

Meanderings

Reflections on People and Places

John Epps



2016

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Dedicated to Charlie, the best of brothers.

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Preface

This is not an autobiography. My life is a very interesting journey, but this book is about the excursions onto paths adjacent to the main route. A little about the main journey may be necessary to understand how I happened onto these pathways, so I'll say just enough here to make sense of the material to follow.

After completing graduate school, Ann and I joined the staff of the Institute of Cultural Affairs in Chicago. We were there for seven years and I worked in the Research division and later as part of the International Directorate. After Chicago we moved to Malaysia for three years as part of the Southeast Asia Coordinating Center. While there part of my work consisted of monitoring rural development projects in Malaysia, Indonesia, Australia, Western Samoa, and the Marshall Islands. From there we went to Denver for three years as directors of the Rocky Mountain Region, then back to Southeast Asia, first to Manila for one year and then to Kuala Lumpur for 22+ years. This time we worked as organizational consultants using and promoting a participative approach to making decisions. For the past 15 years I've been adjunct professor in the graduate business school of the University of Maryland University College.

That's the bare outline of the journey and should provide some explanation as to how I managed to show up in some of the places described in this book.

Friends and acquaintances frequently comment when they hear something about where I live and travel, “You sure have an interesting life.”

Well, they’re right. I do. And I would not swap it for any alternative. But all lives are interesting.

An interesting life is not just the prerogative of a few fortunate ones. Every life is loaded with meaning if we look deeply enough.

That’s what these pages are about—the meaning that appears in commonplace events. Though in my case, the settings have sometimes been unusual, what occasionally shines through is a deeper level.

I say very little directly about meaning in these episodes. The articles are intended to be expressive and evocative rather than explanatory. Explanations tend to conceal meaning behind a veneer of rationality, and these encounters were anything but rational! I hope they may evoke some insight for you.

In a sense, this work is an expression of gratitude for the privilege of being alive. In another sense, it is a bit of accountability to relatives and friends with whom I’ve not been reliable in communicating. Mostly it is an attempt to express the inexpressible.

You don’t need to read the book in sequence from front to back. Look over the Table of Contents and select what seems interesting. Within each chapter, pieces are more or less in chronological order, but that’s not a big issue. Please enjoy these episodes as I have enjoyed experiencing them. If you find in them clues to that level in your experience, then they will have served my purpose in recounting them.

Introduction

There is a dimension of mystery about life that sometimes seeps through the veneer of normalcy in which we live. Sometimes it's as if ordinary events become transparent and you're aware of something else, something you can't quite describe and yet something as clear as a glass of water on the table.

That's what these pages are about...an attempt to communicate the wonder that sometimes appears in quite ordinary circumstances. These situations usually remain opaque to their potential for significance.

All of the people and places described here are real. In a sense, this is a chronicle of my experience. Hopefully, though, it will provide some insights for you about your experience. As James Joyce wrote, "For myself, I always write about Dublin, because if I can get to the heart of Dublin I can get to the heart of all the cities of the world. In the particular is contained the universal." I've attempted to follow his insight by providing descriptions of particulars so that their universality may illumine your experience too.

As you will soon notice, these jottings are not simply descriptive. An "objective" historian might have some difficulty with them. But they're events-as-I-saw-them, and in that sense, they are "internal" history.

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Mystery is always present and always veiled. It's available in commonplace experiences when we take the trouble to notice. You don't have to be a mystic to recognize an otherness about life. You have only to pay attention.

People

This section is not about friends, relatives, and acquaintances, though, to be sure, they have provided many insights into the wonder of reality. But this section is about people encountered, either professionally or by chance, that have provoked insights that went beyond the immediate situation. Every encounter, however brief, has the potential to disclose a depth that often remains obscure.

The Village Headman, Indonesia

1982

The Headman didn't speak English, and my Bahasa Indonesia was at an equal level. This is not to say that we didn't each know a few words and phrases of the other's language. But as scholars tell us, very little is communicated through words.

On that day a few of us had walked over from the Bubun village project in North Sumatra to see how the project was going in Pangkalan Biduk, the next village down the river. When we arrived, my colleagues rushed over to the jetty to look at the day's catch that was being unloaded and iced down waiting for the commercial pick-up.

The Headman spotted me and with a grin invited me over. As I headed towards him, he sent a little boy scurrying off on an errand. He made the gestures that said quite clearly that I was invited into his home. It was an invitation to which "no" was not an option. I went.

Though headman of his village, he like the rest of his constituents, was desperately poor regarding material things. His house on stilts over mud flats had minimal furniture—I sat on a wooden crate that once had held bottles.

The little boy returned with two bottled drinks—yellow colored sugar water of an unfamiliar brand. In that situation, it was a gift of immeasurable graciousness, probably entailing the sacrifice of several meals.

The Village Headman, Indonesia

Then the Headman began talking in earnest, emphatic, modulated, gestured speech that, even despite his few remaining teeth, would have done credit to a Shakespearean actor. I listened intently, maintaining eye contact, smiling and nodding, and occasionally catching a phrase. It was a skill I had mastered in graduate philosophy classes while understanding very little of what was said.

He was describing a poster he had made for the village to communicate five values essential for development. After the talk and our drinks, he took me out to the village center where the poster was standing. It was a picture of a hand. On one side it said "United we stand" and on the other "Divided we fall." And each finger named a type of constituent: Elders, Adults, Children, Women, Men.

I remember little about this project or its eventual outcome. But I remember well the headman and his passion. He manifested a truth uttered by a Denver resident: "We may be low income, but we are *not* poor!"



The Girl in the Doorway, Mumbai

October 1994

She was so small, standing there stark naked in the squalid doorway looking anxiously outward for her mother. Mother had just crossed the street wearing the scowl that frequently accompanies efforts to cross a chaotic street mobbed with stalled vehicles impatiently waiting in the dust and smoke for a light to change or a policeman to wave them onwards.

I was in Bombay, now Mumbai, traveling away from the airport through what must be one of the poorest points of human habitation on earth. This place has the semblance of houses—cardboard and tin sheets somehow patched together in a way that mainly captures the heat and dust that assaults one at this time of year. I think people arriving by plane into Mumbai are made to pass through this section in order to appreciate where they come from and where they are going. It is certainly a contrast to any destination towards which an air passenger might be headed. But it is instructive.

She must have been all of two years old, a newcomer to the art of walking, but probably more accustomed to life in the raw than most of us. She wasn't disturbed or frantically fearful of being left alone; she was just looking for Momma. Nor was she abandoned. Soon big brother, perhaps five years old, came and pulled her back inside the hut. Shortly she was once again at the doorway looking out. And big sister (maybe seven) as well as big brother was alongside. The larger siblings were squatting

The Girl in the Doorway, Mumbai

protectively next to her, the three of them watching the melee of traffic and pedestrians making their way through the haze to unknown destinations.

“Where are you going?” they seemed to be asking with the same detached curiosity we have when watching a flock of birds winging across the sky. The question was not a moral audit, just an idle inquiry of the young towards the unfathomable world of adults.

“Fill our hearts with deep compassion for those who suffer,” we sometimes pray. Are they suffering? Not obviously. No doubt their future excludes “opportunities” for participation in the world of possessions. They are likely destined to live in squalor and reproduce in numbers that perpetuate living conditions totally lacking in amenities. Never are they likely to hear “Place your seatbacks and tray tables in the upright and locked position” that still rings in your ears. Perhaps they are barren of clothes, but still dressed in dignity. Suffering? I think not.

India cares for its arriving visitors in the most unconventional fashion.



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The General, Malaysia

1995

“During this session, I have learned forgiveness” remarked the retired general of the Air Force who was serving as General Manager of an aircraft maintenance company. “Before now,” he continued, “I have always been a competitive person who has to win everything. When we played that game yesterday, I was determined to win. I was really upset when the judge declared a tie. When we continued to talk and I discovered that the rest of you really care about the company and have some good ideas about how to improve it, somehow it didn’t seem to matter. I’m really honored to be part of this group that has so much energy, and I hope you can accept me as your colleague.”

His relationship with the group underwent a marked change during the session, from that of an aloof, condescending observer to being an involved participant.

What happened? According to him, he was first outraged: his sense of justice, fairness, excellence, and superiority were all negated by a game judge who was holding teamwork as a higher priority. (*In fact the point of the game was not to “win” but to work together.*) After the outrage came a brooding time during which the enthusiasm of the group seemed to attract him; people continually teased him about participating, and also asked for advice on some of the matters under discussion. During the brooding, he experienced affirmation. Finally he experienced a re-union with the group that impelled him to make the statement.

The General, Malaysia

This journey was totally subjective and invisible to the group. Its dynamics are reconstructed from the fact of his closing statement. There was no requirement for people to make statements, and the general had to interrupt the closing remarks to get his comments on the floor. But it was a powerful happening for the group and evidence that his sense of meaning was enhanced.



Phnom Penh Newsboy

1998

Incarnation happens in the most unexpected places. Perhaps it was in the Phnom Penh newspaper boy badgering me to take a paper from him and not from the ten others crowding around the hotel entrance as I came out. It isn't so much his pitiful plight as a homeless, orphaned street child subject to who knows what in the way of social abuse, but rather his mischievous twinkle that bubbled through his torrent of broken English:

From me. Here. Me. Remember me? You promised.

Get mine. Only 1200 riel...

Not exactly the babe-in-a-manger, but certainly a powerful young self in ignoble circumstances.

His address was highly personal. He may have also pursued other hotel occupants, but this time it was very personal to me. I wondered what gives me the right to be the one with advantages that he will never even conceive. Gratitude for my status would be contemptibly arrogant; identification with his plight, hopelessly naïve. In the vast distance between us lies sheer Mystery, bridged only by the twinkle as if we both know something deep about life that neither of us can fathom.

Maybe being thrown up against the unfathomable is what Christmas celebrates. In those moments of confrontation with sheer Mystery, there is sometimes a faint echo of "Gloria in excelsis deo..." as if the angels are saying something, and you have the chance again to appreciate life as it is. ☒

The Cambodian Beggar

2000

I encountered him just after a tour of the “Skull Museum” in Phnom Penh. This is a ghastly place in which the torture and execution of thousands of Cambodians took place during the Pol Pot regime. It was a school complex complete with classrooms and dormitories that had been converted first into a dreaded prison, then into a torturing and execution facility and more recently into a museum to honor those killed. The citizens of Cambodia decided to keep it not just as a memorial but also as a reminder, “so that nothing like this can happen ever again.”

The guards were meticulous record-keepers so that the names and dates and photographs of all the victims were recorded. Their skulls have been preserved and are now displayed in the form of a map of the nation.

The facility is a horrifyingly normal-looking place that serves to remind one, among other things, of the banality of evil. To stare at rooms in which prisoners attempted suicide to escape the torture, and see there only the meager furniture of a dorm room with a few bloodstains on the floor throws one into contemplation on the human condition and how we manage to escape such unimaginable horrors. So when you leave that place, you’re in a somber state of being.

I was in no mood to deal with the beggar who was limping across the street, clearly intending to make a hit on this vulnerable tourist leaving the museum. His limp was the result of land

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mines laid, probably by my countrymen, during the Vietnam war. Thousands of Cambodians are missing legs or parts of legs resulting from the mines. So it is not unusual to find limping beggars there. In fact they probably make up a substantial demographic segment.

But I was in no spiritual state for an encounter at that time. So, when he limped about three-quarters of the way across the street towards me and attempted to make eye contact, I quickly crossed the street to the side from which he had come. Looking back, I noticed that he had turned around and was continuing pursuit. So again I waited until he was nearly across then I went back to my original side. I noted a slight glimmer of a smile on his face as he turned again to come after me. Once again I waited until there was no danger of meeting in the middle of the street and crossed back towards my destination. This time when I looked back across the street, he was clearly smiling. Then he rendered a snappy salute, which I returned, and we went our separate ways.



Joe, the Speaker

August 2001

After editing two books of his talks, it occurred to me that Joe Mathews was a speaker. Whether on a rostrum, behind a pulpit,

Joe, the Speaker

across a table, or one-on-one in a hallway, he let his considerable passion focus on his tongue. He could, and frequently did, animate, illuminate and illustrate the most profound concepts while alternatively intriguing, challenging and castigating his audience. The man's oratory was awesome, as many that have heard him will readily acknowledge.

Part of it was his willingness to use whatever language seemed most appropriate to the topic—not necessarily to the audience. He used shock value to great advantage, and the most pious of people listened with considerable discomfort at his army-like profanity while expounding on religion. Far from bothering him, he was delighted to expose “little old ladies of both sexes.”

Another part was his deliberate use of dramatic devices in speaking. Stuttering was a favorite. This this this this eloquent expounder of profound truths would often stutter in such a way that the audience, far from being repelled by a speech impediment, was actually caught up in the drama, trying to help the man complete his sentences.

He spoke mostly without notes, and certainly without a prepared text. Considerable thought went into his presentations, but the idea of reading a text would have seemed to him an insult to the listeners. So he spent his first five minutes or so “spinning.” These moments might have been about some recent experience or about the conditions in the room or occasionally he might prompt the group into a song. Occasionally he would begin speaking so softly that only the closest listeners could make out a word. What he was doing was spinning a web of

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entrancement for the audience while simultaneously “reading” the group mood and interest.

He often began with “The Lord be with you” and awaited the response “And with thy spirit.” This set a responsive tone and called up the context of the historical religious. Following this, he often read a passage of scripture and/or a poem or other appropriate contemporary passage. Following this came what he called “a spin.” This was an informal, impromptu comment circling around the topic and designed to get the attention of the audience.

After the spin, he got going. Any given talk might (and probably did) include a bit of ranting and raving, some corny humor, an incisive analysis of the situation, and some projected ways of addressing it—all delivered with fiery passion and conviction. The only analogy, and it is a tame one, is Tom Peters when he gets going on some management topic. As I say, the man was a speaker.

By the time you finished listening to a Joe Mathews talk, your worldview was different, and you typically were left with a decision of how to embody that difference.

Joe left no literary legacy. The transcriptions of his talks, when edited for reading instead of listening, barely capture the power of the man as speaker. They do, however, disclose that he was no flaky showman promoting his own showmanship; rather, he was a passionate repository of timeless wisdom intent on getting it communicated. His instrument was his tongue.



The Nurse, (RN, OCN, Denver)

January 2008

JE: “Last week I heard you tell someone in the waiting room that the reason you were always smiling is because you love your work. In my teaching I try to instill something like that in my students, but what do you love about your work?”

Nurse: “I love everything about it. It’s just my niche. I can’t imagine doing anything else. I wanted to be a nurse from the time I was 8 years old. When I completed nurses training, I thought I wanted to be in labor/delivery. We all had to start on night duty at the hospital in those days, but I was working towards getting into labor/delivery. Then someone had to move to Pueblo, and I was asked to go into Oncology—and I’ve never left.

“It’s such an honor to be with people in this stage of their life. I get to know them and that makes all the difference. In the hospital, sometimes they would come back, and sometimes they would die. Being able to help people in that situation is really an honor. I know what makes them nauseous, what relieves them, what makes them comfortable, and being able to do that is a real honor.

“It’s not about the money. I’ve known some who went into it for the money, and they don’t last. They get burned out. When I became manager of the oncology division, I got to hire people. What I looked for was compassion. I didn’t worry about skill—we could train them in the skills they need. But if they didn’t care about people, then they wouldn’t be any good.

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"You have to build a relationship with the people—get to know them and really care about them. That's what I do, and I love it."

JE: "Well it shows. You bring a bit of joy into that waiting room which can be sort of grim."

Nurse: "I got it from my mother who was a teacher. One day she came home really upset; she said she'd just met a teacher who didn't like children! She loved her students. She once took me to school when she was in college—she got her degree after she had 5 children, and I was the only one who would go to class with her—there was something in that class she didn't want me to hear, so she kept giving me money to go get a drink from the pop machine or go get some candy. I never found out what it was I wasn't supposed to hear. But she taught me about loving your work. And I love this work."

"My son shows it too. He wants to be a firefighter. He got a couple of certificates, then went to Regis where he's about to graduate. He found some things he really likes there, and is doing great in them. History—he really likes that. And he's become a straight-A student. This is a boy who once got an F minus! He just didn't like the subject so didn't do well in it. But now he's going to graduate with honors!"

"How you get to love something, I don't know. But when you find that thing, the money doesn't matter. You'll do it well."



The Young Man, Malaysia

August 2012

Our office for many years was in a commercial area that included a camera and photocopier shop that we used frequently for producing training materials and occasionally visa or passport photos. Since it was en route to a favorite lunch restaurant, we frequently waved at the couple who were proprietors.

They grew the business from a small photocopy kiosk to include cameras, then digital photography, and now a full-size shop with cell phones to boot. Once when passing we noticed the wife, a rather tiny Chinese woman, was pregnant. We noticed her progression until it seemed she could barely walk. Then she delivered, and later brought the infant to work and proudly introduced us to him.

Today we needed photos for passport renewal, so took the occasion to revisit their shop and our favorite restaurant. After the photo session, while the shop owner was touching up the digital photos, we noticed that his wife had an impish smile as she walked into the back room.

When she returned, she was accompanied by a young man, considerably taller than she, and introduced us to him as her son. He politely shook hands and greeted us. This was the infant—now at the ripe old age of 13.

Mother was beaming with pride, and while the son seemed a bit non-plussed by all the adult attention, he graciously responded to our greetings and questions with the tolerance of a teenager.

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It really doesn't seem that long ago.

Then papa handed over the photos, and when I looked at mine, it began to seem that long. Who is that old man? It can't be the one I view in the mirror every morning. Am I so blinded by sleep that I don't see the wrinkles and splotches and bald spots? Isn't the mind supposed to warn you of aging? How dare it let you be surprised! And I had thought of my opinions as the wisdom of experience rather than the crochets of the aged. Maybe it's time to reconsider.

It makes you appreciate the graciousness of friends and colleagues who don't make a big deal of my apparent seniority. And maybe it's time for me to extend a bit of that graciousness to the real elders I know.



The Musician, Denver

July 2013

A restaurant we frequent for lunch has a clientele of elders, many of whom live in nearby assisted living facilities and all of whom have an apparent loyalty to the restaurant. Most of the diners are female, and virtually all are Anglo.

This time we were seated next to an elderly African-American gentleman who was quietly completing his meal. The waitress brought the dessert tray offering him a substantial choice. Ann teased him by noting that he must be a favorite, getting such attention. He responded graciously with comments about being a special friend of the chef.

As the conversation continued, it surfaced that he is a musician, and has played bass violin in the Denver Symphony for 50 years. He also heads a jazz band that plays in the restaurant on the chef's birthday. He mentioned that he was 93 years old, but still plays every day. We mentioned our love for classical music and jazz, and he then waxed eloquent about the various greats he had performed with—Lionel Hampton, Fats Waller, Ella Fitzgerald, Erroll Garner, Charlie Parker, Billie Holiday, Sarah Vaughn and the San Francisco Symphony. When he learned we lived part time in Malaysia, he mentioned that his niece had recently performed there—Dianne Reeves, the Grammy Award winner. As he finished his lunch and slowly made his way from the table to leave, we saw him lean down and pick up a purse that had been knocked over by a matron diner and handed it to her with great courtesy.

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We found out later that he was Charlie Burrell. In fact he is a noted musician, both classical and jazz. He has been called "The Jackie Robinson of classical music," the one who broke the color barrier in that field. When he left, his parting remark was, "If you have music in your soul, you'll be all right."

At lunch this incognito celebrity was a window into wonder.



Places

This is not a travelogue, though it describes some locations that I have found memorable for various reasons. There is something wondrous about space, and its effect on consciousness can be powerful. Throughout history, certain locations have been labeled as “sacred space” and required particular attire or rituals to enter. The spaces described here are mostly not recognized as sacred, but they did have an impact that was unanticipated. Every space has the potential to disclose Mystery, however unlikely it may seem. Getting mentally attuned to the space we actually occupy requires disciplined effort. While most of us enjoy periodic visits to sacred spaces, an authentic relationship to space would involve perceiving the profound in whatever place we occupy.

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Maliwada, Maharashtra, India

14 February 1979

Eight o'clock AM was the opening ceremony for the new Joseph Wesley Mathews Street and Bridge in the village. School children lined both sides of the road and sang, "When Iron men Go Marching In" as Lyn, Joe's widow, and Pundlik, a local leader, walked between them in the banner-bedecked bridge. There Lyn broke a coconut shell, cut the ribbon and made a brief speech: "Joe was always a bridge-builder...had special love for Maliwada...and would probably approve of this, although he disliked monuments...."

Of all the bridges in the world—the Golden Gate, Tower Bridge, Howrah, Sydney Harbor, Brooklyn Bridge, etc.—this one probably best represents what we are all about:

- It's one bullock cart long and just as wide
- It's over a bone dry ditch that has water at most one or two weeks in a year
- It's in the shadow of the Daulatabad Fort, symbol of past glory
- It's opening a street for new housing which is already committed
- It's a labor of spirit and care
- Men, women, children, and elders participated in the construction and the celebration
- It's transparent spirit in primal community

And perhaps as symbolic as anything of Being's wink,

Bombay (Mumbai) India

this sign—newly painted and neatly lettered—reads: “Dr. Jou Mathus Road.



Bombay (Mumbai) India

11 February 1979

Today there was a corpse on the sidewalk in front of our colleague's house. It was wrapped, incense was burning, and three women, two children, and one policeman were squatting in attendance. Our colleagues called the hearse which arrived six hours later. The driver got out, conferred with the women, and drove away without the body. It was a jolt—but the jolt was that of death, not of pity over poverty. Having seen death among the affluent 15% of the population, this sidewalk wake compared favorably in terms of human care in the face of the ultimate—but of course unfavorably in terms of social structures.

Life and death can be done humanly on a sidewalk, as well as anywhere. Pity, anger, guilt, or contempt are equally inappropriate before our unavoidable humanness that, being inescapable, binds us ontologically to one another.

Finally, what are one's thoughts in one's last conscious moments? How finally does one assess her/his contribution to Being? Whether rich or poor, that's a question that faces us all.



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Bontoa, South Sulawesi, Indonesia

24 April 1979

This is being written in the village development project of Bontoa, South Sulawesi, Indonesia. We're in the meeting room, which is a shelter in a field in the center of the village. We are in a driving rainstorm, with fifty to one hundred kids running around playing soccer outside and twenty or so more milling around and chattering inside the shelter; mostly girls inside, mostly boys outside. A mangy dog, ants, and mosquitoes also populate the dirt-floored, slat-sided, thatch-roofed structure. The talk is going on in sentence-by-sentence translation. And somehow it all feels perfectly normal. At least one fourth of the little boys are stark naked. Most of the young women—who are village leaders—wear heavy coats of rice powder on their faces giving what to Western eyes is a ghastly pallor to otherwise attractive features. It's not the look of a prehistoric culture—the dress and the eyes (bright, lucid, and alert) deny that. It's just other.

The rain is pelting now, and it sounds like a tin roof. The speaker is yelling at the top of his voice and is barely audible. If it weren't for the fact that all ten of us around the table are furiously taking notes and the fact that the speaker is profoundly serious in dealing with the project issues, you'd say that this is an impossible situation in which to conduct business. But it's not. It's just other.

And Otherness is no enemy; it's just the best indicator we have of life's final Mystery. And as in all situations of Mystery,

Aceh, Indonesia

it's uncomfortable and requires great creativity—sometimes the shape of which is continuing business as usual in extraordinary circumstances.



Aceh, Indonesia

1 December 1980

Mohammed Ismail (Mo was once a Chicago bus driver and is now director of special projects at Mobil Oil's Arun Gas Field) described the implementation lab we conducted saying, "It was a miracle: Those guys decided together...consensus happened ...and on their own they began doing the plans...."

The boss, not in the objectionable way it sounds, commented, "It wasn't a miracle. I knew these boys had it in them."

Mo was undaunted. "It was miraculous the way they formed a consensus and went to work."

In fact the plan wasn't all THAT good. But something happened that disclosed a reality that WAS a miracle. Somehow in the midst of that gas field in the midst of those rice paddies in the midst of those kampongs, the Advent miracle happened.

Hope against hope was born to a group of bright individuals and it made them a team. It was born with compelling power that threw them irresistibly into collaborative engagement. For a moment they saw the difference that could be and the differ-

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ence their skills made to the suffering world. It was as if angels were singing the Gloria in their ears, and they were rushing out to participate in this new thing that had come to pass.

Such is the hope against hope. And if none other happens this season, Mo and I have begun our Advent season.



Bangkok

15 November 1981

Last Wednesday evening, Dixie's friend's wife's cousin and uncle took us to the Loi Katong festival in Bangkok. It's a national festival in which you make a little *Katong*—a tiny boat with flowers and candles—and you *Loi* it—float it away down the river.

They took us to the University where 10,000 people were jammed around a small lake with fireworks everywhere—then to the river by the royal palace. They bought us little katongs and we loied them off a rickety dock into a choppy river full of busy boats.

Two stories accompany the festival, both of which are probably true:

1. That it's an offering of thanks to the water gods for the rainy season just finished;
2. That it's sailing your sins away.

This joining of thanks and absolution is very appropriate. But what's jolting is the care with which the katongs are made—beautiful orchids, roses, etc. inside intricately made boats—just like our lives. Then you push it away into the river. Whether this is more about expenditure or detachment, I still wonder. The exercise is similar to the elaborate sand paintings that, once completed, are destroyed. Perhaps both exercises are metaphors for life—intricately developed and then extinguished.



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Manila

1988

In the early months of 1988, Manila was a stimulating place to live. With a major national election approaching, the gold, guns, and goons were increasingly active. This time there was also an undercurrent of discontent bordering on despair among members of the establishment. To that pre-election madness, add the Filipino propensity for showmanship, and you have the formula for chaos.

As if the ambiance were not unsettling enough, our organization was going through a schism without good will on either side, and I was assigned to get it resolved to the benefit of the "angels." Furthermore, our lease had just expired and we were house hunting.

At the best of times, Manila is unsettling. Traffic is snarled; the air is toxic; the water is deadly; the mosquitoes are malarial; the telephones work sporadically; and the weather is stifling.

I loved it.

The simplest activities—buying a loaf of bread—brought about encounters with immensely creative people, and enough adventures to last a lifetime. It makes for life on the edge—adrenalin seems a dietary staple—along with fish heads, rice, and blood soup. A few months of this and you get caught up in the maelstrom.

One day in the midst of the frenetic pace of the city we stopped at a Mexican restaurant in the heart of Makati's Green

Hunting Fossils in Kansas

Belt, and the world stopped. It was dark and cool; quiet background music; cold drinks and ample tasty food. It was an oasis, and not just physically. It was a place where you could pause, reflect, feel at home, regain perspective, and recover the sheer mad wonder of it all.

We dubbed it "The Sanctuary of Tia Maria."



Hunting Fossils in Kansas

1991

The level grassy plain abruptly gives way and you look down into a parched yesterday. Canyons in the soft limestone, carved by eons of wind and snow and rain, blaze their white glare on the intruder as you climb down into the silent defiance to search its secrets

The scale is daunting. From the rim, the horizon rings the barren plain, visible in all directions. The canyons themselves stretch miles, lining both sides of what once might have been a creek. Every six to ten feet is a ridge sloping to the floor, and between them crevices conceal lairs, dens, and nests of every size and description. In this majestic labyrinth, you search for tiny fossilized shark's teeth. An unusually large find might reach

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a single inch in length. Needles in haystacks are disgustingly obvious compared to searching for these treasures whose color and texture so mocks their 8-million year setting.

You look, you scan, you peer intently—systematically quartering an area and gazing back and forth until every twig, clod, stone, and leaf is accounted for. Nothing.

You stumble over to another perch (higher? Lower?) hoping there to happen onto the dental remains of a prehistoric predator. More rocks etched into the walls, and loose dirt.

A third location, and the mind wanders, contemplating the variety of creatures into whose habitat you intrude: the spiders and ants skillfully navigating precipices of clay, the invisible snakes sure to be watching, the coyotes whose dens dot the cliffs, and who knows what else?

The painstaking searching continues. Perhaps if there were a fish tooth detector that might pick up invisible rays that surely must be emitted from fossils...

Climbing to attain a more favorable slant of sunlight, you glimpse other members of the hunt, and call out, "How many?" "Four." "Nine." "Six. How about you?"

Swearing silently, you go back; surely there is an appropriate state of mind for finding rather than searching.

- "Where would you be if you were a tooth?"
- "How did the sea currents drift at this level?"
- "During the latest wind and rainstorm, what areas washed away that might disclose a new find?"

Hunting Fossils in Kansas

The silent emptiness intrudes again overcoming rationality by its sheer magnitude.

“A million years...what will my teeth look like in a million years? Do coffins rot away? Will skulls survive or teeth only? Does cremation destroy teeth? What type of creatures will be looking for them? I hope their eyes are better than...”

The wind picks up invisibly pressing the body and flinging around dirt irreverently loosened by prying moderns in this place where time is reckoned in eons.

You stumble around awhile longer, actually coming upon a nice vertebrae and a mediocre tooth. The turf has reluctantly yielded a few treasures.

They are treasures from an era unthinkable distant, more remote, even, than the clouds. They are treasures from an impenetrable landscape. However thorough the exploration, the canyons retain their distance. No mere human can attain intimacy here. It is a place for awe, not relationships. Even “Mother Earth” and “Father Sky” seem pretentious. This is a place of mystery.

Some things survive best in that environment. You take the tooth home, and while cleaning it, drop it onto the tile floor and it shatters into a million pieces. Eight million years survival in water and buried under tons of earth, but only a two-hour lifespan in “civilization.” Surely there’s a lesson here somewhere.



Charleston, South Carolina

1993

Most places regard present residues of the past as embarrassing defects to be concealed and overcome. Charleston regards them as assets to parade as symbols of its unique identity. The city on South Carolina's Atlantic coast specializes in "was-ing." It's less adept at the "is." As Pat Conroy puts it, "In Charleston, more than elsewhere, you get the feeling that the twentieth century is a vast, unconscionable mistake" (*The Lords of Discipline*).

On one of those brilliant January days with cloudless skies, crisp atmosphere, and shirtsleeve temperature giving a rare sparkle to the drab ambiance of mid-winter, I returned to Charleston, my birthplace. The city takes pride in belying the myth of rapid change; here, after an absence of 17 years, I was easily able to navigate her outrageous network of one-way streets and to wind my way into memories that have not faded. There are changes—new coats of paint highlighting the mansions around the Battery which still stand resplendent in their defiance of time and tide; a new tourist park brightening East Bay Street replacing the legendary Henry's and Carriage House; and the Old Slave Market now bustling with tourists in search of mementos from their pilgrimage to this shrine of Continuity.

It's still the same: the narrow lanes between mansions where the SOB's stroll (aristocrats who live South of Broad Street); the 4-rail barrier along South Battery over which languid men and boys toss fishing lines with only the remotest interest in a catch,

Charleston, South Carolina

and along which lovers stroll hand in hand savoring the salty breeze; White Point Garden with its small pyramids of cannonballs over which children romp in innocent disregard of their sinister symbolism; the squat Moorish towers of The Citadel standing mute gray guard over a deserted parade ground; the unique aroma of North Charleston industry combined with low tide; and most of all, the appearance of calm. In this atmosphere, there is no need to rush: time is an asset to relish, not a resource to manage. Struggle, though it is essential to life elsewhere, in this place is bad taste.

Charleston is different. Dallas, Chicago, Denver, Manila, Singapore, and Kuala Lumpur all have their unique charms, but none can match the sublime contentment of Charleston where the major news is of a hurricane that hit four years ago and effectively pruned the landscape of anything—brush, bridge, tree, house, or building—lacking the interior resources to stand firm. Of course life occurs here with recognizable levels of human catastrophe. But somehow they're submerged under layers of civility, proper appearances, and an unshakable belief in the benevolence of history. To be agitated over anything is simply foolish: "It'll all work out—just relax!"

Ulcers are commonplace.

Some describe Charleston as a paradox of the grotesque and the sublime. Although both are present, neither quite reaches her essence. She is rather like the live oaks decked out with Spanish moss that line the old Summerville road. From some perspectives she is a cathedral to a pantheon of magnificent de-

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ities. From other viewpoints the same sights appear as decadent residues of historical disaster. But it's all one thing, and I think it's in the atmosphere. You can't breathe the air and miss it.

I think the culture begins at around 10,000 feet as your plane descends into the city. Certainly by the time you've landed and reached the concourse, it permeates your system.

Charleston is not one place alongside others. When you are here, every place else is far, far away. Probably China's sense of itself as the navel of the Earth comes closest to the self-perception of Charleston, except that no native Charlestonian would ever use the word "navel" in polite society.

Charleston is a wonderful place to be from and a delightful place to visit. I am pleased to be her native son.



Language

1998

In high school I took Latin for two years and French for two. The same teacher taught both, and while it can be said that she was a fine teacher, one would never accuse her of being fluent in either language. Of course nobody speaks Latin, so that was not a problem. But she also did not speak French—or at least she never demonstrated that capacity.

In college I took French again, this time from someone who probably spoke it, but did so without passing that ability along to his students. In graduate school I took Greek and German, again without acquiring the capacity to converse. And now I've lived many years in Malaysia, a place where the local language bears no resemblance to any of the languages I've studied. Here I've picked up enough to tell taxis where to turn and where to stop.

The point is that languages are not my strong suit; English is the only one in which I can claim some competence.

When I traveled to Brussels for a conference and landed at Amsterdam, I decided to travel by train to the conference site. My seat was across from a distinguished looking gentleman, and we both sat silently for most of the trip.

Then as we were approaching Brussels, I asked him whether the station that we were approaching was The North Brussels station. "I don't speak English," he replied. So, deciding to take a risk and recall my French classes from four decades ago, I pon-

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dered a bit, then tried again: "*Est-ce-que cette gare est Bruxxels du nord?*"

His reply was, "I don't speak English."



Ohhhhh Calcutta...

1998

City of Joy is an incredible work by Dominic Lapierre. Set in Calcutta, it is a story of life in the bustees. That life and those bustees quickly become a metaphor for the life of everyone. Perhaps that's why it's so offensive...and challenging.

The squalor and chaos of Calcutta (now known as Kolkata) is legendary. It is repulsive to those of us who have managed to live in relatively clean and orderly environs. Most of us believe we couldn't make it under the conditions that are normal for the city's inhabitants. But the story is not one of misery: it's one of fulfillment, of love, joy, and human authenticity. Perhaps that's the offense, for if authentic life is available under those conditions, why spend so much time and energy creating and

Ohhhhh Calcutta...

sustaining more up-scale situations? But even to ask this question is to fall into the mind-set that perpetuates Calcutta-like conditions throughout the world. Although it is not necessary to fulfillment to have basic amenities, it's not insignificant either.

Calcutta and "City of Joy" make up a Christmas story, for there the paradox of existence is incarnate: fulfilled life is not thwarted by external circumstances, but occurs in the most unlikely places. One greets that message now as in olden times with mixed emotions. Like the Shepherds I find myself "sore afraid," not so much of supernatural beings appearing in the sky, but of more natural ones all around whose scramble for sustenance and meaning sometimes conflicts with my own. Doesn't it seem at least possible that each of us might pursue our own paths without conflict—especially since each of the respective paths is full of difficulty? But it seems not to be. In "City of Joy" two characters, the money-lender and the "godfather" manifested the issue. Rather than helping their fellows, they were consciously defrauding them, climbing over them and thereby adding to the collective misery. People like that are thoroughly repulsive, whatever climate they inhabit. But they represent one response to Calcutta, that of the survivor. The problem is that they are NOT survivors in the long term.

In the story, the "good tidings of great joy" were indeed grand and cosmic. Try as they might, the villains do not have the last word—authenticity prevails. Not as in Westerns with the good guys finding a happy ending, but as in life wherein the struggle has moments of glory.

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The question raised by the story is profound and deep: How can we let the Calcuttas of the world continue to deprive people of their human potential and trap them in the struggle for survival? On the other hand, since the conditions obviously do not extinguish the human spirit, why bother at all?

Calcutta itself seems to have bothered very little. Perhaps that is necessary: the economic and political chaos seems to have become an ingrained way of life there (and in many other places). Perhaps a citizen who lives under those conditions cannot imagine the possibility of changing them, and so must develop his or her spirit prowess in accommodating to them. But when people from the so-called “developed” world renounce concerns for “worldly” pursuits in the quest for spiritual authenticity, something seems amiss. One cannot simply divide and separate the two pursuits: “this worldly” and “other worldly.” In this life, the direct approach to spirit is denied us. We achieve it in relation to our external tasks. The hero of “City of Joy” won his sainthood through pulling the rickshaw, not through meditation. When he meditated, as no doubt he did, it was in relation to feeding his family and assisting his community.

But for us, are the conditions of Calcutta (and Somalia and Myanmar and Zimbabwe, etc.) Inevitable, or is it possible that dealing with them requires the best imaginations and innovations that the times can provide? One just might begin to believe that current technology and creativity might be able to do something that history has not yet been able to accomplish. Perhaps the new UN role in Somalia might be a harbinger of

things to come. Certainly the use of military force to enhance relief efforts is creative and appropriate, if not a “final” solution.

Those who are willing to undertake dealing with social conditions must be able to distinguish between what is really inevitable for finite beings and what is merely entrenched dehumanization. The former must be affirmed and the latter abolished. To undertake this task, one can’t be too caught up in the quest for personal salvation. One must be fully invested in the pursuit of creative change in the conditions of “this world” trusting that matters of the “other” will be added. Not that they can be ignored, for they provide a perspective from which change can be seen and realized, but they cannot be exclusive.

Some would suggest the alternative approach: going first for the interior transformation and then from that stance, altering the social scene. If only that could work! We are so notoriously prone to seeking the internal things, and then continuing to seek them, never having enough and never quite getting around to attending to the social changes. So misery continues, little abated by our internal greatness.

Surely the only justifiable approach is to combine the two. One only hopes that there are more effective approaches than the options of liberalism or fatalism portrayed in “City of Joy.” Neither one will clean up the slums or enhance authenticity. Perhaps there is some new way of dealing with systems and structures that demean. Ways to deal with local community development are well established, if not yet thoroughly implemented. But how to deal with systems and structures to create

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environments that minimize suffering? I think these are not yet available.

Politicians everywhere seem basically unable to prevent “fall outs” or even “drop outs.” Economics everywhere seems to hallow greed; and culture seems ingrained with a notion of superiority, whatever its origin. The issue of living together in mutual enlightenment and harmony is still unresolved.

Fortunately that doesn’t mean an end to authenticity or fulfillment. Thank you, Calcutta, for that insight.



The Otters

1999

We were vacationing at Lake Kenyir, Malaysia, enjoying the outdoors along with the flora and fauna that made the island of our chalet a hotbed of vitality. Sounds of insects and birds were almost deafening in the early morning and the late evening.

Not to be denied participation in the energetic vigor, we decided to rent a kayak and paddle around the island. It was a quiet morning with a cool breeze and almost no ripples on the surface, a perfect setting for us as unprofessional paddlers to practice our skill. So we set out. Soon we noticed up ahead a flurry of ripples further offshore and it seemed to be headed straight for us. They didn't seem to be large ripples, and we thought it might be from some subterranean pipe releasing pressure or some other unfathomable phenomenon that posed no threat. So we went ahead.

But the ripples kept coming straight for the kayak, and we began to be a little concerned. Then they went under the kayak and we noticed that they were generated by a school of small fish swimming madly ahead. We heard splashes behind them and noticed that they were being chased by three otters and went under our boat to escape.

The otters saw us in the boat, and stopped. They were not happy. They actually reared up to full otter-in-water height and gritted their teeth at us. It was not a friendly greeting. We had obviously ruined their breakfast. Even if unintentionally, we

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were clearly an unwelcome intrusion. So, rearing up, all three began hissing at us. I waved a paddle, partly in apology and partly to ward off an attack. They didn't attack, but now we've been hissed at by pissed otters.



Chennai, India

2008

It's a metropolis of eight million people, all bent on developing economically. Chennai is a paradigm of India's rapid—"industrialization" doesn't seem quite to be the word since most of the economic advances come less from industry and more from the IT sector—development. Here engineers abound and their talents are greatly needed and much sought after.

Still, Chennai is in India. You don't drink the water unless it's been boiled. You cross streets, if you must, VERY carefully. You plan sufficient time to get from here to there, and count on it taking longer. You assume that the clear directions you gave and received are, at best, approximations, the results of which remain uncertain until delivery happens. You find people absolutely committed to pleasing you and relying on their own concept of what that looks like. It may have little to do with your wishes or needs, but it's delivered with the greatest of honor and graciousness.

The way traffic works is a good image of how the society works in general.

A substantial percentage of cars are quite new and modern. There are some holdovers from the past, but they are relatively few. The roads are mostly paved, but pavement has not quite conquered the city. Evidence of this fact is the presence of several inches of dirt at the edge of the road, and sidewalks which are only partially hard-surfaced. But mostly it's people.

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Everywhere. Normal traffic has three parallel lanes of vehicles in a well-marked two-lane road. In “rush hours” more lanes develop in the same space. Usually four or five lanes of vehicles weave in and out with three-wheelers, motorcycles, bicycles, pedestrians, cars, and trucks vying for space and slowly moving forward with horns blowing. Most trucks have signs on the back, “Sound horn please” I suppose in order to let the driver know you’re there. The driver is probably multi-tasking on a cell phone while negotiating the mobbed roadway. People do sound their horns, and the resulting cacophony would be distressing if you didn’t know that it was preventing multiple fatal accidents.

A motorcycle abruptly cut in front of our car and stopped while its elderly passenger slowly dismounted, using both hands to lift his leg over the frame. The fact that our car was just a half-inch from enrolling him in the ranks of the disabled penetrated his oblivion only enough to evoke a cordial smile and wave. He went ahead. And so did we.

Through all the melee of frantic development came a symbol: One of the ubiquitous public transportation three-wheelers swerving madly among the chaotic traffic bore a large sign on its back: “HP LAPTOPS.”

India is on the move.



A Random Act of Music

September 2009

The Cathedral was magnificent. Designed and built by Henry VIII as a symbol of his rule over the newly-established Church of England, it is a massive Gothic structure that has endured countless episodes of human frailty. Its wonder has survived intact. Today its grandeur was being trampled by a group of young Japanese tourists who were loudly photographing everything in sight and mobbing the walkways while I was trying to locate the spot at which John Wesley preached or where Cardinal Wolsey was tried or where St. Freidswide was buried.

This was the cathedral at Christ Church College at Oxford University in England. While we were walking around admiring the arches and stained glass and tributes to notable worthies, the Japanese youth in their colored, fashionable outfits were energetically chattering and snapping away with hi-tech cameras and cell phones. Their enthusiastic presence seemed to defile the grandeur of the surroundings.

I grumpily moved away from them trying to hear the organist who was practicing quietly from his perch in the balcony. He was giving mere whispers from the pipes that increased my longing for something more suitable.

Suddenly a full choir launched into a four-part Latin chorale that resounded through the cathedral and echoed off the spires filling the space with wonder. All of a sudden this was no longer a quaint tourist destination; it was a place of awe. Music made this space once more into a cathedral.

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The singers were the Japanese tourists who had lined up in the aisle and under the direction of an experienced conductor were rendering their considerable appreciation to the setting. The timid organist looked over the balcony to see what was going on. When the piece was done, they dispersed and left.

But what they left behind was as tangible as the stone memorials in the cathedral.



Abbey North, Canada

June 2010

We attended a Mindfulness Retreat at Abbey North, home of a colleague in Halliburton Highlands, Canada.

Abbey North displays a tranquil appearance beneath which is chaotic turmoil. It is an environment in which the abundant flora and fauna wage an incessant battle for survival. The people, residents and sojourners alike, battle not only for survival (though that's sufficiently engaging for many of us), but also for certainty and/or security which elude our best efforts.

Abbey North, Canada

The lake, placid from a distance, harbors unseen beings evidenced by unpredictable bubbles on its serene surface. Whatever lurks beneath defies perception but portends no good.

The vista from a lofty vantage is sufficiently gorgeous to make your eyes ache. The lake and surrounding hills mirrored in its surface stretch to the limits of visibility. The sounds of birds, elk, crickets, loons, mosquitoes, and flies evidence rampant vitality. An occasional butterfly chaotically flits past in search of an appropriate selection among the numerous blossoms.

To call the house magnificent is to demean it. It belongs in the setting, offering an appreciative venue for residents and guests with ample provisions to satiate the most ravenous of appetites. Unlike most developments, it complements and enhances its surroundings. Rather than exclusive, it is accessible, providing a venue for a wide variety of community, national, and global gatherings. Far from aloof, it is practical, engaging solar and wind energy-generating mechanisms, extensive gardening, and hi-tech communication devices.

Despite all this, and perhaps because of it, the house points beyond itself to the landscape, which, in its glory becomes transparent to the underlying Mystery of Being.



The Squirrel

2011

We were taking a walk on a narrow trail in one of Colorado's exquisite state parks. The trail was tree-lined with dense undergrowth on both sides. After a while we saw a squirrel walking along the trail towards us, apparently carrying a load of something in his mouth. The resulting protrusion of his throat looked like a goiter, but it was probably nuts or perhaps even a baby squirrel.

He stopped and stood there looking at us. Squirrels along our customary trail quickly scurry away up the nearest tree, as though we were fearsome aliens to their world. This one didn't scurry, scamper or dash. He simply stood there waiting expectantly. We moved to the right side of the narrow trail, and motioned to him to come ahead. Then he simply walked slowly by us, as full of dignity as we were of surprise. It's one thing to have your context expanded to include global cultures. It's quite another to have it include other species.



The Monkey

2011

In our taxi as we were heading for work, we saw a young monkey standing on the sidewalk looking for an opening to cross the street. He was having trouble with the heavy traffic. His familiar route through the tree canopy had been devastated by a development project, and he was grounded. It was a sympathetic sight, and we wished him the best of fortune as we sped by. We had experienced that same difficulty crossing the same street just a couple of hours earlier. It was easy to imagine how he felt.



Istanbul

October 2011

This massive city on the Bosphorus has long been a place for stories. At the Council of Constantinople in 381 they finalized the story of the Trinity, affirming the results of the Council of Nicaea against the Nestorians and the Arians and made sure of the two natures of the Christ and consequently Mary as Theotokos (“Mother of God”) which the Nestorians had denied. Ah yes, there are stories.

Even then it was an old city, formerly Byzantium. The Crusades made a mess of it, which Umberto Eco delightfully

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chronicles in his novel *Baudolino*. And the Ottomans did it again later. Now it's "Istanbul, Not Constantinople," as the song says. "Why'd Constantinople get the works? It's nobody's business but the Turks."

Anyway, it's a huge city with a vital and energetic street life. I saw a man with gray hair and beard literally running down the street. Others pushed carts laden with pastries or nuts or pretzels. And flowers were sold on the street in gorgeous bunches. The sellers, however, were shopworn—unsmiling, weary, and apparently immune to the beauty they were hawking. On the Metro, people were incredibly polite, offering us seats in crowded cars. The touts around the tourist sites were aggressively friendly, speaking excellent English with American accents, and determined to get you into their shops where they served tea while displaying gorgeous carpets. One's line was memorable: "I'm not a guide. Don't walk away. I don't eat people—I'm vegetarian."

The Grand Bazaar is literally massive and overwhelming. It's covered with designated areas for leather, fabrics, jewelry, porcelain, and clothing. We happened on a café we'd seen recommended in a guidebook and stopped for Cappuccino. About half way through our drinks we noticed signs on both sides of us advertising out favorite coffee—Ily. We were so near, but... Another bazaar, Arasta Bazaar, is right beside the Blue Mosque. It's less massive and more navigable, and also of considerably higher quality. Bargaining is still possible, but the starting points are higher.

Istanbul

Maps are at best, incomplete. We took a walk in the Taksim area looking for a recommended restaurant and bookshop. It was just off a main street. We took what we were sure was that street and walked a l-o-n-g way downhill before giving up and climbing back to the starting point. Then we decided to look around on another street, and there they were. Maps are like that.

There were surprises. Despite what you would expect from Shriners, no one wore a fez. Mosques were everywhere with slim spires pointing skyward towards lofty realms. The Muslims were Turkish, not Arab, and the distinction is evident. Despite the profound history, Churches were invisible, except for Hagia Sophia which is now a Museum. And on one back lane leading to the Palace, there was a row of RVs that apparently were the dwelling places of a band of ... we don't know what, but their dress was certainly exotic.

Transportation around the city is best done by Metro which is efficient, cheap, fast, and F-A-R underground. Road transportation, on the other hand, is incredibly jammed morning till night. The Metro signage is good and enables foreigners to get around easily.

It rained, a chill, soaking drizzle that permeated our lightweight clothes, numbing hands and feet as we moved ahead determined to see what was there. And what was there was mesmerizing.



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Singapore

August 2012

From the CSC you take the AYE past the KTM and the SPA, then by the IR, the Flyer, and the Supertrees to the ECP and on to the airport. It takes about 30 minutes by taxi, depending on the time of day. The electronic overhead signs will give you the precise time and any route changes that might be necessary in case of an accident. If you understand this, then you're a native and don't need any interpretation.

For the rest of us Singapore is a delightful shock. It's a high tech city that works. The systems do what they're supposed to do with courtesy and efficiency. The trains and busses run on time; the streets are clean and safe; the banking is fast and professional; taxi drivers are courteous and knowledgeable. And the country is technically advanced. It's also green and getting progressively greener.

There is ample vegetation lining the roads and often hiding the residential areas that border them. The East Coast Parkway has a gorgeous row of blooming bougainvilleas between the lanes for a couple of miles. Beyond that, trees on both sides form a shady canopy over the expressway. On one side the harbor contains multiple ships of all sorts lined up for loading. On the other side are golf courses, some with manufactured hills that remind one of the moguls on a ski run. Driving in from the airport is a sensory treat subtly promising a time of pleasure.

Singapore

That pleasure, of course, is of the consumer variety. Singapore bills itself as a high-end shoppers' haven, and multiple outlets for that market are scattered throughout the island. Low-end outlets such as Walmart and Carrefour tried Singapore, but both finally departed. One can still find mom-and-pop outlets in housing estates, but the attempt to grow that market has not been successful. Shoppers want goods that display status, not just performance. Lately Singapore has launched two casinos that celebrate its consumerism, and both seem to be prospering, though Singaporeans cannot enter either without paying \$100.

High rise condos range from the lavish to the minimal. HDB flats are everywhere marking the government's determination to provide affordable housing for the populace. There are no slums or squatter areas visible in Singapore. Construction seems to be an assumed feature of the landscape; the construction crane is almost a national bird. The architecture of office buildings seems like a gallery of the profession's artistry. The variety of styles and features is outstanding, and one can easily get a sore neck from straining to take it all in.

All this comes at a cost: discipline. Singaporeans sometimes find the policies that mandate and enforce cleanliness and courtesy to be onerous; they often visit Malaysia across the causeway for relief. For example, chewing gum is not allowed in the country. Smoking was banned in public places some years ago. Jaywalking used to be banned, but that has loosened up a bit. Discipline once included a strict ban on those who are perceived to object to the strict discipline. Fortunately that does not apply

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now, and the country welcomes talented expatriates who can add to its talent pool. Singapore will not tolerate guns or drugs: both carry the death penalty which is enforced with some regularity. And anyone who thinks it's possible to pass through the airport with concealed drugs has seriously underestimated the security systems. Death row is populated by several who did.

It is a multi-cultural country. Basically Chinese, it includes substantial minorities of Indian and Malay. Actually the official language is Bahasa Malaysia, though few speak it, and most activities of government and business are conducted in English. In light of China's ascendancy, there is a push for learning and speaking Mandarin.

Periodically Singapore has a campaign to upgrade its performance: a courtesy campaign, a customer service campaign, and a cleanliness campaign have all been held. The current emphasis is on green—preserving the environment, so there are attempts to minimize Styrofoam in packaging and to lessen the wanton use of paper, and to minimize the use of petrol. The latter is possible because of the admirable and expanding public transport system.

I mentioned technology. Singaporeans are beyond the novice stage of heralding the latest gizmo. They have made using those gizmos into a national infrastructure. Smart phones are everywhere. Laptops are a bit dated, but still abundant in every coffee shop. Computer kiosks are spread throughout the airport. Wi-Fi is available in all the hotels and many public places. The newspapers have discovered that online publication need not di-

Singapore

minish its market; they publish online editions and have transformed their print media to be more graphic and interactive.

Changi Airport is a global marvel and frequently rated as tops in the world. The arriving passenger is greeted with multiple orchids growing in the terminal. There are many shops and restaurants and parks, and even movie theaters in the terminal for those who have substantial layovers. There are also hotel rooms in each of the three terminals offering short term stays. Children's playgrounds are present and occasionally live performances occur in conspicuous places. Security is thorough but unobtrusive, and immigration lines are usually quite fast. Baggage claim is a marvel—the bags usually arrive at the carousel before the passengers. Of course the airport is clean, thanks to the work of an invisible army of cleaners constantly taking care of the residue of thoughtless passengers.

Anyone who has read *King Rat* by James Clavell will be amazed at the transformation the country has undergone since World War II. In that story the horrors of Changi Prison were chronicled in gruesome detail. The details of Singapore's transformation make fascinating reading, but however it happened, it provides a source of hope for those in hopeless situations.



Four Days in Provence

October 2012

Once again the stereotype belies the reality. Mention “Cote d’Azur” or “French Riviera” and visions come to mind of a place of James Bond and his babes, with wide, sandy beaches filled with beautiful, wealthy people sunbathing or playing beach volleyball with waves gently lapping the shore. Well, the actual Côte d’Azur, at least around Nice, has nothing of the sort. The only Bond babes I saw were the two I was with. There is not a grain of sand in sight: the entire beach (and far out to sea) is covered with pebbles. Walking on this beach is like reflexology on steroids. Volleyball is impossible, and while people do bathe in the sun, they need an air mattress to do so. Rocks dominate the landscape. And the waves from the Mediterranean were non-existent, at least the time we were there. The beach here could not be more different from the Isle of Palms or Pawley’s Island in South Carolina or even Langkawi in Malaysia.

The sea, though, is beautiful. It’s calm, azure color and clear water make it inviting for swimmers, and some were indulging, even though the weather was a typical autumn day of about 65° F.

The accuracy of the stereotype that makes it feasible is that of wealth. Of course there were evidences of “beautiful, wealthy people;” the docks held some of the largest and grandest yachts imaginable—only slightly smaller than the typical cruise liner. A deluxe room in a beachfront hotel goes for \$313 per night

Four Days in Provence

which, while not outrageous, tends to rule out the budget travelers. Other accommodations are available, but far from the sea.

Of course there are many places in the environs where the rocks are appropriate. The old town center of Nice, for example has stone buildings and cobblestone streets that emphasize its centuries-old setting. And the street markets, replete with fresh fruit, spices, vegetables, and chocolates, as well as crafts for the tourists, highlight practices that have been around far longer than I.

Stereotypes do illumine their subject, often in a pejorative way; this time they are excessively flattering. In either case, they mask the depth and complexity of the topic they profess to explain.

To really find places where the rocks are at home, you need to travel outside Nice north to the villages which lie liberally sprinkled on the nearby mountain tops. Each seems to be a walled village (the rocks again), and often the “walls” are simply mountain sides cut away to reveal the underlying rocks as a sheer cliff protecting the village from invaders

Homes in these places are occupied, though at least externally, they are made of ancient rocks. Streets do accommodate vehicular traffic, but mostly in a one-lane, one-way manner over cobblestones that ensure no speeding. Free parking is available, and visitors are encouraged to leave their cars and tour the villages on foot.

Once again the markets dominate the village squares, at least until 1:00PM. Modern boutiques are plentiful with food and clothing and candy and art and crafts readily available. Outdoor cafes are also plentiful. The surprise to me was the

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plethora of pizza shops. Yes, this is near to Italy, but I expected the French to be more parochial in their food choices. Another stereotype laid to rest. Even so, the wine and cheese varieties and prices were exceptional.



Japan 2013

Stereotypes never quite work, though they can be useful introductions to a topic. My stereotypes regarding Japan suffered an attack of reality at the Facilitators Conference held in Tokyo.

The idea that Japanese are quiet in a group and reluctant to express their opinions went out the window as Japanese facilitators were as boisterous and outspoken as the most assertive Westerner might be.

The stereotype that systems there work well was amply confirmed: the trains are on time, the traffic is orderly, queues are maintained, streets are clean, and people are busy.

The great paradox was that people are incredibly energetic: sidewalks are crowded and noisy with bustling people hurrying to get to their next engagement. Watching the crowds make

Japan

it easy to understand the culture of Samurai, Ninja, and Sumo with their disciplined mayhem. Yet in the midst of this, there are parks and landscapes marked by minimalist serenity. In fact, serenity also seems a prominent part of the value system. Both Zen and Bushido are part of the culture. It's an amazing paradox.

We pushed our way through a throng of people scurrying up a narrow lane flanked on both sides by craft outlets doing brisk business as we were en route to the Silver Pavilion in Kyoto. Once inside the gates, the well-marked pathway was mobbed by tourists since this was a national holiday. But what we saw off the path was sheer, well-groomed serenity, the very essence of tranquility. Grounds were elegant in their simplicity of design with every stone and blade of grass positioned to complement the whole. Sand was raked into flowing patterns; rocks were placed to complement ponds and add just the right gurgle to streams; branches were trimmed and shaped into bonsai-like configurations; even the periodic bird calls seemed to highlight the appearance of solitary serenity. But it wasn't solitary and the path was anything but serene. Tranquility was located just off the path, forbidden to tourists. It was visible, almost as a longed-for state just out of reach. The park exemplified the paradox.

Then there were the Sumo wrestlers. While seated at a thoroughly modern coffee shop, I looked out the window and there on the sidewalk was a young, hefty man in full colorful kimono calmly walking down the street. The Sumo auditorium was nearby and "normal" people on the walk seemed to ignore him, despite the unique garb.

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A Sumo wrestling match is a combination of ritual and mayhem, the latter consuming a minority of the time. It starts with two behemoths entering the ring (a circular platform without rails) and prancing around while glaring at each other and flinging salt on the mat. After a while they squat facing each other with a kimono-garbed referee to the side. Quite often, they stand again for more prancing and glaring. Finally they squat, lean forward and place one knuckle on the mat. They then leap onto each other quickly as if surprise were a part of the match. The bout ends whenever one or the other touches the mat with something other than the soles of his feet or steps out of the ring. It usually takes less than 30 seconds. The loser leaves quickly. The winner squats while the referee hands him a certificate, then he leaves. It's all over.



Time Past

2014

“The past is never dead, it’s not even past.”

– William Faulkner in *Requiem for a Nun*.

I grew up in Newberry, South Carolina, a small southern town. I left it at the age of 18 to go to college and never went back except for a few summer vacations. After a lapse of 36 years I returned for a brief visit and found only a little that was familiar. At that time I found that Newberry doesn’t “was”; it’s too busy “is-ing.” To put it another way, the time in which it was my home was a brief period in an on-going process of change.

But the “was” still is.

Recently a Facebook page appeared entitled “You know you’re from Newberry if...” In it, many one-time and current residents recorded memories and photos of the place. It struck a long dormant chord. Names like Molly’s Rock, Lynch’s Woods, Willie’s Drive-In, Silverstreet, Wiseman Hotel, Mollohon, West End, Hun’s Hamburgers, Johnny’s Donuts, Kit’s Crossroads, Wells Theater, Bush River School...etc., etc., etc. proved still alive and well, at least in the minds and hearts of many people. More than 3,800 entries have appeared to record memories. Even though many of those places no longer exist, they are present and cherished by those of us who experienced them.

It’s easy to get lost in the memories. I was jolted back to reality when someone recorded a cherished memory from a time

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20 years after I left about something I never knew. Another jolt is when someone posted photos from a time before I arrived, or when people refer to the high school where I made a graduation speech as functioning now as a kindergarten. One of my classmates posted a photo of our junior high school band—I still have that clarinet and still remember many of the people in the photo. Someone else remembered playing in the rubble of that same Junior High School building when it was demolished. You'd think that made those places past.

But it didn't.

The impact has been amazingly persistent. I've spent altogether too much time reading posts on the site, occasionally adding a few of my own. I've also been able to name many schoolteachers and visualize many classrooms, stores, and streets. They're all still present, though not geographically. What was is not dead, it's not even past.

Faulkner was right.



Walking in the Colorado Mountains

June 9, 2014

Walking in the mountains is not my ideal pastime. Somehow the trails always seem to be ascending, both going out and returning. Maybe Escher designed them so that whichever way you go, you're always going up. There are even mock stairways that assist your climb, though they do little to minimize the exertion required. It's not particularly hot since the altitude is around 8,500 feet, and there are occasional patches of snow that haven't yet melted. To say that the atmosphere is thin would be an understatement. The panting that usually comes after vigorous exercise arrives unbidden in the mountains after a couple of steps. Rest stops happen frequently and at diminishing intervals. While there are many places that give evidence of the recent floods (and fires), the trails are generally in good shape, which is more than I can say for myself.

The environment is gorgeous. Spectacular views confront you at every turn—snow-capped peaks, verdant valleys, pines and aspens in varying shades of green. The aroma of cool, damp air permeates the atmosphere and evokes relaxation to the struggling lungs. And occasionally the resident wildlife shows itself—herds of elk, deer, chipmunks, rabbits, squirrels, hummingbirds, mountain magpies, and crows. Fortunately the insects stayed away. Maybe it's too early in the season for the ravenous flies and mosquitoes and ticks to be out in force. The absence of these bearers of West Nile virus and Lyme disease is

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most welcome. As for the wildflowers, it's still a couple of weeks early for their outburst of color, but some have sent out pioneering probes as if to test the setting before exhibiting their beauty. These floral pioneers punctuate the landscape with points of yellow and lavender that highlight the dominant green. The rivers and streams have recently receded back into their banks after a brief overflow from the mountain snowmelt. Although contained, they are still wildly raging. Their splashing roar exerts an almost magnetic attraction—you're drawn to the edge and tempted to place a hand or toe in the water. Only the recent reports of drownings in similar streams holds you back. The water's treachery remains concealed behind its mask of beauty.

However it happens and for whatever reason, you come away changed. Not different but changed. Frost was right: "These woods are lovely, dark and deep...."



Malaysia

Malaysia has been my home for more than two decades. The country is known for its diversity. It's a place where Malays, Chinese, and Indians live together in harmony and mutual respect. But diversity is not simply about racial differences. The real trauma of diversity comes from differing values, ideologies, and practices. Those cut across racial lines. The ability to accommodate, much less respect, completely different values has not been mastered many places in the world, but Malaysia continues to try. These episodes describe some of the differences I've encountered in this setting.

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The Kuala Lumpur March

March 1987

The office is two and one-third Sousas from the house. (The Sousa is a measure of distance equivalent to the number of 30-inch steps taken by a person whistling or humming a march by John Philip Sousa at 120 beats per minute. As a measure of distance, it is somewhat imprecise since, for example, "Washington Post" has only three strains with an eight-measure break while, on the other hand, "Stars and Stripes Forever" has a break of 24 measures with its famous piccolo strain played at least three times; "El Capitan" is somewhere in the middle. Nevertheless, as a measure of distance, the Sousa is greatly preferable to, for example, the Tchaikovsky or, God help us, the Debussy. The former could be a measure for either continents or atoms; the latter, clouds. The Sousa, for all its imprecision, is at least down to earth without getting as sordid as the Bartók or as rural as the Copeland; if not quite so grand as the Mahler or the Wagner, it is at least loftier than the Beatles.) The distance from the house to the office is one "Washington Post," one "Stars and Stripes Forever," and the bugle strain of "El Capitan" done twice, second time with the woodwind obbligato. We walk it twice a day.



The Kuala Lumpur House

1987

The house sits beside and beneath a five-strand section of electric wire which, silhouetted against the sky, looks like a music staff. It is inhabited alternately by a flock of crows and a covey of sparrows. One discerns the weather by reading the music.

Single-note measures—all the birds on the same wire—connotes fair and hot; a sparrow-chord, rain; a tune of crows, wind. The other day a combination of crows and sparrows formed an A-flat minor diminished 7th. We had a storm that blew down trees and fences and shut off power for 24 hours. Today a bright blue bird with a yellow head is perched on B natural. I am looking for an overcoat.



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The Smells of Kuala Lumpur

August 1987

There is a fruit here known as “the king.” *Durian* is the formal name. It looks like a pineapple; when peeled, it looks like pods of large, milky grapes. But what makes durian king is neither looks nor taste. You approach a durian stand thinking of pineapple. And as you approach, you find yourself wondering where nearby is the open sewer into which 200 squatters obviously deposited their breakfasts.

Durian is an olfactory invasion with staying power. Deposit a fresh, uncut durian in the trunk of a car, drive five miles, and the car’s re-sale value has declined \$875; twenty miles and you pray for auto theft. The smell of durian defies Air Wick, aerosol insecticides, kerosene and pipe smoke. In a room where durian has been during the past week, you wish for odors that are merely repulsive—dirty diapers, limburger cheese, or sulfur. It will seep into walls, carpets, curtains, dishes, and woodwork and set like concrete. Hotels forbid it. It travels well in open spaces—a single durian regularly permeates a four-block radius. It is king. And if, by some willed sensory black-out you manage to approach a durian close enough for a taste, it’s not half bad. There’s a (sealed) container full in our fridge.

And another thing.

Ann tells me it’s fish. The substance I now describe is far more aggressive. It is rotten bacon, low tide, feedlot, paper mill, biogas, and fish market, all mingled with stale cigar smoke. It is

The Smells of Kuala Lumpur

a common Kuala Lumpur breakfast, no doubt inspired by the mandate to get to work on time: no one could linger at this breakfast table. On a sweltering overcast morning when the neighbors cook this dish, your eyes water, nose clogs, mouth dries out, ears droop, and skin crinkles. To ride in a bus past a place of this smell is to put your head into the exhaust fumes for relief. That otherwise sane-looking humanoids could actually place this substance in their MOUTH simply defies imagination. And I will not get close enough to be proven wrong.

The food stalls are wonderful. Portable, potable, and plentiful. To walk by *makan* stalls is sensory bliss. Fresh fruits, barbecue ham, stir-fried vegetables, ginger-garlic-onion sauces, soy, curries, oven-fresh bread, roti, coffee, teh tarik, and fried rice all assail the nostrils with promises of Nirvana, Heaven, Tao, and Mecca.. It's anticipatory bliss intensified by the clove cigarette smoke and the incense burning in the entrance.

Kuala Lumpur is a nasal wonderland, complete with chamber of horrors and freak shows, but also with an abundance of stellar attractions.



The Sounds of Kuala Lumpur

September 1987

The sounds deserve a separate treatment from sights and smells. For the moment let's forego descriptions of those vehicular roars that inflict people everywhere and focus on those animate ones more or less distinct to this place. There are two general classifications: animal and human, though the precise dividing line is blurred for reasons that will become apparent.

Animals speak the same language everywhere, don't they? I mean a mockingbird symphony and a cricket concerto sound pretty much the same in South Carolina and Kansas and Colorado and Malaysia. Just note that they are here in abundance making the atmosphere shimmer with woodwind- and string-like vibrations. The rooster fanfares are striking. About six of the fowls live in the neighborhood, and their efforts at trumpeting are quite distinct. Did you ever *watch* a rooster crow? It's a more pompous and ludicrous sight than a political speech. Anyway, the difference is in the follow-through. Some cut short the final "dooooooooo" (of the cock-a-doodle-dooo) and it sounds as if they've been stepped on by a rhinoceros. Other birds hold it out and it sounds as if a train whistle is stuck while the engine speeds away into the distance. I find myself encouraging the boys to be thorough in their follow-through. It's a gimmick that helps in golf and in marketing. It only seems appropriate in crowing.

And speaking of crowing. The crow *contata* is a single-note rasp, grating to the ears. And four of the old bandits live here-

The Sounds of Kuala Lumpur

abouts. I have developed a grudging respect after being spoken to, warned away, and finally buzzed by them when one of their colleagues was ill and grounded. We speak every morning. But despite their apparent independence, whenever one is hurt or dying, the others will stay in sight until the end. They won't actually sit with the afflicted, but they will stay close by and keep off any human or canine or feline critters intent on euthanasia. They care for their kin.

More on the humorous side is the domestic dog serenade. The other night while home alone the neighborhood dog let forth a pitiful lament. The Psalmist could have learned from that howl. It was so infectious that four other neighborhood mutts picked up the chorus, and for awhile it was as if a pack of coyotes were in the area. But on reflection it seemed that the soloist was serious and the others were mocking. Such is the sympathy amongst the animals. As Tillich said, "Sometimes the misfortunes of even the best of friends is not displeasing to us."

The feline soloist is more prima donna. When the cat stuck its head in the door and let out a loud "*Meeooww!*" he seemed terribly offended when I responded in kind. We meowed at each other for a couple of minutes, then he went off in a huff. Maybe he was offended when I barked at him.

Then there are the humans. The morning begins here at 5:30 with a solitary cup of coffee. At 5:45-ish the local mosque begins its first of the day call to prayers with a haunting Arabic chant followed by the minor-tune of the Muezzin. The speaker is two miles away, but on a clear morning it's as if it were next

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door. The sound is haunting. Another mosque is also within earshot, but this one has an inferior speaker-system, and its caller has a high-pitched whiney sound. The two together are vivid reminders of the Other World in which we live.

As the cuckoo clock next door rings out six, the Hindu family begins mantra-chanting with crescendos in direct proportion to the amount and type of liquid consumed the previous night. Tinkling bells and the six-note chant go on until around 6:15. By then the other neighbors are pounding spices in a stone mortar and pestle roughly in time with the chants.

But the real treat is the old Christian across the street. Senility barely describes his state of energetic out-of-it-ness. Walking around the neighborhood without his teeth and with his sarong, he speaks to everyone in fortissimo the Beatitudes in mixed Tamil and English. The other evening we were returning from a call and found him standing on top of the sliding board in the park declaiming to no one in particular some obscure Bible verses. But the man is a singer. Loud. At almost any hour you can get the full, unabridged repertoire of the old Cokesbury Hymnal booming throughout the neighborhood. I had really forgotten how many verses "Sweet Hour of Prayer" has; and "Just As I Am" and "Jesus Loves the Little Children." Last Tuesday evening the usuals were complemented by complete renditions of the Doxology and the Gloria Patri. Last week it was "Joy to the World" and "O Little Town of Bethlehem." You just never know.



The Kuala Lumpur Fire

March 1988

Four days without rain and with sun shining on a field cut three days before can create a condition of spontaneous combustion. Actually the fire wasn't too bad. It lasted only 90 minutes or so, and it took only an hour to get the briars and smoke out of our clothes.

A fire out of control sounds a lot like water cascading down a drainpipe.

Four of us formed a bucket brigade second in competence only to the Keystone Kops. When the Fire Brigade arrived, they were kind enough not to laugh, at least in front of us. Anyway, we almost had it under control by the time they arrived—about half an hour after being called. We heard them racing all over the neighborhood looking for us before they found the place. When he heard the sirens, our neighbor said, "Here already!" though in fact they were still ten minutes away. Anyway we insisted our colleague readjust her skirt to normal length from their tucked-into-panties position more appropriate for fighting fires than for greeting firemen.

Our expertise is certainly somewhat amateurish. One was dumping a pan of water over the fence to fill the bucket held by another (easier than lifting a full bucket, you know). About 30% hit the bucket. It was quite hot, so the recipient was looking forward to a shower anyway. I was more concerned with the rats and snakes in the tall grass than with the flames, which did

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subdue a little under the barrage of 20+ buckets of water and about a ton of sweat.

Organizationally, we left something to be desired. The standard bucket-brigade dynamics seemed to elude us. The role at the point was pretty clear, though the decision whether to establish a wet fire-break or to douse the fiercest flames was never really resolved. But filling and passing the buckets was both too heavy and too mundane to inspire sustained commitment. So one went off to call the Fire Brigade, being the only one of us who knew the number, and another went after a neighbor's hose. Both were long-range strategic moves. Two of us continued with the immediate tactics.

In the midst of tactics, strategy sometimes seems pretty abstract. Convincing the neighbor 1) that the fire was a problem ("It happens all the time here. They usually burn themselves out."); 2) that we could borrow a hose; 3) that a 9-foot clogged hose wasn't nearly so useful as his 50-footer once the broken nozzle was removed; it seemed at the moment beside the point. In fact, this piece of strategy proved a lifesaver. And the Fire Brigade that was called saved the neighbor's house. So the long- and short-range efforts do work together. But all the while, one was handing full buckets over the fence and I was taking them to the fire and dumping, we were wishing for more bodies.

To celebrate the victory, our bucket-lifter took the last full bucket back to the fire brigade caller and, with appropriate religious incantations....you know Methodists do a lot of baptizing during Holy Week, and pouring has always been an acceptable

The Kuala Lumpur Fire

alternative to sprinkling. Our colleague became an honorary Methodist yesterday.

And that's the news from Taman Yarl, where all the men—and all the women—and all the children are....



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The Crows of Kuala Lumpur

April 1989

Our neighborhood is crowded, thoroughly and systematically. Everywhere you go, you are under crowful scrutiny. No matter where you are, a soft cawing pervades the background—unless you step out of line at which time a fierce screaming emanates from the nearest treetop, power line or hedge, warning the trespasser to watch your step.

Each bird has his territory; between the house and the store, Fred, George, Harry and Tom cover the main pathway; the alternate route is watched over by Sam, Lucifer, Al and Mabel. They acknowledge a greeting with soft contempt, maintaining the aloof perspective required for effective crowing.

It takes corporateness and intentionality to crow a neighborhood.

Their meetings aren't long. They occur twice daily, seven days a week with an average attendance of 500. They're more of a stop-in than a lengthy deliberation; at any given time, there are no more than 30 in attendance. The turnover is rapid and regular. They arrive in groups of 3 to 15 between 6:40 and 7:00 AM and PM. Occasionally a lone straggler will show up, but this is rare. And occasionally a group will by-pass the meeting and head straight for the day's work, but this is the exception. Maybe they started late or checked in the previous night.

The actual meetings consist of some subdued crow talk, as if receiving the day's commissioning or accounting for its accom-

The Crows of Kuala Lumpur

plishments. Then they leave, as they arrived, in small groups moving swiftly either to the day's scavenging or the night's roost. In daylight, they move off towards the south; at evening, it's back northwest.

The venue for this coordination is the topmost span of a high tension line tower near our back porch. It never varies. When that span overcrowds, some move off rather than occupying lower perches. Occasionally one will occupy a loop in the line itself, but mostly it's the tower. From there come the Orders of the Day that make for effective saturation of the entire area.

They check in and they check out, not as if punching a time clock, but as if holding a briefing and debriefing for each day. Perhaps they're tracking progress in the crowing of the area; or tabulating successes and identifying future maneuvers, reflecting on some edge insights, inventing new methods, sharing effective approaches or generally signifying the day. Perhaps also a brief ritual, though given their frequent turnover, it's more likely a quick formal send out that reminds them of the profound function of crowing.

Rarely do they intrude. When they do, it's related to death—approaching or realized. When one of their number falls ill, a cadre of the fiercest stands guard warning off all human and feline and canine encroachers intent on euthanasia. If you get too close, you're in for more than a verbal warning, you're in for attack. If a bird of another feather falls ill, these same guardians affect the ministrations of the grim reaper.

But mostly they watch.

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It seems effortless and natural, this crowing of a neighborhood. Saturation seems from the outside as natural as rainfall. But we know, you and I: significating a place, imbuing it with either cawing or spirit is as delicate and relentless a task as conducting a symphony or running a business or writing a book. Of course, all it takes is a decision to win; then the rituals, the meetings, the studies, and the assignments come quite naturally. Nor forced, but necessary; voluntary but predictable; regular but flexible; nonchalant, but structured.

We can learn something from the crows.



Exeunt Crows

May 1991

The crows don't come here anymore. As recently as a month ago more than 500 gathered twice a day atop the power pole outside our house for assignments and debriefing on their mission of crowing the neighborhood. Now there are none. The pole sits barren and stark against the rising sun, bereft of its feathery visitors vocally ritualizing their delight at the day's opportunities.

Occasionally a lone bird approaches the perch, then nonchalantly moves on without stopping for more than a glance. And you can still see several flights of six to eight high above, weaving lazy eights almost as if casually searching for an anchor point. And then they are gone.

It's not as if the crows have left; the whole neighborhood still echoes with a background of soft cawing. But their gatherings have ceased. Their disciplined corporateness is replaced by random appearances no different from other species of less remarkable (but more colorful and melodious) birds.

Why?

A few weeks ago, the authorities declared war on crows, and took to shooting them at their evening nesting spots. But the effect of this crude stratagem was negligible: the birds simply nested elsewhere—and even appeared one evening en masse (500+) at the edge of the city center, almost in defiance of the inept persecution. And they kept coming to their morning meetings. Only their direction of arrival was different. It is not

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likely that so minor an interruption could terminate the morning ritual.

On the other hand, it could be internal tension. With so many participants passionately intent on having their recommendations recognized and carried out, and so little concern for hearing or honoring the consensus of the group, small wonder that they stopped meeting. Perhaps they each know what they were going to do, and did not need the input of others trying to tell them how.

Or maybe they neglected their symbols. The story of what they were doing and why, represented in their symbols, fades quickly without frequent rehearsals. So why bother? Just go to work.

No one knows the mystery of the crows and their gatherings. But they will be missed.



More on the Crows

July 2008

Yesterday the crows attacked.

It's been a long time since I've paid any attention to crows: they left the tower and we moved to another part of town some time ago. But they haven't gone away. Yesterday made that clear.

It was a day from the dark side, even before the crows. A nagging hip pain had prevented sleep the night before. Upon arriving at work, I discovered that a check I had deposited last month was lost in the bank's automated system. And I found that the company audit had not yet been delivered and the tax was not yet filed and the board meeting required signatures and on and on with crucial minutiae.

I was headed across the street to the bank, waiting on the sidewalk for a break in the traffic when the first crow came flying by a bit more closely than usual, but I blithely ignored it. He perched on top of a nearby pole and looked me over carefully. I glanced up and noticed his gaze, and then another buzzed me.

The traffic broke, so I moved across to the median, there to wait the 52 seconds until the light changed. While there, 3 more crows flew by, one at a time like fighter planes on a strafing mission, each buzzing more closely than his predecessor. They were getting my attention.

When the light changed, I walked quickly across the street, and upon getting onto the sidewalk another buzzed me, and the next one actually hit me in the head—the back of the head since

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I was, by then, running full tilt for a covered bus stop to take shelter. Fellow pedestrians were politely giggling at the scene. I had been crowed.

Upon reflection I realize that the hit was actually pretty soft. He didn't sink claws into my skull as if trying to pluck me out of the sea of urbanity. He didn't sink a beak into my head as if trying to break open a savory morsel. This is remarkable because these particular crows have substantial claws and beaks. The hit felt more like a small feather pillow gently tossed from behind and ricocheting off into the distance.

So maybe it wasn't an attack. I've known them to be protective of an injured colleague attempting to frighten away predators, but neither disabled crow nor lurking predator was obvious. I also wondered if my bald spot was particularly attractive (or threatening) to them.

So maybe it was an occasion to wake me up to the gift of the day, despite its appearance.

Crows are remarkable harbingers of mystery.



The Jungle Path, Taman Negara Malaysia

1990

Malaysia has vast jungles, parts of which are open for tourists to explore. We occasionally engage in jungle trekking.

Soon you are lost in reverie amidst deceptive tranquility and you find yourself quiet in the silent bombast of the jungle. No space is empty; no time spare; and no life is secure. Vitality in the jungle is continuous and you intrude into its milieu with trepidation. It's a place where life and death are continually vying for preeminence and where the boundaries between them merge. Without care, one could become a participant rather than an observer in this cosmic contention.

To enter is to be enchanted, to visit a place where only images can approximate description: multiple hues of green and brown ripple in the shadows and shade of the pulsating backdrop; webs, insects, and butterflies sparkle as a glistening leaf makes its swirling dive to a ground where life and death coalesce into pure fertility.

To be still is to elicit the luxuriant life timidly concealed as you pass: squirrel-like rodents scurry up the tree where nondescript birds chirp out their manifesto to the unseen creatures below.

Trees are entwined with suffocating plants whose tendrils reach down to the trail; orchids parasitically cling for position in the sun; shapeless nests form dark clots blocking the visual flow of limbs and trunk.

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The damp green smell of fern and loam and moss and wet and rot assaults the nostrils; the mossy, springy loamy path has varicose roots forming irregular staircases for ascent and descent.

The distant gurgle of an unmistakable creek is concealed beneath profuse foliage as we stumble across slick damp logs loosely laid over the veiled gully. The wildly waving fern exaggerates a negligible draft into occasion for hyperbole.

Cicadas fiddle their undercurrent vitality to the atmosphere. Spiny moss and feathery ferns provide visual static to the forest view. Ominous holes under stumps and beneath the sod and cut into the hillside give mute evidence of unseen beings.

They say there are hornbill birds and huge butterflies and mountain vistas and roaring waterfalls, and gigantic flowers and huge snakes, even perhaps tigers and monkeys. They say the Orang Asli people hunt in these jungles with blowpipes. They say that people have disappeared here. They say that wars have been fought in jungles like this. But today is for passing through the mysterious play of the earth without too much more than observation and appreciation of its rare beauty.



Malaysian Cuisine

July 1992

We're making some changes in adapting to life in Malaysia. We've been introduced to a canteen inside our office building that has a massive buffet featuring Malay and Indian specialties. Fish, prawn, beef rendang, curry, fish, rice, eggplant, fish, squid, mutton, potato cakes, and three types of chicken. You can have all you can eat plus a plate of fresh fruit (pineapple, papaya, guava, mango, banana, etc.) for around US\$1.50.

Of course, the dishes tend to be spicy, ranging roughly from "*Oh My God!!!*" (mild) to "*Yahghhh!!!*" (strong). It's tongue-scorching, head-itching, nose-running, neck-sweating HOT. I like spicy food and even enjoy eating horseradish by the spoonful. But this makes jalapeño peppers dipped in Tabasco sauce seem kind of bland. A mouthful would turn Placido Domingo into an instant soprano.

The obvious antidote, ice water, only spreads the fire down the gullet into nether regions best left unmentioned. Let's just say that you know it for hours. The only effective palliative is sweets, and the fresh fruits are ideal. Yet people here persist in adding chili to the diet "to give it a bit of spice." Their digestive tracks are obviously asbestos-lined, perhaps an evolutionary leap.

Despite the heat, the food here is unparalleled, both in quality and in accessibility. Around our office (within a block) are Thai, Chinese (3), Japanese, Indian banana-leaf, Malay, and Kentucky Fried Chicken. One restaurant features mild chicken

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rice lunches and provides incredible service. Since I always order the same thing, when they see me coming, they prepare it, and the food reaches the table at the same time as I. There are also some fine eating places nearby, including a Hilton Hotel where, aside from their usual gastronomic delights, they serve a “high tea” from 4-6 daily with a massive assortment of goodies. Malaysians are gourmets by upbringing and experience, and the food is remarkably cheap.

It’s little wonder that a popular greeting is “Have you had your lunch? (breakfast/dinner?)” It’s not that anyone cares about whether you’re facing starvation, or that assistance would be forthcoming if you were. No more than our Western expression, “How are you?” reflects a medical interest. We’d be quite chagrined were anyone to tell us. The question about food rests on the assumption that there is wonder to be experienced in encounter with it, and that assumption is accurate in Malaysia. We Americans stuff ourselves with carcinogenic and cholesterol-laden, salt-filled, sugar-saturated, calorie-ridden, fried and greasy delicacies. Where else in the world are the malnourished overweight? Is it by preference or training that we prefer most that which is bad for us?

Perhaps other cultures are not so inured against beneficial diets as are we in the West. Perhaps TV ads have brainwashed us with the desirability of the unsuitable: all the fast foods are promoted for anything but their nutritional value, and we love it.

In Malaysia the food is so exceptional that it needs no advertising. There are, no doubt, unhealthy foods here. Personally

The Ants in our Kitchen in Kuala Lumpur

speaking, there is an overabundance of sugar used in almost everything. But otherwise, it's great.

I've gained a lot of weight.



The Ants in our Kitchen in Kuala Lumpur

October 1991

They don't do much; they don't bite and they don't smell bad and they don't leave tracks and they don't make noise. You just know they're there. Perpetually there. You can spray, clean, scald, poison, sweep, empty, and wash every relevant space; but the next morning there they are in their single file line, scurrying across the counter, up the wall, over the sill, and out the window. And back. This is their form of harassment.

Let a gecko (small lizard) die, and they swarm by the thousands, each intent on scavenging a piece of the once-mobile flesh. Teams remove the larger segments, and in a matter of hours, the skeleton is completely clean. The perpetrators of this engineering marvel are nowhere to be seen. Their only evidence is the line across the counter.

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Sometimes a spot of grease or a drop of honey escapes the cleaning cloth. In moments, they are quivering with the movement of tiny black legs. Once the trash liner split and a few drops of vile liquid seeped onto the floor. Within an hour, the floor was a blackened mass of scurrying movement. To walk across it was to leave footprints of dead ants—but also to leave their terrified relatives industriously clambering up your leg. It's best in those circumstances, to mop up the squiggling mess, then to dunk the mop in a deep bucket and leave it there to soak.

They aren't invincible. A puff of insecticide or a dash of boiling water or a damp cloth or a footstep will cause instant death. But does that eliminate their presence? Not on your life. Whether it's by spontaneous multiplication or phoenix-like regeneration, they or their relatives take up the slack in an instant. You can kill and kill and kill. The ants will return and return and return. An anteater would die of gluttony.

Best learn to tolerate the single line on the counter. What it masks is a far more massive seething presence, the sinister potential of which is best left concealed.



Talking With Chickens, Kuala Lumpur

1994

A flock of chickens lives across the street along the footpath to the store. The size of the flock and the chickens making it up seems to vary with the season, but they are always present when I'm crossing the drain onto the path. They're pecking away at the grass or flapping in a sand-wallow or racing this way and that either towards or away from the rooster, depending on their sexual appetites. It isn't clear to whom they belong since there is no fencing to restrain them—just the street corner with its deep drains on two sides and a row of houses on the diagonal. They could be abandoned for all I know. They seem to roost around and under a large dense bush, and for all the young chicks that seem to sprout periodically; no one seems to bother about gathering eggs.

Normally when you walk past a flock of chickens, it scatters with some show of panic, probably designed more to flatter your self-esteem than to express real fear. I have recently made it a point to play a different game with them. No more content to be an object of feigned terror, I decided to be an over-sized, somewhat obscure conversationalist.

So I talk with them whenever I use the path. A soft clucking sound in deep falsetto usually does the job. Anyway, it's what they seem to be doing with each other. So I add mine to the undercurrent of sound. Most often it goes ignored—and so do I. They don't run away, but neither do they gather around to hear

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what I have to say. They just keep pecking and clucking. Were I to be so thoroughly ignored in a group of people, I might be highly offended at their rudeness. But you have to make some allowances for chickens. They haven't had the opportunity to be schooled in etiquette. So they show overtly what we have learned to cover up with feigned interest and attention: utter indifference to what's being presented.

Maybe their own conversation is enthralling; maybe I'm just adding some affirmation of the truism one has just uttered; maybe I'm muttering about the sand stuck in my craw; maybe my clucks don't amount to much. It's hard to interpret the body language of a chicken.

I wonder about the egg consumed at breakfast, or the chicken rice lunch to which I am looking forward. They seem oblivious to all that—which would occasion attacks of existential angst in most other species. They don't seem to mind my cannibalism, blithely accepting this strange gawking clucker as if I were a benign part of the landscape.

There are some experiences that make you wonder. Chickens are one of them, and sometimes you have to be a little silly to get around the mental fences we've built to keep out the surrounding Mystery of life.



Lost on the Island

August 1994

We once took a holiday to an island.

Except for a strip of beach on one side, the island is covered with jungle. Its residents consist of 25 people, one wild boar, multiple monkeys, pythons and pit vipers, a few cattle, and at least one lizard. Fortunately, we met only the cattle and the lizard. An island is ideal for getting lost since all you have to do is to head for a beach, and then continue to follow it until you reach the place where you began. That's the myth.

On the occasion of being lost on an island, your mind goes in quite different directions, especially when the environment in which you are lost consists of what pulp fiction writers refer to as "steaming jungle." Prior to this occasion the only jungles in which I have had the privilege of wandering around were in rather cool mountains where the shade and breeze were constant. Not on the island. There the jungle reeked with humidity, and the mountains, though quite steep, harbored not even the faintest zephyr of a breeze. What steamed was the grass, the leaves (many of which held small pools of water slowly evaporating in the heat), and yourself. Glasses fogged up and breath was almost visible. It was nothing at all like previous experiences of jungle.

This business of following the coastline until you reach "home" is all quite nice in story books. But islands typically do not have smooth coastlines around which you can wander. First, there are rocky points which form impenetrable barriers to the

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hiker; then, on the occasional stretches of beach, the sand is nearly impossible for walking—each step sinks ankle-deep; finally the sun: if you thought the jungle was steaming, words do not adequately describe the searing heat of the unfiltered equatorial sun at noon. Walking around an island is no piece of cake.

There were trails (see “trials”). The one we took in the beginning was well-marked with red paint on trees and rocks. On the steepest grades up the mountain, there were ropes. The island is made of three mountains, and the trail from one side to the other went through the pass.

The red trail was basically only unpleasant, so we decided to take the black trail home. The makers of that trail obviously failed their mountaineering exam, but passed with flying colors their test on misleading followers. It began OK with well-marked, not-so-steep pathways headed around the south end of the island. The path cut around the rocky points and seemed a neat way to get back in reasonable time for lunch and a rest before a cool dip in the sea. Then, at a stretch where the path met the beach, the trail markings vanished. Nothing. We went back to the last marker, found it, and then looked around to no avail. After three tries, we finally trudged across the sand to the other end vowing to throttle the trail marker if ever we met, and there it was—another black mark. This continued over the next two hours, alternating between ecstasy and fury at whoever considered themselves helping poor tourists to get around.

Finally, climbing exhausted over a boulder and noticing that the way down was rapidly vanishing under an incoming

Lost on the Island

tide, we spotted a few swimmers and knew that help was within reach.

Bathed in sweat and briars and sand and disgust, we stumbled up to the plump Englishman and uttered those timeless words of desperation: "Hi. Having a good swim?"

We were still half hour from the "other place" where we'd planned lunch, and another half hour from "home."

Still, an island is the best place on which to get lost. Though filled with Mystery, at least it's finite. Only eight miles around. Mainland jungles, though cooler, can go on for days, not just hours. And there's no border to which you can repair for a fix on location or a cooling dip. Of course, it's best not to get lost.



The Birds at Fraser's Hill, Malaysia

1994

He just appeared — all two inches of him. He appeared on the evergreen branch about five feet from my face. He was about the length of an index finger, but every ounce was full of energy. Solid gray with black-tipped wings and black-capped head, he let out a series of chirps neither tuneful nor alarmist, but just announcing his presence.

He gave me a good once-over and appeared to decide that our species gap was sufficient to protect the privacy of his preen. So he began a painstaking job of making ready for the day. Ruffling up and down his feathers, stretching neck and unfolding wings one at a time, he seemed to examine, then to stroke each feather, clearing it of wrinkles and dust or mites or whatever might have accumulated during the night that might be inappropriate for his day's excursions. This was the same bird that last night explored the nearby flowers, much as a hummingbird would except for the hovering, and took a taste of nectar from each bud. This morning he was solitary in minute attention to appearances.

Later another bird appeared as a bright green blur across the road. When our eyes were drawn to focus on the destination, all we saw was the bush, the blur's end point.

"What the hell was that?!!" I exclaimed, still rattled and uncertain whether the sight was a bug or an animal or what.

The Birds at Fraser's Hill, Malaysia

"Sana magpie koning," remarked the local caretaker, casually strolling by from the opposite direction. "Dia dari bawa bukit." "Kasih," I replied, wondering what in the world a green magpie would be doing at the bottom of the hill.

Taking a closer look at the bush, we noticed a wary eye peeking out from the undergrowth. Finding the coast clear—we were frozen in place—he hopped out and paused briefly en route to the next bush. That's when he provided us with a good look: green; a black eye mask and wing tips, yellow bill—size of a mockingbird—and a squawk like a wounded moose. He moved at a low level from bush to bush where he disappeared from sight, invisibly watching for predators as he fed.

He wasn't exactly shy—just private. Perhaps it was none of our business whether his diet was vegetarian or carnivorous... or whether his table manners were up to standard. And perhaps his willingness to display his plumage was more attuned to mating than to eating. One thing for sure: our presence was totally uninteresting to him. Soon we heard a flutter—still without any visible signs—then silence. He was gone, leaving only an appreciation for a glimpse of beauty.



Eating Out in Penang, Malaysia

1994

Eating in Penang is out of this world. Of course, not every aspect of the other world is sublime: Heaven, Purgatory and Hell all have their places, and sometimes the distinction among them is blurred. So it is with Penang's dietary delicacies. Here are two examples.

First, "The End of the World" is well known by aficionados of seafood as extraordinary. The name relates to its location which is 100 meters past the end of the road along the beachfront on the island of Penang. The "restaurant" lives up to its name: it has all the ambience of an abandoned, dilapidated shack—peeling paint, weathered sides, rickety planks, concrete floor, missing walls...

To enter, you squeeze through crowded tables past sloshing fish tanks, stepping over open drains past buckets of Pepsi and Orange and beer on ice. All this is amidst the deafening din of waiters, waitresses, patrons, kids, and occasional cats in a melee of digestive delight. You wedge into a seat at a splintered round table covered with a once clean cloth, and yell for service. A waiter comes over and splashes scalding tea into a glass, the touch of which raises blisters. While waiting for the order, you engage in the local sport: using slick plastic chopsticks to grasp oil-glazed peanuts on a platter. It's a test of dexterity and patience; some plates of peanuts are said to last for years before some frustrated diner dispenses with etiquette and gobbles down a handful.

Eating Out in Penang, Malaysia

Then comes the first dish—chili crabs. The aroma, texture, flavor and taste are captivating. You are quickly absorbed in getting volumes of food out of its shell and into the mouth as rapidly as possible. The second dish—tiger prawns—arrives too soon, with the third—steamed fish—quick on its heels. By now you're enmeshed in the elaborate and sensuous task of stuffing yourself—all concerns about cholesterol and diet long banished. There follows an uninterrupted flow: lobster, scallops, shrimp, mussels, squid, and sea cucumber, all succulent, fresh, spicy. Then comes fried rice and noodles along with endless refills of tea.

After 90 minutes or so, you've reached far beyond satiation, and you waddle back to the bus in that stupor of agony and euphoria which characterizes a meal well-consumed.

Secondly, there is "Starlight"—an urban, 2-story establishment complete with receptionist, uniformed waiters, mirrors, chandeliers, polished ivory and lacquered wooden furnishings. The ambience was pure Chinese, from the dragon gracing the entranceway to the front lawn parking lot presided over by a dwarf. From the beginning you suspect this place is special.

Roast suckling pig: a huge platter with the piglet splayed flat and browned to a crisp. The animal was split down the middle from forehead to rear so that it lay flat, staring at you, legs akimbo, ears perked up and tail standing at attention. The waiter took a perverse delight in rotating the dish so that each of us got a full frontal and a full posterior view of the corpse. Our initial thoughts were NOT of Charles Lamb's "Dissertation Upon a Roast Pig;" They were more on mortality in general, and

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certain viewpoints of the body in particular. Becoming rapidly vegetarian, we were quickly served thin chips of skin—the pork version of potato chips. They weren't bad, so we received the second round gratefully—this time more skin with a bit of flesh adding some flavor. Gratefully, that is, until I found that the piece I was having a little trouble biting into was an ear. So much for gratitude.

By now the piglet was stripped bare of skin. We carnivores, appetite whetted by the greasy, salty, crunchy bacon of the rind, gazed expectantly at the platter of pure, delicious tender pork meat. Some of us were actually drooling in anticipation. Then the waiter whisked it away with barely a nod. It's to be mixed with salted vegetables and made into chop suey...tomorrow.

Sometimes in Asia it's difficult to keep smiling.



September

September 1995

September was a dreary month in South Carolina where I grew up. School started, the days were often rainy, the leaves began to turn, and the World Series was not yet. Neither the band nor the football team had yet reached its stride. Windbreakers replaced short sleeves, and a distinct chill was in the air promising misery to come. Mostly it was gray, both in color and in mood.

In Malaysia with the lack of seasons, it's not the same. Although the haze from Indonesian forest fires appears and, supported by local exhaust fumes, threatens to choke both vision and smell, the color is more brown than gray. Heavily sprinkled with green, the forests are alive and well.

Just *how* alive is the startling part. In every culture you can search the news in order to gain some insight into its depth. In the USA, news is when man bites dog. Both parties are domesticated (the varieties of this formula are endless). Tornado striking mobile homes is another common news formula, this time displaying Nature dismantling puny efforts at civilization. Some recent articles from the Malaysian newspapers provide an altogether different view.

Two weeks ago a 6-meter (20 foot) python killed and consumed a man on a rubber estate. Actually the snake didn't quite complete the feast since the man's brother happened by when the swallowing was half done. He panicked and called officials who quickly killed the snake, releasing the corpse. Photos of the

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event confirmed this to be no figment of fertile imaginings, and for final proof, the python has been gazetted for display at the national museum. Local authorities are complaining that they want to keep it as a lucky charm. But Federal officials are intent on displaying the beast because 1) it's the largest on record in the nation; 2) no one has been eaten by a python in at least 10 years; and 3) many rural folk regard a python as magic and will cut it up, boil it, eat it, and perform various rituals around the place of its demise if it is not handled by authorities. Since officials have taken over, a certain caution pervades the estates, since pythons are known to travel in pairs. A couple of days later, another one was found nearby that measured only about 4 meters (12+ feet). "Shorty" they called it.

Today's paper displayed the photo of another python—this time 5.5 meters (about 18 feet)—that had recently swallowed a wild boar. Someone had spotted it and, thinking the bulge was probably human, shot the snake dead. Subsequent autopsy revealed the error. Probably the most surprising feature of this story was the fact that a passer-by had a gun. It's a capital offense here to possess firearms. Obviously there are exceptions.

Last week two tigers killed a couple of villagers near their home. Officials have not yet found the villains, but locals report seeing the suspects around the area. "This accounts for the chickens we've been missing," replied one.

Malaysia is an economic boom-nation with an 8.9% growth over the past 5 years. Construction is everywhere, and the world's tallest skyscraper is nearing the top-up point. (It'll keep

September

the record 3 months before a Chinese, then a Japanese skyscraper surpasses its height.) Condos and cars are everywhere at outrageous prices, and they're snapped up as soon as offered. Yet the veneer of urbanization is thin. Even the city is not immune: a 4-meter deep and 10-meter long sinkhole appeared in the middle of downtown recently, closing the street in front of a 5-star hotel.

September here has its own character.



Delightful Diversity

25 May 1998

It was a lunchtime break during a seminar on Strategic Thinking with the Malaysian Central Bank. A number of us were sitting around the table chatting, and I asked a senior manager seated across the table, if her name meant “victory” In Hindi.

“Yes,” she remarked, “Vijaya” is usually followed by “Lakshmi” or “kali” or one of the other gods. We have quite a few gods related to victory, and people are named for various ones of them. When we go to the temple, we pay attention especially to the one that relates to our name.”

“I’ve always wondered,” remarked a Chinese manager from the economic department, “how you manage to teach your children moral values. Do you have something like Sunday School like we do in Christianity, where kids can go and learn about the values? I sometimes think I’m not doing enough for my children, because we don’t go to church regularly.”

“We don’t have that kind of teaching in Hinduism. We don’t have a single book like the Koran or the Bible or the teachings of Buddha. There are so many stories. My children actually get the stories of the gods from comics. The Ramayana stories used to be on TV. And I try to relate them to the Power Rangers—they’re always changing shape and exercising their power.”

“When I was a boy,” said a senior manager, sitting beside her, “I was the only one from a Thai Buddhist family in a neighborhood of Malay Muslims. All my friends went to Mosque. I ran

Delightful Diversity

around playing with them, and when it was time for Mosque, I waited for them and then we ran around some more afterwards.”

“This is really remarkable,” I commented. “Malaysia has something to teach the rest of the world. Here we are at lunch having a casual conversation that includes a Hindu, a Buddhist, a Muslim, and a Christian, and it seems perfectly normal.”

“Yes,” continued, the Thai. “We were the only Buddhist family in our neighborhood. I remember the time all my friends went through circumcision. I wondered why, and they said it was a ritual. So I waited with them for a week while they recovered, then we went back to running around again. When a monk would come to visit us, all the boys in the village knew he was coming to our place because it was the only Thai style house around, so they would bring him to us.”

“We were brought up with differences. At home I had to speak Thai with my parents. But with all my Malay friends I had to speak Bahasa Malaysia. Then my father sent me to a Chinese school so I had to speak Mandarin, but also to play with the other kids, I had to learn Hokkien and Hakka. Now I also speak a little Japanese. It’s helpful to know several languages.”

All this was being recounted in perfect English.

Back to the Indian: “I took a trip to India recently; it was the first time, and it was so shocking to see all the poverty. I thought about it for a long time, and finally began to understand the sort of viciousness of the well-to-do. It’s to stay out of the sea of poverty that surrounds them. People will do anything to stay away from it. But there are very wealthy people

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and very intelligent people. And of course people think deeply about why conditions are like they are, so philosophy is a major preoccupation. I went to the Ganges and actually went into the water. Normally you would think about all the dirt and pollution in the river. But everyone was doing it, and it felt good like washing your sins away.”

I wonder sometimes why on earth “ethnic differences” are the supposed occasion for so much violence in the world. They can also be occasions of great delight. One is honored to encounter this obvious fact in practice.



Traffic in the Tropics

March, 2004

I am constitutionally unable to not-drive, even when I'm a passenger, which is most often the case in Kuala Lumpur. We use taxis to get around, and I've perfected the art of back seat driving, usually silently except for extraordinary situations.

Riding in a KL taxi gives one a front seat to Mystery in multiple guises. The roads are not bad at all, and are constantly being upgraded. That's not the issue. The issue is that they are massively overcrowded. Passing takes place on all sides. Typically three cars occupy two lanes. Horns are very rarely used since it's impolite to announce your presence in this culture. You just go ahead and hope. Motorcycles regularly weave in and out amongst the lineup of cars. (For a year I rode pillion on one to appointments, and could reach out and touch busses and trucks on both sides. But that's another story.)

At one expressway exit near our home, four full lanes of traffic merge into two lanes, and we inevitably find ourselves in the lane being squeezed out. They are now building a new exit, which will only increase the rush to get through.

Pedestrians pay no particular attention to the traffic. They cross streets whenever they choose, whether or not a rush is oncoming. They make a slight lift of the wrist (trying to wave inconspicuously) as if to say, "Slow down: I'm crossing."

There is a massive amount of trust shown by the local drivers—trust that the other guy will let you do whatever you're

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trying to do. It's the polar opposite of the "defensive driving" that I was taught, and I find it both terrifying and fascinating. (Isn't that a sign of awe?) A Malaysian native who now lives in the USA returned for a visit and called it "aggressive driving." Occasionally you come across an accident, usually involving a motorcycle. The gawking that accompanies it slows down traffic for as much as 3 miles behind the scene.

I've tried to read the newspaper to get away from the emotional turmoil of riding, but it just doesn't work. There are very many wrong ways to take us to our destination, and the driver usually tries at least one of them every trip. So my paying careful attention is not only neurotic and contemplative; it's also practical.

Occasionally I will actually drive in this melee. There are few other situations that require such intensity of attention to detail. (Probably open-heart surgery is one.) Not only do people drive on the "wrong" side of the road here, they also operate on completely different assumptions about right-of-way and speed and lanes. Misleading signage heightens the experience. We once spent an hour getting out of town because a massive rockslide had closed the road, but the signs didn't indicate that—nor did the three persons we asked at tollbooths. Then once you get on the road, there usually comes the rain. Not just rain, but RAIN! The tropical downpour type of rain. The kind where you can't see the road, much less oncoming traffic. But you're on an expressway, so slowing down or pulling over is equally dangerous. So you continue—and fortunately it usually stops after a short while; and then you discover that a massive log-laden lorry is

Traffic in the Tropics

breathing down your exhaust pipe. It's enough to make a person gasp in terror.

And traffic police are nowhere to be found. After all, they know better than to venture out in all this.

These encounters with traffic in the tropics are just practical ways of confronting contingency.... not simply the fact of my approaching death (though they bring that vividly to mind occasionally) but perhaps equally daunting, the fact that other people act out of totally different assumptions from mine. My assumptions about driving are, I believe, well founded and have seen me through hundreds of thousands of miles of driving in all sorts of conditions. They are not arbitrary. I trust them. People here don't even acknowledge them.

We say lots of fine things about diversity and tolerance, but let it hit us in the face, and we all turn into defensive bullies. My internal dialogue in these situations turns to a vocabulary that would embarrass a sailor. It's really quite hard to live in a world in which my way is not the only way, and maybe not even the best way. I find myself in a daily battle to block out that reality, and it just keeps intruding.

One day when in a taxi we were weaving through an incomparable traffic jam, I was reaching a fairly high level of frustration. The driver looked around at me and said, "You know, traffic jams are my hobby." After that, we had a great conversation, which, while not exactly relaxing, at least made it possible to avoid trying to escape the given situation.



The Conference

2006

We had a conference to facilitate with 100 persons the whole Life Insurance Company of a group. They have been a semi-government group, and known for public-sector-style operations. New managers that have been brought in suffered a culture shock at the obvious apathy of staff. "They just don't care! They come in at the last possible moment and leave as soon as 4:30 rolls around. They don't care about the work." This conference was one of several measures to attempt a transformation.

The omens were pretty bad. The CEO announced his resignation just a week ago. We had two sessions with appointed internal team facilitators who would assist with table conversations and action planning. They weren't interested enough to be apathetic. They were sitting around the tables bodily, but mentally somewhere else. Their question to the organizer was, "How are you going to get people to come in on Saturday for this conference?" When the organizer said, "It's compulsory," they commented something about difficulty of enforcement, etc.

Then the venue, which was originally set for a retreat setting out of town, had to be changed back to the office. The original venue was no longer available. And anyway the OIC conference (Organization of Islamic Countries) was in town that week with multiple road closures. We couldn't get there. And to get to the office, we had to arrive by 7:30 AM to avoid closed streets.

The Conference

Our preparations were somewhat in the mode of preparing for disaster, though as facilitators, we didn't let even ourselves admit it.

The day went beautifully. Everyone participated fully and enthusiastically, from the General Manager whose opening presentation was the first time I've ever seen statistics sing and dance around the screen, to the clerical staff whose suggestions about having robots greet customers got cheers and applause. It was an occasion of communication, creativity and resolve. The company has experienced (at least once) a new way of doing things—and experienced the reality of commitment and care that everyone said was missing. As one trainer who was doing a report remarked, "It's quite unusual to see so much group energy at 4PM on a Saturday afternoon."

Our experience was surprise throughout, and wonderment at what was happening. We were doing so little and so much was happening. We have quite a few reflections on what are appropriate next steps, but right now we are filled with gratitude and wonder.



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A Return

25 July 2010

It's a jolt to see how familiar it is to be back after 3 months away. The normal patterns of operation return as a sort of default, though I occasionally have to remember such minor details as putting on an apron before doing dishes, locking the outside grill before going to bed, and the taxi telephone number(s) for getting anywhere. But it's still familiar.

Getting back went smoothly—until arriving in Singapore. There I had arranged our hotel room in the wrong terminal (which meant an earlier than anticipated rise). Then the flight we were booked on had a technical fault resulting in an hour delay and a walk to another gate and re-security check-in. That was not too bad. But on getting to KL, there was a HUGE log-jam at immigration counters. The upshot was that we had to wait in line for 90 minutes. That was an ominous portent for what is to come.

We have to pack up the office and move. Ann began today and found 3 old laptops that we've worn out over the past two decades. There's really no telling what will emerge as we begin sorting through the accumulations of our time here.

Another possible portent of things to come was a minor earthquake felt in the office this morning (25 July 2010). Certainly the upcoming move will involve a considerable shakeup of our routines. It's not something I look forward to.

A Return

Good parts:

- The aircon works well in the bedroom
- the taxis have been courteous and efficient so far
- the walk to the store for the newspaper has been cleaned up and re-surfaced
- the office is being renovated on the façade
- various clerks recognize us
- the lattes at Coffee Bean and Secret Recipe are still among the best.



MEANDERINGS

Assunta October 2011

“Assunta” means the “Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary.” It’s also the name of a prominent hospital in Petaling Jaya that I’ve known for quite a long time. Rarely, however, do patients or staff manage to be assumed into the other world as did its patroness.

My first major encounter was in the outpatient clinic where I went for a persistent skin rash. The doctor asked if my family had a history of diabetes. When I said no, he prescribed a test which proved positive and I broke out laughing. The laughter was because it was less severe than what my imagination had diagnosed. Anyway, its immediate effect was a brief hospital stay for assessing the appropriate treatment. During that time a young student nurse brought in a graphic illustration of dietary restrictions which I assumed she had made for me. I thanked her and asked to keep it. When I saw the expression on her face, I quickly realized that it was a class project, not a gift, so I withdrew the request as graciously as possible. We both learned something.

My next encounter was through a series of appointments for regular check-ups with a gastroenterologist whose main conversation topic was the exploits of Bill Clinton. His interest in my condition was marginal at best. His office was pre-renovation. It was coupled with that of an ob-gyn specialist. They shared a waiting room, the walls of which were plastered with

ghastly posters of maladies pertaining to both specialties. Sitting there, which I did for many hours, was an education in anatomy.

Post-renovation, however, the specialist clinic has been transformed. The mood is one of quiet bustle. The student nurses are busily shuffling papers and running errands while the old hands manage the new and not-yet-complete computer system. Patients basically sit quietly contemplating mortality and occasionally, though more rarely here than in most public places, fiddling with smart phones. Basically people are quiet, even the few couples who occasionally share a few subdued comments. It's not the quiet of satisfaction: all is not well here. It's the quiet of recognizing human frailty, visibly dramatized by the elderly and infirm who regularly pass by.

The patients represent the diversity of the nation—Malay, Chinese, and Indian—though here their numbers are more nearly equal than in the population. Also age and gender equality is present. Illness knows no favorites. Linguistic diversity is practiced by the staff, and it's quite common to hear the same nurse giving instructions in English, Tamil, Mandarin, and Bahasa Malaysia. It's really rather remarkable. Still, with all the diversity and despite an occasional vocal toddler, it's a place of contemplation.



The Walk

March 2014

For several years, I've been exercising through walking. In Denver we live near the Highline Canal with a walking / bicycle path beside it that runs for about 100 miles around town. It has lots of local scenery, occasional sights of wildlife, and good views of the mountains. There's plenty to keep the eyes and minds occupied while going through the tedium of walking. There is also quite a bit of traffic, both pedestrian and cyclist. We once stopped to view a nest of recently-hatched owls that looked somewhat askance at all of us. We weren't sure who was watching whom.

Kuala Lumpur is different. There are paths with ample greenery, numerous birds, a few dogs, and increasingly rarely, a family of monkeys. But the heat and humidity and the hills make walking there fundamentally difficult and unpleasant. So I've taken to walking in the parking lot of our condo. The condo is a high-rise with three towers, each of which has a 2-storey basement parking lot; they are attached, so it's possible to walk them all while remaining out of the scorching sun while still enjoying the breeze.

But walking in a parking lot!!!! Where's the fascination and mystery there? Isn't it boring?

Yes, so I thought. And there's much to confirm the initial impression: the gray cement floors, the exhaust-stained walls, the sameness of the view, the total absence of wildlife, the rusting

The Walk

and dusty abandoned motorcycles, the empty cars—it's not a visual or sensory delight. It's just simply ordinary—a parking lot.

The parking spaces themselves are of the same width but differ in length. Some are nine paces long and others only seven. Their size does not seem to indicate the size or type of car that occupies them.

It's mostly empty of people at 4PM. Occasionally several maids wander through with their brooms en route to another cleaning task, and often on weekdays the car-wash wallah is busily cleaning some parked cars whose owners have engaged his services. But usually it's empty.

The cars, while about 78% Protons and Peroduas (local brands), also include about 12% Toyotas, Nissans, and Hondas, 5% Mercedes and BMWs, a few Hyundais, a Porsche SUV, and several others including Audi, VW, Citroen, Peugeot, Volvo, Subaru, Cooper, Suzuki, Chevrolet, and Mazda. They represent the globality that is now part of life. The lot is also populated by motorcycles, most of which are small, greasy, and easy to ignore. There are also three shiny Harley-Davidsons and one bright red Ducati that seem to be waiting for their next adventure.

The car park is also the abode of Mystery, the wonder sometimes shows itself in unexpected places. The walk the lot is an occasion for dialogue with the vehicle. Have you been? Who were you carrying? What adventures have you experienced? What's next for you?

The walk is also an occasion for internal reflection. It can run from contemplation on nothingness

MEANDERINGS

about world events—the missing MH370 is prominent these days—to prayers for friends and colleagues. Occasionally there are more rational considerations about current tasks, but often the mind wanders to pieces of music—titles like “Harbor Lights,” “I Wonder Who’s Kissing Her Now,” “Blue Moon,” “If You’re Gonna Play in Texas You Gotta Have a Fiddle in the Band,” “Soon It’s Gonna Rain,” “Rhapsody in Blue,” “The Great Gate of Kiev,” and a bevy of Sousa marches with special attention to the solo clarinet part.

And on rare occasions, my mind turns to poetry:

I walk in a lot made for parking
The spaces are lined with brick marking.
I walk it a lot
Outside it’s so hot
In the park even the dogs are not barking.



Intrusions

March 2015

Intrusions are a familiar feature of living in Malaysia. Still, they ARE intrusions. That morning my agenda was filled to the brim. It was set to be a busy, though manageable day.

What happened was quite different: I was hit by a motorcycle while crossing the street to get a taxi. I attempted to carry out the day's agenda, though by nightfall, it was obvious that medical attention was needed, and the projected agenda was completely overturned. A new one emerged, along with some insights. Here are a few:

- Getting hit by a motorcycle is not fun. There are better ways to get a taxi.
- Going to the doctor right away is better than waiting 24 hours.
- Walking through two shopping malls with an old umbrella as a cane to support unrecognized injuries is not smart. It ruins the umbrella.
- A fractured left distal fibula hurts.
- People are incredibly gracious to one in a wheelchair.
- Using crutches is not rocket science, but it is lever physics and pendulum dynamics. Not quite as easy as it looks from the outside.
- One cannot be too certain of a well-planned agenda. Life intrudes.



Conclusion

As you may have noticed, many of these episodes took place on the way towards something else. They occurred mostly as side paths onto which I meandered.

Meandering—movement that is somewhat less purposeful than “journeying” but not so aimless as “wandering.”

Meandering, as these reflections show, is about traveling, but taking time to smell the flowers, even when their scents are somewhat putrid.

The atmosphere on this path has a bite that got my attention like the outside air on a sub-zero morning. Sometimes the bite was delight, sometimes sorrow, sometimes humor, sometimes appreciation, but always surprise. Surprise seems to be the way we most often encounter the wonder that makes life interesting.

The insights from my experiences do not belong to me. I’ve created this work so that you may have access to them. You, the reader, will have to judge whether they provoke insights into your experience.