort of a splat on a windshield.

At my wit's end, I cycled another 26 km's to Lumsden. By now, I had cycled 227 km's in one day – likely a personal best. The stars were out, but still not a hotel or motel to be seen. I asked a passerby,

and he confirmed the situation. But he mentioned that there was a Franciscan retreat just down the road. They might take me in.

So, after ten minutes along a moonlit lane, I knocked on the door of a large, single story building. And someone let me in. He didn't look like a monk, but he kindly ushered me into a vast, silent kitchen (reminiscent of Kubrick's *The Shining*) and showed me a fridge full of food. Before he left, he pointed out a door down the hallway where I was to stay.

There was one other person in the kitchen, and so I smiled and said hello. I only received a smile back, so he must have been under a vow of silence (though he didn't look like a monk, either).

The next morning, I left a twenty dollar bill on the pillow, and I mentioned to my host that I had only used my sleeping bag (so they wouldn't have to wash the sheets). Then I resumed cycling in the crisp fall air, alongside the prairie grasses that would shortly be covered with a blanket of snow.

After an hour or so, I found myself in the middle of Regina. And unlike in Saskatoon, the hostel was actually an accredited youth hostel (in this case, a large, historic house that had been renovated). So I spent a lazy evening in warm comfort.

But that was it for 1996. I would have to continue the journey the following year, since I didn't have deep enough pockets for hotels and hostels on a regular basis, and I didn't want to find myself featured on the evening news as a victim of hypothermia. So the next day, I scrounged around for a big cardboard box, partially disassembled the bike, and hopped on a Greyhound back to Edmonton.

regina to thunder bay (april, 1997)

I spent the rest of the winter at my parents' place in Victoria, where I assembled a pamphlet comprising some of the juiciest quotes from *Changing Maps.* It also included a letter that I managed to get printed in the *Globe and Mail*, praising the book. I decided that even if my weight allowance on the bike ruled out bringing the

Changing Maps: Governing in a World of Rapid Change
- by S. A. Rosell, et al.
Report of the Project on Governing in an Information Society
Carleton University Press
253 pp. $21.95 pb

On Government Today

We, in Canada, have pushed the parliamentary form of government in a direction that has exaggerated conflict in a very unproductive way. The result frustrates many of the people who work within the system, both politicians and public servants.... Another institutionalized problem for our political system is the extent to which debate occurs in secret, either in caucus or in Cabinet. It's hidden from the people, and that limits the extent to which people can see and understand how the various interests represented in Parliament are being articulated, and how conflicts are being resolved. In the information society that sort of covert process may no longer be sufficient. p. 83

Special interests need to be countered, and their money kept from corrupting our elected officials. The political energy required to reform the political system, so that it better protects the public interest, can only come from aggrieved citizens banding together to clean up politics. p. 204

Government officials come to see themselves as elites who "do things for" the people. And "the people," placed in the role of those for whom things are done, grow passive and unrealistically demanding. The relationship inevitably deteriorates, with people constantly nagging at government about their rights, while government officials, tiring of the unreasonableness of incessant public demands, respond by becoming more secretive, cunning and manipulative. A vicious circle is set in motion that erodes our democratic institutions. p. 245

Leaders who guide people to work their own way through thorny issues, rather than adopting a "we know best" posture, and who create the conditions for dialogue, rather than imposing their own views and values on the citizenry, are not ~~abdicating their responsibility~~ for making the hard decisions. On the contrary, they are ensuring that their decisions, once made, will reflect the true convictions of the citizenry, as well as their own best judgment. p. 252

On Rights & Responsibilities

We need to remind one another that no rights are absolute. Even freedom of speech, we all know, is denied to people who want to shout fire in a crowded theater when there is no fire. p. 243

It is a mistaken notion that just because we desire to be free from governmental controls, we should also be free from responsibilities to the common good, or indifferent to the community. p. 201

On Belief Systems

We need to recognize that we live in communities and that, to obtain the benefits of living in that community, there are some norms of behaviour that we need to adopt. p. 38

Myth lies at the basis of human society.... This is mankind's substitute for instinct. It is the unique and characteristic way of acting together. A people without a full quiver of relevant agreed upon statements, accepted in advance through education or less formalized acculturation, soon finds itself in deep trouble, for, in the absence of believable myths, coherent public action becomes very difficult to improvise and sustain. p. 124

.. He proposed, for example, that we do not need a common religious or philosophical view, but we do need to be committed to the view that developing and socializing our children is a fundamental requirement, and to the view that a society in which people actively participate in self-rule is better than one in which people do not take part. p. 45

Equally, of course, too high a degree of social uniformity (groupthink) can constitute a learning disability, depriving society of the different perspectives and unconventional viewpoints on which learning so much depends. p. 140

On "Public Judgement"

Raw opinion is opinion on an issue that is formed before the public has had the opportunity to deliberate it, and to grasp its full implications. Inconveniently, people do hold strong opinions on subjects about which they know nothing, and to which they have devoted little or no thought. Typically, such opinions are highly volatile, changing from day to day, and full of internal contradictions. The surest sign of raw opinion is when people are unaware of the consequences of their own views. p. 247

On some issues, however, the public's views have evolved from raw opinion into more thoughtful judgment. Typically, this evolution requires a complex process of deliberation that unfolds through a number of stages. One knows that public judgment has been reached on an issue when, on probing, peoples' opinions are found to be firm rather than volatile, self-consistent rather than contradictory and, most importantly, self-conscious, thoughtful and responsible about consequences. p. 248

Some roundtable members questioned the degree to which the public really is interested in being involved in such an effort. People have busy lives, they noted, and simply don't have the time, or often the interest, to be so fully engaged. Yankelovich agreed that the process of coming to public judgement is not needed, or appropriate, for some issues. At the same time, he cautioned, when it comes to the most important issues, public interest is real, and public involvement is essential to a legitimate and effective outcome: p. 97

The desire to be involved, to be part of the decision-making process that affects our own destiny, is so powerful, it's one of the most powerful human feelings. And, most often, the detachment, mistrust, aloofness, cynicism, and so on that we are seeing on the part of the public is an angry reaction to not being involved, to not being consulted with genuine sincerity. p. 98

The style of leadership, most consonant with the evolving new framework, is one in which leaders:

- respond to citizens as equals;
- give citizens the opportunity to deliberate alternative choices on important issues, rather than trying to sell them a single prepackaged choice;
- possess the communication skills (and patience) needed to help citizens make the journey from raw opinion to public judgment;
- empower average people to take moral responsibility for the consequences of their opinions; p. 251

The legitimacy of decisions in future will rest, not on absolutes, but on the degree to which they arise from an agreed process. That agreement itself will be temporary, contingent and subject to periodic revision. p. 37

In our mixed economies, there is plenty of precedent for government to seek to compensate for market failure. Also, opinion polls show that while the public (at least in the United States) distrusts government's social agenda (on the rational grounds that government hasn't learned how to cope with social problems very well), it does support a proactive government in the economic arena. There is virtual consensus that market solutions should have priority but, that when these fail, government must step in. For the public, the issue is not ideological but pragmatic. The public mandate is: Do whatever it takes to make the economy work to provide good jobs for all who seek them, and who have the skills and motivation to do them well. p. 244

On Economics

PLEASE HELP!
1) give me and/or the book honest criticism at 250-592-...
2) discuss with family + friends
3) write your M.P. or M.L.A.
4) call the media

The Globe and Mail, Saturday, February 8, 1997 p. D13

An important book

I've recently finished reading the review of *Naming Rumpelstiltskin* (Dec. 14), and the lament contained in the last paragraph — that the book "fails to provide the combination that will be necessary if our society is to retain its compassionate values and remain competitive during a time of upheaval" — saddens me.

I'm saddened because there is another book out there which *does* fulfil the task admirably, but which has been inexcusably neglected (according to the Canadian Periodical Index, it has only once been reviewed, and then only by an obscure literary magazine). The book is *Changing Maps: Governing in a World of Rapid Change*. It's edited by Stephen Rosell, and published by Carleton University Press. I'm constantly reminded of the book's pedigree by the appearance of many of its renowned co-authors (16 in all) in the media.

Just recently, for instance, Judith Maxwell (executive director of the Queen's/University of Ottawa Economic Projects) was featured on CBC's *Sunday Morning*. Just a couple of weeks ago, Richard Lipsey (former economic adviser to the C. D. Howe Institute) was featured in a nationally syndicated column by Giles Gherson. A few years ago, Charles Taylor delivered the Massey Lecture for CBC's *Ideas* series. The list goes on and on.

There is simply no reason for this book to be buried in obscurity. Not only is it quite possibly the most important work of non-fiction to come out of Canada in the late 20th century, but it's very well written and mercifully jargon-free for the lay audience (it even has some cute little illustrations).

Please don't get the wrong idea. I'm not haranguing you about this because I stand to gain anything monetarily if this book gains a wider audience; I'm haranguing you about this because I'm scared of the future, and as I see it, this book is by far the most effective tool to ensure Canadian survival into the next century.

D. Evan Bedford, Edmonton

On the Media

. Journalists continue to seek to frame issues in terms of the narrative, dramatic model, so that if it doesn't have a personality base, a conflict, and a clear conclusion, it does not count as a news story worthy of mention. Most stories are selected on the basis of how they fit the narrative model, not on the basis of their intrinsic importance for national discussion. p. 99

. It seems to me, more and more, that this is a technological revolution made in heaven for Canada, and yet we are allowing private players to control this game and there appears to be no sense of public urgency about it. If we're concerned about reversing tendencies toward social fragmentation, and about knitting together a country that is spread over an immense territory, it seems to me that this technology offers us an immense opportunity. We need to ask ourselves what role government can play to ensure that the technology is developed in ways that serve public purposes as well as private interests. p. 129

One of the most popular developments, in this new world of information and communication, is people communicating with each other. In the midst of all of the passive technology we pump out, what people respond to most positively is the interactive aspects. When we offer people even very crude interactive capabilities, the response is phenomenal. Ted Turner is right, he said that it is not video on demand that people want, it's people on demand that they want.' p. 131

I think the press and other institutions do a superb job of raising consciousness and of creating awareness. But what they do is get the public agitated and aroused, and then move on to another issue just when people are ready to engage an issue. p. 94

On Class Warfare

Consider, for example, the emerging threat to our societies of class warfare. This threat is implicit in one of the Governance project's scenarios. It is as applicable to the United States as it is to Canada, and is, I believe, the most likely outlook for the future of both nations, unless the two societies actively intervene to change the flow of history. p. 240

This scenario need not be imagined for a remote future. It already is happening. In the emerging global economy, the class warfare scenario is a far more likely outcome than it would have been in the more autonomous, less interdependent economies of the past. p. 240

There can be no more urgent task for leadership and governance than to slow, stop and reverse these trends. p. 241

Building social cohesion and a learning society requires that we find ways to provide a reasonable distribution of the proceeds of that society to its members. Otherwise, people will not participate fully, and we shall end up drifting toward the world of increasing social polarization described in the *HMS Bounty* scenario (or worse). At the same time, we are reaching the limits of the tax/transfer system to address issues of redistribution. As a result, a variety of alternative approaches have been suggested to deal with the question of distribution. These include different ways to redistribute work,[83] different ways to encourage wider participation in capital ownership,[84] and more. How best can we address these distributional issues in the information society?

More broadly, this process of renewing the social contract will require that we provide at least a partial answer to a question that underlay many of our discussions; namely, to what extent must we be driven by the imperatives of the globalized marketplace, and to what extent can we make choices about the sort of society we wish to construct and sustain: p. 120

. On the one hand we have a supply of skilled people who are un- or under-employed, and on the other hand we have a range of serious social problems that need to be addressed. It should be possible to devise innovative ways to bring together that supply and that demand: p. 84

On Dialogue

Playing down conflicts can blind us to important perspectives and be self-defeating. We talk with like-minded people too much, and tend to underplay the extent to which knowledge is contested. Instead, we need to bring the conflict in our perspectives to the fore, and use that as a basis for learning.

We need to stop pretending that the other side does not exist, is wrong, or does not matter. We need to stop viewing debates and conflict from a technical perspective, to stop regarding them as error, the error of others who disagree with us.... To develop effective learning organizations, and learning societies, we need to focus on conflict, not tiptoe around it. We need to set up mechanisms for dialogue and negotiation that use conflict as an essential stage in the building of that consensus. p. 87

On Social Cohesion

.. What became clear to us, out of the scenarios, is that sustaining social cohesion is going to be a dominant concern in a world of rapid change. Otherwise that world will fragment and fall apart. Not only will Canada become the Titanic, the world will become the Titanic.

Social cohesion involves building shared values and communities of interpretation, reducing disparities in wealth and income, and generally enabling people to have a sense that they are engaged in a common enterprise, facing shared challenges, and that they are members of the same community. p. 78

In this view, we need to place greater value on rebuilding our social infrastructure, to emphasize the importance of investing in our families and our neighbourhoods, rather than simply investing in producing more goods and services. Rebuilding our social infrastructure should be a primary, not a derivative, goal. p. 46

> Like other forms of capital, social capital is productive, making possible the achievement of certain ends that would not be attainable in its absence.... For example, a group whose members manifest trustworthiness and place extensive trust in one another will be able to accomplish much more than a comparable group lacking that trustworthiness and trust.... In a farming community... where one farmer got his hay baled by another and where farm tools are extensively borrowed and lent, the social capital allows each farmer to get his work done with less physical capital in the form of tools and equipment.[74] p. 113

Even more striking, Putnam and his colleagues also found that social capital was the only reliable predictor of economic success:

> ... if we draw a map of Italy in 1993 according to wealth, we will find that communities with many choral societies are also more advanced economically. I originally thought that these fortunate communities had more choral societies because they were wealthy. After all, I thought, poor peasants don't have time or energy to spend singing. But if we look closely at the historical record, it becomes clear that I had it exactly backwards. Communities don't have choral societies because they are wealthy; they are wealthy because they have choral societies – or more precisely, the traditions of engagement, trust and reciprocity that choral societies symbolize. p. 114

Schultze argued that the major economic and social institutions of society cannot be made to work effectively simply through the laws, regulations, social policies and monetary incentives that govern them. Rather, to work, they require that the citizens of a society hold, and transmit from generation to generation, an appropriate set of supportive values and attitudes. Schultze cited a wide range of examples to illustrate his thesis:

- *The free enterprise system.* A web of implicit contracts, informal understandings, and ideas of fairness underpins the modern free enterprise system, a set of relationships which cannot practically be governed by explicit legal contracts..
- *Tax collection.* Revenue collection from an income tax system cannot be enforced by audits and penalties alone. Were taxpayers' decisions about whether or not to cheat to be based solely on a calculation of the likelihood of being caught, the system would not work, except perhaps with a huge enforcement mechanism that would violate other important social standards.
- *Income support systems.* .. The existence of individual values that give a significant weight to the virtues of self-support and to the long-term future is probably necessary to underpin a technically well-designed welfare or unemployment insurance system.
- *The criminal justice system.* .... Where impulsiveness and aggression are the norm, and when individuals place very low values on future benefits and costs, then no system of criminal penalties and law enforcement that is consistent with a civilized society can successfully deter a large volume of criminal activity. p. 122

. Max Weber, one of the early sociological critics of modernity, attacked what he called the process of rationalization: the tendency of "instrumental reason" to dominate all forms of modern life, ultimately creating, he believed, an "iron cage" civilization stuffed with "heartless experts" and "spineless pleasure seekers." p. 236

book along, I could at least bring some of its better quotes.

I also thought long and hard about my camping gear, since a bivy sack and a tarp weren't going to cut it in the frigid weather. I had a really good quality, 3-season tent, but it was heavy. And I was also concerned about the security of my bike. So I reasoned that if I used the bike as part of a tent frame – which I would design – then I'd be ahead on both counts. I'd have a lighter tent, as well as fewer worries about the bike wandering off.

So I spent a solid month on Mom's sewing machine. Most of the material was waterproof, but there was breathable material up top, covered by a rain fly. It wasn't quite breathable enough though, as I later found out from the constant battle with condensation and dripping. However, it was still a huge improvement over the tarp and bivy sack.

Another improvement was a set of bolt-on handlebar extensions. This not only allowed me to hunch down out of the wind, but it also allowed the weight of my upper body to rest on my forearms, and not on my wrists. So, drudgery? Yup, still there. But pain, not quite so much.

Due to the fact that my yearly fire tower stints were all plunked right in the middle of prime cycling season (May to September), I had very short windows of opportunity when I could continue the trek eastward. So it was mid-April when I loaded up the rusty Nissan with the bike and camping gear, and headed back to Regina. There, I found an RV storage yard on the outskirts of the city, where the Nissan was allotted a patch of ground, and the Norco once again hit the asphalt.

It was probably on the first or second day when I noticed a small

figure a mile or two ahead. After a while, I had gained on it enough to see that it was another cyclist. Not too much longer, and I was able to pull up alongside. And then I noticed why I had gained distance so easily. The fellow was riding an old mountain bike with a chain that squeaked. And he was a decade or two older and a few pounds heavier than me. He had been cycling from BC and was on his way to Ontario, where his parents had recently died. He barely had a few nickels to rub together, and this was supposedly cheaper than taking the Greyhound. But he was stoic, and he rejoiced in the fact that the prevailing winds were from the west.

He was subsisting to a certain extent on charity, but he obviously wasn't a con-artist. I had run across a few of those, and they're very averse to any sort of exertion...especially when nobody's watching. So I gave him a few bucks, wished him luck, and pedaled on ahead.

Maybe it was Wolseley. Maybe it was Moosomin. All I remember is that there was a campsite just off the highway, by a dip in the road. Maybe there was a culvert. Maybe a small bridge. But a small stream, which normally would have been just an indentation in the geography surrounded by a few trees, now looked more like a lake. The campsite was closed, and a few of the sites were already under water, but I snuck in anyway, and found a higher area to pitch my tent.

It got progressively colder the next day, and snow started to fall. By evening, it was apparent that if I chose to camp out (even with a 3-season bag) I'd be shivering most of the night. And the following morning, with an icy road shoulder, I wouldn’t have gone more than ten yards without crashing. So I found a motel by the highway, and hauled my bike into the room. And the next few days I found myself propped up in bed watching much more of the Weather Network than I ever had previously or since.

Finally, the weather broke, the ice on the shoulder melted, and I ventured out again. I passed a spot where a semi-truck and trailer lay stranded in the ditch, and I later found out that a young boy had been trapped under the truck for several hours. He was trying to help another vehicle out of the ditch, when the truck plowed into him, dragging him forward into a potentially icy grave. But he survived.

Somewhere west of Brandon, I pulled into a roadside diner to load up on fats and carbs. The owner asked me what I was doing, and so I gave her one of the photocopied sheets with the quotes from *Changing Maps* on it. She plied me with a few more questions, and then asked if I had contacted the media at all. I replied "no", and thought nothing more of it.

But soon after I got on the road again, a small car pulled over on to the shoulder, just ahead of me. It was decked out in media colours, and one of the occupants hopped out, flagged me down, and asked if we could chat.

I don't remember what the questions were, and once again, I regretted not having the book along with me (but apparently not enough, since I never brought it along on future legs of the journey, either).

Later that day, I pulled into Brandon and stayed at a Youth Hostel (another real one). And the following morning, I stopped in at CKX-TV, where they kindly gave me a videotape of the interview (which, in later years, I somehow managed to tape over with re-runs of *The Simpsons*).

Then, it was on to Portage La Prairie, where snow in the ditches gave way to standing water in the ditches, and where I started to hear

about the historic flooding that was soon to hit southern Manitoba.[8] I got a shot of my bike leaning against a veritable mountain of snow in the parking lot of the local big-box store, and then I retired to a rather crusty room in an old hotel in the middle of town.

It was somewhere between Portage and Winnipeg that I started getting sharp pains shooting up my left leg. I had no idea what it was, but I soon found out that it was related to the tucked-in position that the handlebar extensions allowed me to use. If I pedaled with a more upright stance, with my hands gripping the top of the handlebar, the pain mostly went away. So I went back to sore wrists and brick-like aerodynamics.

The streets of Winnipeg were wet and mucky. But thanks to Duff's Ditch,[9] I wasn't waist deep in water.

Once again, I found a youth hostel. Clean, friendly, and a lot warmer than a tent. But instead of just an overnighter, I decided to stay a few days, since I wanted to relax and check out Winnipeg. But above all, I wanted to hang out at the public library in order to find out why my leg was hurting so much.

And find out, I did. I had developed a case of sciatica.

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[8] It was the worst flooding that the Red River had seen since 1826. In Canada alone, it spread over nearly 100 square miles of formerly dry land, and it became known as the "Red Sea".

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[9] The Red River Floodway, built in 1968 and capable of diverting 2,550 cubic metres of water per second around the city instead of through it. See: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Red_River_Floodway

I also found something else: books on bicycles that mentioned a contraption called a recumbent, where the rider sits back in a relaxed position, in what looks like a lawn chair on wheels. Even just gazing at images of these folks sprawled out in such a restful fashion put me in a better mood. I knew that even if I'd be out the next morning on the torture device, come next fall, I'd have a smile on my face, and I'd be pedaling a “bent”.

I headed east again. The typical prairie scenery ended, and I was into rolling hills and pine forests. And for the first time since central Saskatchewan, I was back into the tenting mode. The days weren't warm, but at least I wasn't battling the bitter cold any more.

I was somewhat despondent. The threat of a sciatica flare-up was always there, and the road was more lonely. There were no longer any of the little prairie towns every fifteen kilometres to break the monotony, and I started to feel unsure of the reasons why I was doing what I was doing. That night, struggling with the paltry glow of a candle lantern, I wrote a letter to Peter Gzowski's *Morningside*, asking if they would consider letting Canadians know what I was doing and why. I didn’t hear anything back, so maybe I should’ve just saved the ink – or written to my contact at CBC Edmonton – duh!

From the sandy soil and the pines of eastern Manitoba, I came to the Precambrian Shield of Ontario, with its bare rocks and its small, picturesque lakes. I also came to fear its roads. Whereas before, I at least had either a full gravel shoulder or the knowledge that a vehicle coming up behind me had two lanes to manoeuvre in, I was now in the land of practically no shoulder and single lane traffic. If there was a big truck coming up behind me, and if there was another coming in the opposite direction, I had a bit of praying to do. Usually, they had enough sense to slow down a bit, but whenever any of them came up behind me, I kept one wary eye on my rear view mirror and another on potential escape routes into the ditch.

Kenora. Dryden. Now, I only have vague memories of rocky landscapes filled with lakes. But at Ignace, Ontario, I recall that there was forest fire tower that had been fixed up for visitors. It was still closed for the off-season, but within spitting distance there was

a secluded patch of trees where I set up for the night. It was still cool, however, and vestiges of snow and sloppy ice lay about. So I yearned for the warmth of the following day.

In the morning, I loaded up on greasy protein and headed out. It was a glorious day. Not too cool and not too warm. But it was about 60 kilometres to the next dot on the map (English River). So along with the hefty breakfast and the small stash of granola I had in the panniers, I needed to make good time.

I got there around noon, but I found out that the dot on the map signified little more than a seasonal motel...which hadn't opened yet. And the next dot on the map was another 40 or 50 kilometres away. And I was ravenous.

But there was a vehicle in the parking lot. And it belonged to a guy who just happened to be cleaning the place up in preparation for the summer season. Luckily, he took pity on me, and guided me over to the kitchen. Canned soup and bologna sandwiches had never tasted so good, and once again, I felt as though I was dining in the Waldorf Astoria.

The following morning was even warmer than the day before, and I knew I was on the home stretch. I would be in Thunder Bay that afternoon, and since it was situated on Lake Superior, I also knew that there would be more down-hill coasting than up-hill grinds.

It was the end of another leg of the journey. When I arrived, I once again dismantled the bike, wrapped it up snugly in cardboard and packing tape, and hopped on the next bus west. It was time to make a bit more cash on one of the towers.

sault ste marie to ottawa (september 1997)

The following September, I bought a shiny new recumbent. It was a few pounds heavier than the old wedgie,[10] but the reclining

[10] …as bent riders snidely refer to normal bikes, referring to the same bullying tactic that I mentioned back in chapter i (in this case, when a bicycle seat is trying to wedge itself between the victim's bum cheeks).

position brought with it significantly better aerodynamics. In fact, the only reason you don't see such machines in the Tour de France is that back in 1934, wedgie manufacturers pressured the Union Cycliste Internationale to outlaw them.[11] However, today all of the world speed records are dominated by riders using recumbents.

I had to modify the tent I designed, so it would attach to the new bike, but the panniers and everything else from the old bike fitted just fine. And sciatica was no longer a threat. Sore wrists were gone. My aching neck no longer ached. And the inflamed area that wedgies were famous for inflaming, now felt perfectly normal. My daily tours would no longer be synonymous with drudgery and pain.

So I tossed the bike in the back of the Nissan, and headed east again. But I didn't stop at Thunder Bay. I had been following a Canadian bike touring manual, and it specifically warned against anyone trying to tour across the north shore of Lake Superior. Traffic was simply too heavy and the road was too narrow. So I went straight through to Sault Ste Marie, where I paid for a spot to park the truck for a few weeks.

Unlike the first leg, when I didn't get away until October, and unlike the second leg, when I had to battle an April full of snow and ice, I was now in a balmy September. The leaves were turning colour and there wasn't a cloud in the sky. I now also had the occasional luxury of choosing alternate routes. Upon reaching a dot on the map called Echo Bay, I had the choice of taking the busy Trans Canada or the secondary highway known as 638. I chose the latter, even though it didn't look as straight on the map. Nor was it. A lot of meanders, and a ton of little up-hill grinds and down-hill dashes.

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[11] From Wikipedia's entry on the recumbent bicycle: "On 7 July 1933, at a Paris velodrome, Faure rode a modified Vélo-Velocar [ie, recumbent] 45.055 km in one hour, beating an almost 20-year-old hour record…" And “On 1 April 1934, the UCI published a new definition of a racing bicycle that specified how high the bottom bracket could be above the ground, how far it could be in front of the seat and how close it could be to the front wheel.”…effectively banning recumbents.

As the sun started to drop, I noticed a small cemetery on the side of the road. And being that it was a fairly peaceful road and an even more peaceful looking cemetery, I went through the gate and sat on a bench. And it occurred to me that this would be an ideal place to set up the tent. I'd wait until dusk, and I'd pitch the tent just behind a few trees in the corner. Nobody would be the wiser. No campfire. No garbage. Nothing left behind except a few bent blades of grass. And the peace of the dead to keep me company.

The next day was glorious. Gently rolling hills through small farms and woodlots filled with fall colours. Traffic was minimal to non-existent.

But then the road met up with the Trans Canada again. Heavier traffic, but at least the shoulder was more substantial than it had been in western Ontario. And since there were many more small towns along the route, the speed limits were often reduced. There was also more variety to meet the eye: small shops, cafe's, pedestrians, and occasionally the Mississagi River just a stone's throw from the shoulder.

I remember later that day, I camped by some rapids. Was it the so-called Mississagi Falls? A quarter-century has elapsed, and as I scroll along the route with a satellite view (courtesy of Google Maps), some things make sense. Some things become more confusing. And some things will always be a blank. So, one day in the not-too-distant future, I'll have to cycle the whole route again in order to rekindle a few lost memories…and, of course, make an attempt to give a copy of *Changing Maps* to whoever happens to be in 24 Sussex Drive at the time.

After a night in Espanola (after having asked someone if $10 would suffice for pitching my tent on their land), I headed south toward Manitoulin Island. But the sky got darker and darker until there was a constant rain. A rolling landscape, which would have been beautiful on a better day, now had the greyness of drudgery. A long-dead raccoon blended in with the gravelly

shoulder. And somewhere along the way, I caught a cold.

But later in the day, the sun broke through and it started to warm my bones and my spirit. The island was now beautiful...even if it did produce another dead racoon. And that evening, I found another cemetery.

The following day was perfect. I pedalled up over the highest point of land, and then down toward the ferry that would take me across the Great Lake and on to the Bruce Peninsula.

On the boat, I met an older couple who took an interest in my journey. The fellow had written a book on some aspect of sustainability, so he promised to mail me a copy when he got home. Which he did. And – ungrateful wretch that I am – I never wrote back to thank him. On top of that, I offloaded the book on my next foray to the used book store, so I don't even remember his name...or precisely what he wrote about.

South of Tobermory, I spent the night in a pine forest, listening to distant thunder. And when the violent winds and rain came through, I thanked providence that pine trees (as opposed to spruce) were known for their deep taproots.

In Meaford, I found a large, gated cemetery with opening and closing times posted on the gate. There were a few folks wandering around, so, until the arrival of dusk, I pushed the bike around and looked at old gravestones. And then I found a remote corner in amongst the trees.

From Meaford to Collingwood, I took the only true bike trail (an

old rail bed) that I happened upon during the long journey. A large part of it was just a cinder track, so I was going a bit slower than I would have been out on the road. But the surrounding trees formed a quiet, comfortable cocoon, and it turned out to be one of the most pleasant parts of the trip.

Next was Orillia (which I only recall because I was familiar with its most famous son, the humorist Stephen Leacock). And from there eastward, I followed the secondary highways as much as possible.

It was warm in the daytime. Easily warm enough to break a sweat. And I hadn't had a shower in days, so I was quite pungent.

Somewhere between Furnace Falls and Khartum, I came upon an elegant German-style restaurant nestled in a forest (I half-expected to see Hansel and Gretel sampling the building to see if it was made of ginger-bread). Luckily, it was fairly empty, and the hostess, barely concealing a grimace, seated me in a remote corner. I gobbled down a couple of slices of apple pie and ice cream, and then somewhat full, ambled back out to the bike and continued on down the road.

When it was time to bed down for the night, I found a spot in a wooded area, not far off of the road. But before I wriggled into the sleeping bag, I knew that I desperately needed a shower...or a bath...or something. I had two water bottles on the bike. I had to save the larger one for drinking, but the smaller one had about half a litre of water which I could use. So I stripped down and had an abbreviated version of an army shower: one cup of water to get wet, and one cup of water to rinse off the soap. I initially didn't think it was possible, but my scepticism vanished just as surely as the grime. And I slept that night in supreme luxury.

A day or two after that, I hit the back-roads of the Ottawa River valley, where the trees were showing off their finest fall colours. And after a night in a gravel pit somewhere west of Kanata, I spent the morning cycling into the nation’s capital. Sightseeing wasn’t on the agenda, so I merely got myself oriented, and then I spent a night in a cell in the Ottawa Jail.

Really. The youth hostel occupies the imposing old building in which Patrick Whelan was hung in 1869. He was strung up for the only political assassination at the federal level in Canadian history. Seen by many as a scapegoat, his ghost is reputed to haunt the place. However, the only bothersome soul I met there was a drunken Quebecois who occupied the next bunk, and who delighted in loudly muttering the oath "tabarnac" well into the early hours of the morning.

Months before, I met Dr. Keith Martin, the MP for Esquimalt-Jaun de Fuca (Reform Party), primarily due to the fact that his columns in the Victoria Times-Colonist talked about the same democratic deficit that *Changing Maps* did. In one column,[12] he wrote that our system of governance "more closely represents a medieval fiefdom than a democracy" and that "if President Bill Clinton had the power of our prime minister, he would be doing cartwheels down the White House lawn." So, before I headed out to Sault Ste Marie, I gave him a copy of *Changing Maps* and he wished me luck on the journey.

The morning after my stint in jail, I phoned him and updated him on my progress. He congratulated me, but he was unsure as to what advice he could give me. Obviously, the lack of media attention meant that it would be relatively meaningless for me to give a copy of the book to Chretien...or more likely to a bored secretary somewhere in the bowels of the House of Commons. He suggested that I contact Stephan Dion, who at that time, was the Minister for Intergovernmental Affairs. I didn't say anything over the phone, but I was unsure as to how relevant intergovernmental affairs was to matters such as deliberative democracy and social capital. So I never did contact Dion's office.

The fellow I was after was Marcel Massé, one of the contributors to *Changing Maps*, and then the President of the Treasury Board, as well as the Minister responsible for Infrastructure. But although I stopped by his office a couple of times, and his staff tried to be helpful, I never did manage to talk to him.

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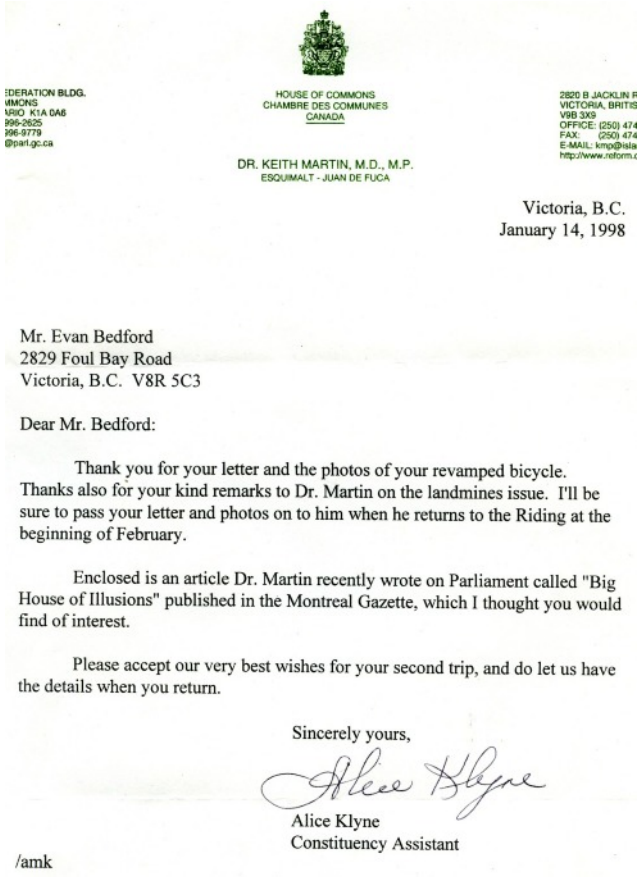
[12] *The House of Illusions,* p.A17 (November 6, 1997)

I also stopped by Steven Rosell's office (the editor and organizing force behind the *Changing Maps* roundtable). He was in the U.S. at the time, but his secretary seemed elated to hear what I had just done (though I wrote a letter to Rosell later on, and didn't hear back).



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Victoria, B.C.
January 14, 1998

Mr. Evan Bedford
2829 Foul Bay Road
Victoria, B.C. V8R 5C3

Dear Mr. Bedford:

Thank you for your letter and the photos of your revamped bicycle. Thanks also for your kind remarks to Dr. Martin on the landmines issue. I'll be sure to pass your letter and photos on to him when he returns to the Riding at the beginning of February.

Enclosed is an article Dr. Martin recently wrote on Parliament called "Big House of Illusions" published in the Montreal Gazette, which I thought you would find of interest.

Please accept our very best wishes for your second trip, and do let us have the details when you return.

Sincerely yours,

Alice Klyne

Alice Klyne
Constituency Assistant

/amk

So I quickly realized that the venture had come to naught. I guess I shouldn't have been surprised. The real key was media coverage, and I had precious little of that. Besides the interview on the highway outside of Brandon, I only had one other brush with the media. It was with a newspaper in Thunder Bay. I just went to the front desk and told them what I was doing and why I thought that some coverage would be great. A writer by the name of Ed interviewed me with enthusiasm, but when I checked back on a subsequent leg of the journey, I found out that he was no longer on staff.

Even the student newspaper back at the U. of A. proved fruitless. Though I had previously written several columns for it when I was in grad school, the editor took one look at my submission and told me that it was "too much like an advertisement." I was livid. My submission was part book review and part travelogue. It was a

testimony to many weeks of shivering and sweat and drudgery and disappointment. To this day, I shake my head at the blindness and indifference. The Globe and Mail allowed me to write nearly ten column-inches praising the book, but The Gateway essentially told me to eff off.

calgary to medicine hat (april 1998)

I decided to give it another go. Not only would I put a bit more effort into getting media coverage, but I would also be able to make up the mileage I had missed from the north shore of Lake Superior.

But first I needed to take another look at the bike. The comfort that the recumbent brought was undeniable, and the third leg to Ottawa was done without a single ache or pain. But it was a heavier bike than the wedgie. So I worked on the only thing that was left: aerodynamics. And I reasoned that instead of bulbous panniers and a mountain of stuff on top of the rear rack, a streamlined container attached to the back of the seat would enable me to slip through the air considerably easier. And the container itself would have some type of message painted on it.

So I went to work with a bunch of 3-ply, 1/8" aircraft quality plywood. Perhaps not as light as carbon fibre or fibreglass, but it was cheap, and I had ample experience working with the stuff. I added in a bottle of carpenter's glue and a fistful of wood screws, and soon came up with an elongated, pyramid that sprouted out from the rear of the seat.

I searched for a message, and I found two of them in the Globe and Mail. One was from the lead editorial of June 28th, 1997. And the other was from an article about the growing tendency toward autocracy[13] by William Thorsell, who at the time was the editor in chief of the newspaper.

[13] Autocracy in Action. Globe and Mail, September 27, 1997. p.D9

Autocracy in government. That was in the good ol' days, when a prime minister could wade into a crowd of protesters and attempt to strangle one of them.[14] A few years later, we had an odd robotic character who looked like something out of a 1950's Brylcreem commercial. He never would have strangled a hamster, let alone a person. But in his own way, he was very much the autocrat. In fact, if you google Stephen Harper and "control freak", you get almost 10,000 hits.

Now we have a young hipster who wades into a crowd of protesters, not to strangle one of them, but to get a few selfies taken. (Of course the crowd would be protesting some sort of social inequity; not the hipster's broken promise on electoral reform.) But I digress…

So I loaded everything up and started out again...but this time from Calgary. I made a stop at the Calgary Herald, hoping for a bit of coverage. But after waiting for about a half hour in the lobby, I began to get itchy for the open road, and I left.

The trip was much like the third leg, but perhaps even a bit more sedate and comfortable. I had rigged up a small shortwave radio on the handlebar, so I could listen to the Beeb, Radio Canada and Voice

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[14] Chretien was almost poetic in his defense of his actions: "some people came my way... and I had to go, so if you're in my way...." From: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shawinigan_Handshake

of America as I pedalled along. This greatly alleviated the boredom during those stretches when the local programming was confined to country music, sports and mattress commercials.

A kind soul in Bassano let me set up the tent in his backyard. Or was it Brooks?

At a roadside restaurant just outside of Walsh, a rancher walked in and asked who had the weird looking bike outside. I hesitantly raised my hand, but he didn't say anything in response. And I couldn't figure out whether he was pissed off at the quotes on the box, or whether he was just mystified.

The rest of the trip was just a blur of endless miles of road shoulder and prairie grass. I camped under a bridge deck one night, and in a pasture next to a barbed wire fence the next (there didn't seem to be any cemeteries between Calgary and Moose Jaw). I took a photo of a 215 foot high steel teepee outside of Medicine Hat, and I took another of a 32 foot high fiberglass moose outside of Moose Jaw.[15]

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[15] …and during previous legs of the journey, a sasquatch smoking a cigar, a spider in a top hat, and Perry Mason on the side of a barn.

And then I got dispirited. I was getting nowhere. So I found another cardboard box and I packed up the bike and headed home.

That summer on the tower, I wondered what I could do next to promote the book. And the thought occurred to me that if I did something crazy enough, the media would have no choice but to talk about it. Or at least mention the title a few times.

The tower was on a high point of land. All the better to see smokes pop up. But also on this high point of land were a number of cell towers. There were perhaps a half dozen of them around, with the nearest less than a 100 metres away. They were about the same height as my tower, so they made excellent targets. And I had Dad's old hunting rifle and scope.

I wouldn't even have to hit one. I'd just have to threaten to hit

one. Or I could just take off the corner of one of the parabolic dishes to show that I had the capacity to do some serious damage. I could bring a week's worth of food and water up into the cupola (or a month's), and I could easily jam the trap door shut. Feces and urine could just be thrown out a leeward window. The only way the law could stop me would be to either start firing up through the heavy plywood floor or to lob a few concussion grenades – neither a likely prospect against someone who wasn't threatening life or limb.

All I'd have to do would be to call up the local media and let them know what was going on. They'd be on it in a flash. I'd let them know that unless a copy of *Changing Maps* was delivered to Jean Chretien, I'd start doing some real damage. Or I could demand that a parliamentary committee be formed to study the recommendations of the book.

Of course, the real purpose would be to bring the themes of the book to wider audience. To let Jane and Joe six-pack know that they had the potential to get involved in the decision-making that affected their lives. And that they had a civic duty to be involved not only in the governance process, but also in the voluntary organizations that made society livable. And some idiot with a gun on top of a tower might be more effective for that than any number of parliamentary committees.

I had most of the summer to think about it. But when the end of the season came, I chickened out. What was I scared of? I suppose I was scared of losing whatever comfortable existence I had. But more than that, I was scared of the reactions of friends and family. They wouldn't be angry; they'd just be "worried sick" (one of Mom's favourite phrases).

That winter, I made up more leaflets with the book quotes on them. I put studded tires on the recumbent bike, and I pedaled around the U. of A. campus, handing them out. I pedaled up from behind, and when I was even with someone, I held out a leaflet and with a bit of exaggerated irony asked, "Can I give you some

propaganda?" Nobody ever declined, since they didn't have time to formulate some type of refusal in advance. But neither was I an extroverted salesman, so I never really got into any conversations with the students…except for a First Nations guy who stated that sustainability would only manifest itself when all of us immigrants went back to where we came from.

Then I came up with the idea to create a book contest. I offered up $1,000 to anyone who could come up with the best explanation for why any particular Canadian book was "important" for the new millennium. I formulated some criteria for judging, and I contacted the Alberta Writers' Guild, the Edmonton Public Library, and the Books columnist for the Edmonton Journal. There was a surprising amount of interest – though not from the bigger book stores in the city. The typical store manager would express mild curiosity and tentatively offer to help out...but then silence would ensue.

It might have been the complexity of the contest. I wanted readers to justify their choice of book based on a range of criteria, ranging from "...subject matter, scope and intrinsic or practical importance, to whether a book is descriptive or prescriptive."[16] It all made sense to me, but the average reader might not have had the time to dissect a favourite book in such a way. And some potential judges might have simply wanted to skim a few glowing paragraphs from each submission, in order to pick out the catchiest prose.

Of course, the real reason for the contest was that I wanted to submit my nomination for *Changing Maps.* I had thought long and hard about why it had the potential to change the world, and from that, I formulated the criteria for the contest judging. Was that cheating? Was I giving my nomination an unfair chance at winning? Perhaps. But the criteria were general in nature. And I wouldn't have been doing the judging. A book by Marshall McLuhan or David Suzuki might have won the contest just as easily

Due to lack of public interest, the contest died. In fact, I can't

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[16] Gordon Morash, *Books & Authors* columnist for the Edmonton Journal. March 28th, 1999. p. F7

even remember if it ever officially started. The now defunct Orlando Books (a small store catering to feminist and lesbian readers) carried brochures for a while, but that was it. And now all I have to remember it by are a couple of yellowing newspaper cuttings and a mug. Even the contest rules are lost in the mists of time (although they may be sitting in one of the obsolete hard drives that I occasionally toss into a box in our storage room).

So it became yet another dead end.

The list to end all lists

Edmontonian serves up book plan of the century

Edmonton Journal
Sunday March 28, 1999 P. F7

Gordon Morash

Books

Plans are afoot for an Edmonton-conceived Canadian book list for the millennium involving the Writers Guild of Alberta, the Alberta Book Publishers Association, and the Edmonton Public Library.

The push that shoved the project into being is a self-described "avid bibliophile with too much time on his hands" named Evan Bedford who met with representatives from the three literary organizations to gauge their interest and support.

Bedford sees the list providing more than entertainment for the reading masses. Instead, he sees books of high impact having a problem-solving component that would make them useful physical and emotional tools for survival from one century to the next.

"As we move from one millennium to the next, Canadians have the perfect symbolic opportunity to assess both their position in history and their outlook for the future," says Bedford, in detailing his group's search for what he calls "superlatives."

"What has been the most important book or books to come out of Canada in the late 20th century? We tentatively chose 1967 as the date because we thought it was a nice patriotic number."

Bedford's project is in its early infancy, yet he has put his money where his bookshelf is by providing $1,000 for a seed fund.

He leaves next month for his annual six-month stint manning a forest fire look-out tower on the outskirts of Whitecourt. "So I have plenty of time to read," he says.

When he returns to Edmonton in September, Bedford expects the readers to have had enough advance notice to have thought through some titles for nomination. Writers Guild of Alberta executive director Miki Andrejevic has offered to post nominations on the WGA's Web site, but is wary of taking titles en masse until Bedford's return.

The criteria discussed by organizers address both fiction and non-fiction and run the gamut from subject matter, scope and intrinsic or practical importance, to whether a book is descriptive or prescriptive.

"Description is great, but prescription is critical if our children are to make it to the distant decades of the 21st century."

Bedford admits that the list might not emerge until after the turn of the year. But then, for many, 2000, is not the leap into the new millennium, 2001 is.

"I simply thought this could be an important civic pursuit," he says.

"I thought, initially, it could be just Edmonton, but if other cities thought the idea was good, they could appropriate parts of the concept."

Edmonton Journal
Feb 13, 2000

Gordon Morash

BOOKS

Help compile a list of must-have books

About a year ago, Evan Bedford, a self-confessed "avid bibliophile with too much time on my hands" caught a dose of millennium-itis and hatched a plan to construct a made-in-Edmonton list of essential and life-changing books.

Bedford called it The Millennium Book Challenge, but since that time, the project has rested largely in limbo, despite support from the Writers Guild of Alberta, the Alberta Book Publishers Association and the Edmonton Public Library.

At the time, Bedford, who spends six-month periods manning a forest fire lookout tower on the outskirts of Whitecourt, admitted that his being out of town while trying to co-ordinate an Edmonton project was not in anyone's interest.

Even the WGA, which offered to post book titles on its Web site, was leery of too much participation until his return. Plus, says Bedford, the organization wanted to apply an "old elitist judging paradigm" for what he sees as anything but a program requiring standard judging.

The idea behind the original list was to highlight what Bedford described as "important" fiction and non-fiction — those works possessing a problem-solving component that could enable them to be used as physical and emotional tools for survival from one century to the next.

He tapped six areas of concern as criteria for readers' selections, including the obvious one covering literary quality. However, he also examined scope of the writing, description versus prescription, and intrinsic or practical importance.

Recently, a coffee mug bearing the words "The People's Book Contest" appeared on my desk with a letter of explanation from Bedford. This time around, Orlando Books has offered to handle what Bedford calls "the physical logistics" (displaying the coffee mugs and information), a Web site is in place for entries and title suggestions (**http://clubweb.interbaun.com/quixotic**), and the EPL stands ready to promote the contest.

And this time around, the millennial aspect of the list has been downplayed in favour of collecting English-language titles published during or after 1967, Canada's centennial year, and having readers propose titles or support titles already nominated.

"I didn't want to just limit it to a list that people would have to wait until the next millennium to appreciate," said Bedford. "I just thought that I could better encourage copycats in other communities if they didn't become intimidated by the big 2000 number. For instance, if a non-profit group in Iowa wants to copy aspects of the contest in the year 2003, I wouldn't want to put them off."

The first title has hit the Web site, in what has now transformed into a contest, complete with the regular raft of prizes ranging from coffee mugs to engraved watches to cash. In the kitty is $2,000, half of it provided by Bedford himself.

The list will appear after the 100th nomination arrives, and the volunteer judges are in place to debate the strengths and weaknesses of the books.

Information sheets are available at Orlando Books and the Edmonton Public Library. But if you want a true sense of the rules, hit the Web site.

No shortage of dead ends. However, I can derive a bit of comfort from the Irish author, Samuel Beckett:

Ever tried. Ever failed.
No matter.
Try again. Fail again.
Fail better.

Maybe that's why I've written this dumb book. Maybe that's why I'm scouring the internet for information on velomobiles.[17] Maybe that's why I'm using Google Earth to see if the highway along Lake Superior looks any safer than it was deemed to be a few decades ago.[18]

All in all, it looks like 2024 (when I retire) will be a go. I'm 62 years old now, but I'm still healthy. One knee sometimes lets me know that I'm 62 years old, but only when I'm sitting still.

And most importantly, when I mentioned this to my wife, she didn't have a fit. That's a very good sign.

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[17] A recumbent that's fully enclosed in an aerodynamic shroud (usually made from some combination of carbon fibre and/or fibreglass and/or kevlar). The aerodynamics are so good (drag coefficient of 0.1), that they make the revolutionary Mercedes EQS (with a drag coefficient of 0.2) look like a big ol' brick.

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[18] Hmm. Much of it looks to be not too bad. Google Street View often shows stretches where the paved shoulder is likely less than a metre wide. However, there is invariably a continuation of the shoulder in gravel for another two metres or so right next to it (therefore, at least somewhat safer looking than some of the stretches I recall between Kenora and Thunder Bay).

chapter xviii: a woman

Part way through my second year of civil engineering, I applied for a summer job at the County. I would be surveying drainage ditches and stretching pneumatic rubber tubes across gravel roads in order to count traffic volumes. It would involve lots of outdoor work and a four day work-week…and decent pay. In other words, something close to paradise.

So one fine morning, I showed up at a rather drab looking building, where my new boss ushered me in. He found some time consuming work for me and the other tech student to do, and then he apologized. He had to take off for an hour or two to attend a funeral. At the time, I had no inkling that it was the funeral of a fellow whose face I would get to know quite well. For within a couple of years, I would marry his widow.

I may have noticed her once or twice during that first month, but she likely didn't notice me. As she told me later, her mind was somewhat detached from her surroundings after the untimely death. Plus, it was a big office with lots of people, and I was usually out slogging through ditches.

But at some point, I found myself sitting next to her in the coffee room, talking about lawn mowers. And she mentioned that her husband had recently died and that she wasn't very mechanically inclined and that she could probably use a man around the house.

Hmm. A few months later, I asked her out. But not in person. I e-mailed her.

Hmm. Maybe if the internet hadn't been invented, I might still be single.

After a few dates, I found out that one of her nephews and one of my nephews were best friends. A hundred miles to the south. In a city of a million people. Strange.

A few months later, at a church camp on the shore of an idyllic

lake, we wandered into one of the cabins,[1] where she and her daughter were to stay the night. Before I left to go back to my tent, I noticed the profusion of young signatures scrawled on the ceiling and the roof joists. And there, in close proximity, was "Evan was Here" and "DENISE WUZ HERE".

Years later, she told me that that particular weekend on the lake was the turning point. She knew, even before we headed out there, that by the end of those couple of days, it would be evident whether or not we were compatible.

Our parents also bonded. Both couples were church-goers, extroverted and quick to share a story and a laugh.

But in many ways, Denise and I are polar opposites. I'm an introvert, who didn't particularly mind being totally isolated for months at a time on the towers. Denise, on the other hand, would find tower life to be the equivalent of one of Dante's circles of Hell.

Dante also wrote about the spheres of Heaven. For me, one of them must surely involve a pint of Guinness, while getting immersed in the 500-year-old Paston family letters. Denise would prefer the sphere which includes a glass of wine and a TV set tuned to either *Dr. Pimple Popper* or *The Bachelor*.

Dante's third masterpiece takes place on Mount Purgatory, where I'd likely wind up on one of the lower terraces (my first instinct is to always think of myself). Denise meanwhile would already be on the summit (her thoughts and actions invariably seem to involve the welfare of others).

But even given all those differences, I note that we've been married for more than fifteen years, and I don't recall a single incident where either of us have raised our voice at the other. So I suppose we're doing something right.

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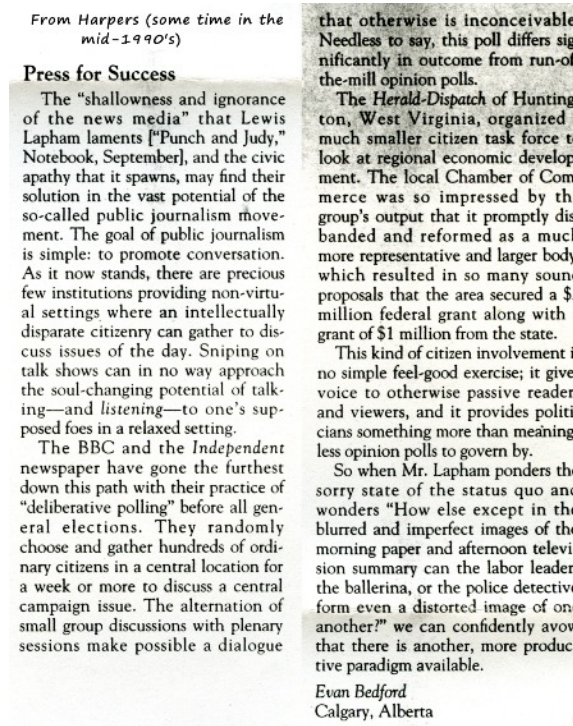
[1] It might have even been the same cabin in which, forty years earlier, Dean and I and a bunch of other kids had horse-played around in. The same cabin in which Dean had tormented a bed-wetter so much that he slipped away at night and tried to hitch-hike back to the city.

chapter xix: newspaper columns

I've been writing submissions to "Letters to the Editor" for many years. The earliest one I recall was in the early 1980's, when Timothy Leary came to Calgary on a speaking tour. Some smart-ass columnist put him down, so I was obliged to defend him. I signed my name as Herb Spliff, and the obvious reference to cannabis must have gone over the editor's head, since the letter got printed.

I found that it was considerably more difficult to get letters printed in national publications (because there's a lot more competition, and the editors have the luxury of rejecting mediocre thoughts, mediocre prose and mediocre subject matter). But occasionally, I was able to get a letter into the Globe and Mail. And once – on the subject of deliberative democracy of course – I managed to get a letter printed in the very prestigious Harper's.



From Harpers (some time in the mid-1990's)

Press for Success

The "shallowness and ignorance of the news media" that Lewis Lapham laments ["Punch and Judy," Notebook, September], and the civic apathy that it spawns, may find their solution in the vast potential of the so-called public journalism movement. The goal of public journalism is simple: to promote conversation. As it now stands, there are precious few institutions providing non-virtual settings where an intellectually disparate citizenry can gather to discuss issues of the day. Sniping on talk shows can in no way approach the soul-changing potential of talking—and *listening*—to one's supposed foes in a relaxed setting.

The BBC and the *Independent* newspaper have gone the furthest down this path with their practice of "deliberative polling" before all general elections. They randomly choose and gather hundreds of ordinary citizens in a central location for a week or more to discuss a central campaign issue. The alternation of small group discussions with plenary sessions make possible a dialogue that otherwise is inconceivable. Needless to say, this poll differs significantly in outcome from run-of-the-mill opinion polls.

The *Herald-Dispatch* of Huntington, West Virginia, organized a much smaller citizen task force to look at regional economic development. The local Chamber of Commerce was so impressed by the group's output that it promptly disbanded and reformed as a much more representative and larger body, which resulted in so many sound proposals that the area secured a $3 million federal grant along with a grant of $1 million from the state.

This kind of citizen involvement is no simple feel-good exercise; it gives voice to otherwise passive readers and viewers, and it provides politicians something more than meaningless opinion polls to govern by.

So when Mr. Lapham ponders the sorry state of the status quo and wonders "How else except in the blurred and imperfect images of the morning paper and afternoon television summary can the labor leader, the ballerina, or the police detective form even a distorted image of one another?" we can confidently avow that there is another, more productive paradigm available.

Evan Bedford
Calgary, Alberta

Red Deer has a daily newspaper. But unlike the Globe and Mail or Harper's, it doesn't have the luxury of being able to choose between a submission from a learned academic and one from an eloquent Member of Parliament. So, unless something is racist or homophobic or it otherwise crosses the boundary of civilized discourse, it gets transformed into ink on the page. Whether it's a public thank-you for a returned wallet, or

another rant about climate change from Mr. Bedford, it seems to be good enough.

I suppose it *was* good enough, since at some point, I received a request to write a regular column on the environment. The payment was purely nominal (if I added up the hours taken to write an average column, the compensation would've been about $5/hour). But the subject matter (mainly climate change and peak oil) was important, and it was good practice for me. Plus, it gave me a bit of notoriety in what was – and is – likely the Hummer capital of the world.

Climate change, to many in central Alberta, is an inconvenient topic. And it was especially inconvenient to some of the other local columnists who delighted in mentioning that (for example) CO2 is only present in the atmosphere at a concentration of 0.04%. Or that it is something that plants love. Or that it is something that columnists exhale with every breath.

I had many adversaries. There was Mr. Anti-Government, Ms. Tar Sands, Mr. Sports, Mr. Oil and Gas CEO, Mr. Heartland Institute, and Ms. Plagiarist. They either had regular columns or occasional guest columns or syndicated columns that went across Canada. And all of them wrote disparaging things about either climate science or alternative energy.

It was easy demolishing their arguments. When you have 197 years of science[1] at your disposal, you have a substantial advantage over those who are forced to scour the internet for alternative facts that are nestled in armchair theories which might have some surface veneer of logic.

But when you demolish an argument, there are different ways to do it. You can do it in an abrasive way, or you can do it in a manner that simply points out facts. And the object should be to generate light; not heat.

However, sarcasm is fun. And often funny. After all, Churchill

[1] It all started in 1824, when Joseph Fourier presented his essay on the greenhouse effect to the Academie Royale des Sciences in Paris.

used it to great effect.

After the better part of a decade, my column was cancelled in 2016. The explanation was that “Like all newspapers right now, we are having to re-evaluate everything we are doing, including looking at all of our columnists and contributors and how they fit with what we do.” No other reason or clarification was given.

The cancellation certainly wasn’t due to the extravagant payments, since I immediately wrote back, offering to forego the generous sums. (See how easy it is to slip into sarcasm?)

I heard nothing back, so I was left to ponder the reason for the cancellation. Was it because of the inconvenient subject matter of the columns? Or was it because I obviously enjoyed ripping bogus arguments to shreds? Who knows? I’m not clairvoyant, and I’m certainly not the most objective person to try and figure out what was wrong with my columns.

Many years ago, when I wrote for the university newspaper, the editors made their policy known on the Letters page. In addition to the now-ubiquitous stipulation that hate speech would not be tolerated, they also banned “sarcasm”. I kid you not.

At the time, my thoughts immediately went to the Monty Python sketch about the Piranha Brothers:

> Vercotti (former Mafia thug): …Well, I was terrified. Everyone was terrified of Doug. I've seen grown men pull their own heads off rather than see Doug. Even Dinsdale was frightened of Doug.
>
> Interviewer: What did he do?
>
> Vercotti (quivering with fear, and on the verge of tears): He used...sarcasm.

A quarter of a century later, and our skin is even thinner. Some

university students want warnings whenever their Sociology professor is about to veer off into a subject that is deemed somewhat disturbing…like about half of the curriculum.

And on the right, there's Joe Six-pack, who had a tough time with middle-school math and science, and deems it sufficient enough to state "I just don't believe in all this global warming stuff". He then retreats into silence when someone reminds him that belief resides not on a satellite sensor or in a research laboratory, but in a house of worship.

Will Joe Six-Pack ever be able to find a way to talk to the sociology student? Will the the both of them ever be able to sit down for a chat over a couple of beers? You had better hope so. Otherwise our children's future will be either extremely bleak or entirely absent.

Yes, sustainability *is* possible. And deliberative democracy works…even without beer. It's a relatively simple concept. The hard part is letting people know it exists.

But it doesn't help when "dog whistles"[2] are used to arouse the Joe Six-packs of the world. For example, Mr. Oil and Gas CEO wrote a column about a "green energy fairy tale", "eco-elves",[3] and the International Panel on Climate Change.[4] In it, he detailed how CO^2 "provides the fizz in soda drinks and the bubbles in champagne" and [it is] "the very substance that plants need to breath". The clear implication is that since CO^2 is harmless to plants and soft drinks, then lofting an extra billion tonnes of it into the

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[2] …also known as code words that are embedded in a message. The average reader may not pick up on them, but a specially intended audience definitely would (see the Wikipedia entry for "dog whistle politics")

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[3] I guess that's slightly better than Mr. Anti-Government's favourite *ad hominem*: "enviro-nazis"

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[4] *'Green energy' fairy tale turning into a nightmare for Canada* by Gwyn Morgan. Red Deer Advocate from December 5, 2017. P.11

atmosphere every two weeks must also be harmless.

But an implication is quite different than the statement which carries it. CO^2 *does* provide the fizz in soda drinks. Plants *do* inhale it. So Mr. oil and gas CEO is perfectly free to shove a big steaming pile of deception out to the Joe Six-packs of the world, while ostensibly stating something that is true.

And when I lodged a complaint with the National NewsMedia Council,[5] it sided with Mr. Oil and Gas CEO. They stated that the plants and soda drinks remarks were "factual statements".[6] Hmm. Would they also pretend not to notice cleverly crafted statements by a KKK member about nutritious watermelons and cute little yellow stars? After all, watermelons *are* nutritious. Yellow stars *are* kind of cute.

I've been going on and on about the need for *deliberative* democracy, but maybe I should retrench. Maybe in this era of dog whistles and Donald Trump, it's time to ensure that the plain old, garden variety, one person/one vote type of democracy survives. And it should not have to suffer from the spinelessness of those people and institutions who are entrusted to protect it. After all, we know that free speech is vitally important, but we also know that yelling "fire" in a crowded theatre is a really dumb idea.

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[5] From the NNC website at www.mediacouncil.ca: "The National NewsMedia Council is a voluntary, self-regulatory ethics body for the English-language news media industry in Canada. It was established in 2015 with two main aims: to promote ethical practices within the news media industry and to serve as a forum for complaints against its members."

[6] http://mediacouncil.ca/decisions/2018-11-bedford-vs-red-deer-advocate/

chapter xx: sitting in a church pew with a sense of detached irony

Even before Denise and I got married, we alternated between the churches that we respectively grew up in. She was the product of an evangelical church. I was from the Grand Old Dame of the "social gospel": the United Church of Canada.

In her church, people would sometimes spontaneously raise their hands as if in a trance. The music was loud, and God was "awesome". The people sang hymns, but more often, they sang nauseating "choruses", which were devoid of any complex melodies and were full of syrupy lyrics that might have come out of the nearest Hallmark card.

And when they weren't singing, they were listening to sermons that could be remarkably parochial...just like the Old Testament. I cringed when I once heard the pastor give a mean-spirited criticism of Islam.

In my church, on the other hand, we once smelled the burning of native sweet-grass in a ceremony marking the wrongs of the residential school system. When visiting my folks on Vancouver Island, I recall being very impressed by the public speaking skills of their openly lesbian minister.[1] And the yearly pronouncements of the national presbytery often read like the policy statements of the NDP.

But somehow I won out. We gradually stopped going to Denise's church. Maybe it was the overly loud music. Or maybe it was the interminable sermons, one of which droned on for 45 minutes. But whatever it was, I was glad to be free of the suffocating goodness.

My church was good also. But at least I had the feeling that I would be welcome there if I showed up in a burlap sack and a purple mohawk…or a yarmulke or a turban.

Why do I go to church? Why did I sometimes go to church even

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[1] The United Church of Canada allowed the ordination of openly gay ministers back in 1988.

before I met Denise? I often pondered the question as I sat and listened to the occasional nonsense about Creation and that omnipotent deity who seems to have his hands tied when Syrian children are blown to bits.

And I came up with several reasons why it was worthwhile for me to attend a house of worship. Some of them were relatively superficial, such as being able to sit in a beautiful building held up by massive glulam beams, lit by intricate stained glass, and permeated with thunderous fugues from mammoth pipe organs. But there were other, more important, reasons.

First, was the opportunity for internal reflection. A decent sermon or a pertinent passage of scripture or the Lord's Prayer provided ample reminders that my life wasn't perfect, and that I had an ego which was quite suitable for someone born under the sign of Leo.[2]

"...forgive us our sins..."

"...lead us not into temptation..."

It's impossible for me to hear these words and not think of the numerous little conceits and idiocies that I commit on a daily basis. And the little prompts are sometimes exactly what I need in order to try and mould myself into a somewhat more civilized human being.

The second reason for churchgoing is community. Where else can you so easily plunk yourself down and find yourself among a bunch of folks who already have so many significant emotional ties to each other?…and are so ready to form ties with you? It's like an adoption agency for luckless loners.

Of course, these communities are also one of the key ingredients for a sustainable planet. As long as they're able to easily integrate with the outside world, they help to bond society together in an otherwise fragmented culture which constantly tells us that "I am more important than you".

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[2] Even though I think astrology is nonsense, I often wonder who else but a Leo could have written the first three chapters of this book?

And last, but not least, there are the old hymns which occasionally hit me like an thunder-bolt. They're few and far between, but now I closely monitor any strange visceral reactions that I might have when I pick up a hymn book and try to belt out a tune.

So I came up with three good reasons. But Alan de Botton has gone much further than that. And unlike myself (a church-going SBNR[3]), he's a pure atheist. His book *Religion for Atheists: A Non-believer's Guide to the Uses of Religion*[4] details some of the customs that organized religions have cultivated over the last few thousand years, and he suggests ways in which secular society could become more sustainable by copying them. And while he's at it, he also does a fairly good job of criticizing the excesses of libertarianism and all of the other selfish "ism's" that Ayn Rand promotes:

> "A lack of freedom is no longer, in most developed societies, the problem. Our downfall lies in our inability to make the most of the freedom that our ancestors painfully secured for over three centuries."[5]

Libertarians may celebrate the fact that we now have the perfect freedom to sit in the basement, while gorging on bacon rinds and killing cops on a digital screen. But most of the rest of us sense that something important has been lost in the process.

The excesses of capitalism and the media and advertising also get the de Botton treatment. Why, he asks, does religion get singled out for brainwashing the masses, when advertising arguably does a much better job of it?

> "In truth, we are all fragile in our commitments and suffer from a weakness of will in relation to the siren calls of advertising, an ill-tempered three-year-old entranced by the sight of a farmyard play set with

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[3] spiritual, but not religious

[4] Toronto: McCelland and Stewart Ltd. 2012.

[5] de Botton *op cit.* p. 77

> inflatable dog kennel as much as a forty-two-year-old captivated by the possibilities of a barbecue set with added tongs and hotplate."[6]

And government:

> "Consider, by contrast, how belatedly and how bluntly the modern state enters into our lives with its injunctions. It intervenes when it is already far too late, after we have picked up the gun, stolen the money, lied to the children or pushed our spouse out of the window. It does not study the debt that large crimes owe to subtle abuses."[7]

And how we relate to each other in myriad small ways on a day to day basis:

> "Judaeo-Christian ethics...knew that rudeness and emotional humiliation may be just as corrosive to a well-functioning society as robbery and murder."[8]

"Shared mental maps" and "shared myths" are the terms that *Changing Maps* uses to describe what some elements of society (such as organized religion) use to help foster a "learning society". Shared myths are humanity's substitute for what the lower level of animals know as instinct.[9]

But of course, we have to first sort out which myths are positive, and which are negative. Should we favour the

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[6] de Botton *op cit.* p. 88

[7] de Botton *op cit.* p. 84

[8] de Botton *op cit.* p. 84

[9] Rosell *et al*, *op cit.* P.124. Also William McNeill in "The Care and Repair of Public Myth", (*Foreign Affairs* Vol. 61, # 1, 1982). (Not seen. Cited in Rosell *et al.* p.124.

ideology of Moses, with its terrifying take on how to treat non-combatants in war? Or should we follow the ideology of Jesus and his story about the Good Samaritan?

A church I once attended was on a downward spiral. The sea of grey hair I saw on a typical Sunday morning had been dwindling down to the size of a few large puddles. A typical reason cited was that young families now have to cart their kids off to a multitude of sports and other activities on the weekends. But of course, we all knew that it was really much more a function of the ongoing secularization of society. Even as far back as April 8th, 1966, the cover of *Time* magazine asked "Is God Dead?"

But that was too big a problem to deal with, so we looked for a more convenient scapegoat. How about the minister? She had spent a lifetime righting social wrongs, but she was getting old, and she had nowhere near the charisma of the handsome young minister from many years past.

Or perhaps it had something to do with a corrosive power struggle going on behind the scenes. A few of the parishioners were in the thick of it. A few more (like myself) might have only heard bits and pieces via the grapevine. And still more were blissfully unaware of any strife.

So a decision was made to hire a consultant to find out why the pews weren't full. And why a raucous congregational meeting on a potential deficit budget had left the Council Chairperson in tears.

The consultant came up with three recommendations:[10]

- "Engage an outside resource to help you address the levels of conflict."
- Facilitate the growth of "positive energy".

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[10] *Getting to the Heart, Soul and Mind of the Matter*. Report by The 3D Path for People and Organizations. 2012.

- "...establish priorities in mission."

So a Sustainability Committee was formed. However, it ignored the stuff about “address[ing] the levels of conflict". Conflict was too messy. So it went for the second item on the list: “positive energy” (ie, more bake sales and pot-luck suppers).

But the pot-luck suppers didn't fill the void. Unkind words were still said, tears still fell, and years later, there was still no guarantee that the revolving door (a half-dozen ministers in a dozen years) would ever change into an open door with a Welcome mat.

Things might have gone differently if "dialogue" was seen as something more than just a nice word in the dictionary situated somewhere between “diabolical” and “diarrhoea”. People seemed resigned to the notion that conflict would forever be present in the church. But at one Council meeting, I had to remind them that Rwanda had a reconciliation process after the genocide. So if there was at least some forgiveness in a place where people were hacking each other to death, think how much easier it would be for a church congregation to deal with the fact that some members had personal agendas that didn’t sit well with other members.

For an answer to this dilemma, let us now turn to the Good Book (I am, of course, referring to *Changing Maps*):

> “We need to stop pretending that the other side does not exist, is wrong, or does not matter.”
>
> “...we need to focus on conflict, not tiptoe around it. We need to set up mechanisms for dialogue and negotiation that use conflict as an essential stage in the building of that consensus.”[11]

A small church in a small city. But really, is it all that different from the circus that we see in the House of Commons? And when

[11] Both quotes from roundtable member Steven J. Klees (professor of International Education Policy at the University of Maryland) in *Changing Maps*. *Op cit.* P.87

we ponder the solutions for a small church, are they really that much different from the solutions needed for a nation of 36 million people?[12]

[12] Solutions for our Houses of Parliament and our provincial legislatures could start with the abolishment of television cameras. Think about it: If the cameras weren't there, would the trained seals from the various parties have as much incentive to bark out slander across the aisles? Cameras were first installed in the House of Commons in 1977, and many feel that decorum has gone downhill since that time.

Other solutions (such as those I mentioned in chapter xi) might include the empowerment of more inter-party committees, instituting some form of proportional representation, abolishing the system of political parties, and facilitating the formation of Citizen Assemblies, which could study and propose legislation that naturally has much more transparency and perceived legitimacy than what our current leaders ever manage to spit out.

chapter xxi: civilization?

Wow. So this is the last chapter. This is the chapter where I'm supposed to summarize all the important stuff in the other chapters. So here goes, subject by subject:

- Women. Take careful note of everything I've done, and then do precisely the opposite. That includes going into nursing, instead of forestry.

- Materialist addictions. If you hadn't figured it out by your n^{th} Hot Wheels set, you probably never will. And even if you *have* figured it out, you may never get the monkey off your back. And if you *have* managed to get the monkey off your back, then count yourself lucky, since you're already miles ahead of me, and I likely can't give you any advice anyway.

- Morphic resonance, mysticism and religion. Neither believe, nor disbelieve. Instead, go for the experiential route. Attend a soccer match in England when nearly 100,000 people are in the stands, belting out *Jerusalem*. Sing along. Repeat.

- LSD. Just do like the jacket said: READ ABOUT PSYCHEDELIC DRUGS AT YOUR LOCAL PUBLIC LIBRARY.

- Governance: Get a copy of *Changing Maps*. Read it. Then tell everyone else to read it...including whoever happens to be the Prime Minister at the time.

A decade or two ago, I saw a documentary titled *All You Need is Love*. The producer went around asking famous people if – as The Beatles proclaimed – love indeed might be all that's needed to save the world. Most of them said “yes”, but Allen Ginsberg (yeah, the same guy with the disturbing fondness for pederasty) disagreed. He

said that *awareness* was the limiting factor. Which makes sense, since a blind saint might love the world to bits, but not be aware of any suffering...or of any solutions to the suffering.

Therefore, we have at least two characteristics associated with a person (or a community, or a nation, or an over-populated rock swarming with nominally advanced hominids) that aspires to be civilized:

- love (or “empathy”) , and
- awareness

But wait; there's another. What if that person is aware and has empathy, but is a lazy son-of-a-bitch?...like me. In that case, nothing positive will get done either. So now we have three elements that a civilized person (or a global citizenry) should possess:

- empathy
- awareness
- initiative

Hmm. I guess that leaves me in a bit of a quandary. I'm fairly aware. I read a lot of non-fiction. And of that non-fiction, much of it concerns the big issues that affect the planet. Like climate change and peak oil and deliberative democracy and why Vladimir Putin and Donald Trump are both such dangerous ass-holes.

But my empathy score is quite low. About the only person I empathize with is Jean-Paul Sartre, who famously said "Hell is other people".

And my initiative quotient is also rather shabby. I can rouse myself if my car or my motorcycle needs some work, but even then, I prefer to day-dream about working on my car or motorcycle, as opposed to actually doing it. And at work, even though I know that I'm supposed to prioritize my tasks so that the dullest jobs are done first, I invariably do it the other way around. And at home, I'm quite content to live in a pig sty, if it means that I can sit on the couch for

another hour.

Luckily, however, I'm married to Denise. She's the exact opposite. Her awareness levels have been dulled over the years by watching too many episodes of *Sister Wives*, but she has both empathy and initiative. Regarding the former, she's Mother Theresa (but minus the wrinkles). And regarding the latter, she's the one who cracks the whip and reminds me that certain things need to get done within a certain time period.[1]

But in general, I *am* trying to change. And it's not just in the interest of domestic peace and quiet. It really goes back to all of that stuff that I hammered you with in chapter xi. My research has led me to acknowledge that empathy and effort in our various communities and nations are two of the most important keys to our survival.

So I strongly urge you to hunt down some of the authors and books that I've written about.[2] And don't just stop with reading. Get

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[1] ..though when it comes to dust bunnies behind the stove, I'm still standing firm on the law of diminishing returns (applicable not only to apples and alcohol, but also to all categories of dust).

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[2] …or didn't write about, though they still have a treasured spot on my bookshelf. In alphabetical order:

– *Bowling Alone* by Robert Putnam (get the revised 2020 version – worth it for the updated preface and afterword alone).
–*Changing Maps* (of course).
–*Discovering Common Ground* by Marvin Weisbord (and 35 other authors) (just in case you want to organize a Future Search Conference).
–*Doors of Perception* by Aldous Huxley (far better than anything Timothy Leary ever wrote).
–*Erasing Death* by Sam Parnia (an important read, even if you're highly sceptical)
–*For the Common Good* by Herman Daly & John Cobb (the best book – that's still understandable by us non-economists – on sustainable economics)
–*Gulag Archipelago* by Alexander Solzhenitsyn (there are abridged versions, if you're not too keen on wading through all 2,000 pages)
–*Miracle of Love* by Ram Dass (see how the old guy in the plaid blanket fares against your BS meter).
–*No Contest* by Alfie Kohn (the perfect inoculation against Ayn Rand Paul

involved. Volunteer. Write a Letter to the Editor. Write to your elected representatives. Run for public office. Join a local association or committee. Practice the fine arts of listening and dialogue in your daily life. And be sure to check out newdemocracy.com.au and masslbp.com.

If you don't, you'll regret it later on. You'll look back on a life that wasn't lived up to its potential. You'll kick yourself.

That's why I've written this book. I assume that I'll still kick myself as I'm drawing my last breath or soiling my last pair of diapers. But maybe by having written this book, I won't kick myself quite so hard.

Ryan)
–*Presence of the Past* by Rupert Sheldrake (see how Jerusalem vs. Kashmir fares against your BS meter).
–*Spirit of Community* by Amitai Etzioni (covers much of the same ground as *Habits of the Heart,* but it's a much easier read).
–*Storms of My Grandchildren* by James Hansen (the most comprehensive – and yet remarkably readable – book on climate change I've come across)
–*Walden* by Henry David Thoreau (if you have a mountain of patience, it *is* a rewarding read)

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