

AND ANOTHER

THING



Essays & Opinions

ALAN ROBBINS

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Opinions & Essays

By Alan Robbins

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These essays and opinion pieces were submitted to and/or
published in the various magazines, newspapers, books or websites
listed with each piece.

Offering Your Seat

Even though I just turned 69, I like to think of myself as still attractive and only slightly older than the young dark-haired fellow I remember kindly.

So when I was standing on a crowded #1 train and noticed that an attractive youngish woman sitting nearby was looking at me, I straightened up and put some muscle tone back in my face. I didn't smile exactly, but I thought about it. She was nice looking and it was nice to think she thought the same of me.

Then, to my surprise, she got up and walked right over to me. Then I did smile as she looked directly at me and asked, "would you like a seat?"

Ouch.

I refused, of course, and dismissed her rather harshly. But the worse part was not the wound to my ego: it was the fact that I had a long ride ahead of me and really wanted to sit down!

Liberal Arts

To the Editor:

In “Philosophy Pays Off” (Op-Ed, May 1), Robert E. Rubin provides an example for the need to support the humanities in higher education. In the current move to focus college on career training, the humanities are often derided as “Liberal Arts” at the worst, or merely impractical at the least.

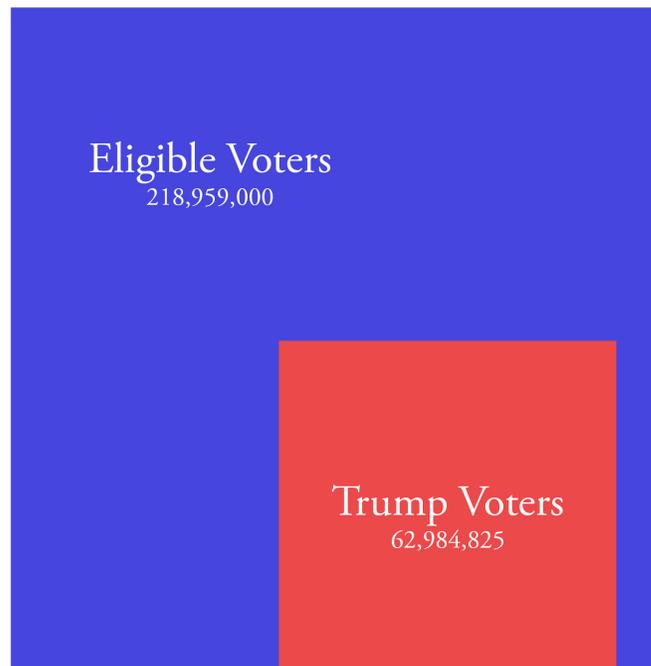
But ask people who went to college earlier in life what courses had a lasting impact and the answer is rarely the ones that provided job skills and almost always the ones that made them think about the world and their place in it. The courses I took in philosophy and psychology were hardly impractical because they shaped my views of life. Even a required course in hygiene, of all things, introduced me to ideas about the mind-body connection that are still useful today. As Mr. Rubin implies, the goal of higher education should be to produce citizens who can think and evaluate not just workers who can perform their tasks.

On The Media

To the Editor:

Re "How to Save CNN From Itself" (column, Jan 26): Jessica Yellin's commentary clearly explains why I have gone completely cold-turkey on CNN. Never watch it, never turn it on, zip right past it to almost anything else on cable. As I watched it - too much, I admit - in the run-up to the election, I had the growing sense of being manipulated rather than informed. The endless parade of opinionators, the constant barrage of breaking news, the treating of Tweets like papal bulls...in the end I felt as though I had binged on empty carbs and that my brain got fat. When drama rather than information becomes the goal, it's not news anymore. It's Reality TV. And I don't need CNN for that.

The Vast Majority



We keep hearing about the “majority of Americans” or the “American People” who voted for Trump and support his policies. While it is true that he is the duly elected President of the country, can we at least dispense with the fable that any kind of majority supported him. The fact is that he got less than one third of the votes (28.8%) of all eligible voters.

A huge minority in fact.

This does not suggest that his presidency is illegitimate; it certainly is legal. But it also points out how this peculiar version of democracy allows a small percentage of citizens to falsely claim that they represent the “will” of the country.

THE SAFER SPACE

The debate in higher education about what ideas and images we present to our students can feel academic with its themes of safe spaces versus intellectual challenges. But this issue became very personal for me recently and changed my attitude about our responsibility as educators.

It began with a very simple image that I was showing on the first day of my class called Understanding Images. It was the notorious cartoon of Mohammad wearing a turban that looked like a bomb. When this cartoon was first published in the Danish newspaper Jyllands-Posten in 2005, demonstrations around the world followed. In 2015, twelve staff members of the French magazine Charlie Hebdo were killed after publishing similar cartoons.

My point in showing this cartoon and discussing its effects was to say that images – even ones comprised of some simple sketchy lines – have a profound and powerful impact on us. Also that the understanding of all images is partly contextual and based on the passions and beliefs of the cultures from which they emerge and we should therefore be careful about the assumptions we make about them.

It was one of a number of images I was using – the first x-ray, the whole earth photo, and others – to show the power of images and get the students engaged in the material. The tactic seemed to be working well enough until one semester when a student came up to talk to me after class. She was a young woman wearing a hijab and was quite upset with me. She did not think that I had the right to show that image. Not only that it was disturbing to her personally but in showing it, she felt, I myself was purveying it...extending the impact of an image that was offensive to Muslims.

I did my best to make my case. That my intention was to inform students about the power of images, even simple cartoons. How could I do that without showing them powerful images? Also, that some images are controversial and that, from a different culture, we may not see that right away. How else to demonstrate without such a provocative image? I had even explained to the class that showing the face of the prophet was proscribed in that faith but that we needed to study even images that made us uncomfortable, assuming of course that there was a legitimate educational reason.

And then there was the issue of academic freedom, my right to use material for educational purposes and her right as a student to respond or not respond to them but to at least try to engage with them. Her discomfort made me question the balance between speech and silence, exploration and censorship, the right to show and the need to protect.

I knew what she meant. Later in the semester, I showed a swastika to illustrate the power of a simple graphic symbol to encapsulate evil and how uncomfortable it was for me as a Jew to be showing it. I knew my own intention in displaying it but was concerned that someone might miss the context of my point. I was not, in other words, ignorant of the tension around these images; I was simply choosing study over avoidance.

The student and I argued this point for a few weeks and for a while it became somewhat uncomfortable. I felt that I was under scrutiny for my decision about intellectual engagement and I worried that she might even report me to the administration. I had no doubt they would support my decision but it was a possibility I hoped to avoid.

But then an amazing thing happened.

The more we talked, the more we came to know each other. I began to see her as an accomplished student, a mother, a teacher herself, who was simply standing up for her beliefs. I began to see her as a person, in other words, not just through the lens of her religion or ideology. And I felt that she was starting to see me as a person who wanted to help my students make their way in a complex visual world.

We were from very different backgrounds of course, but in a more important way, we were similar...just two people trying to understand. And because of that, we were willing to treat each other with respect and look beyond our differences to see the humanity we both share. Man and woman, Jew and Muslim.

Ultimately, we became friends. I have met her charming husband and lovely daughters. We have exchanged gifts and even had dinner together with other faculty she befriended. She sent me a birthday card; I just wished her the best of luck with a new job she started.

I do not show that image any more. Instead I mention it and explain it but tell students to look it up online if they want to see it for the simple reason that I do not want to offend anyone. I decided this because I came to understand that what she was saying might be right. Not for me and the majority of my students, but for her and others like her. This change of mind on my part did not come from a convincing argument or any political threat but from simply getting to know her.

Considering the world as it is now, this kind of discourse is crucial although seemingly impossible. For it to work, we have to try to listen to each other amid

the shouts and chants. We would have to make an assumption of respect for those who are not us.

Every teacher has to make his or her own decision about what to present, but for me, modeling sympathy and compassion was more important than any intellectual point I could make. The solutions are not in the principles and rules and procedures we create for our students...they are in the relationships we build with them.

On Self-Improvement

To the Editor:

Re: “Jon Hamm: The Reboot” (Men’s Style, Sept. 15)

I am gratified to have read this article, including the captions, so carefully because otherwise I might almost have missed, amid the obsessive name-dropping, the blatant product placement, and the impressive self-absorption of his devotion to himself, a truly inspiring fact. Unless it is a typo, Mr. Hamm in one photo is wearing a Giorgio Armani T-shirt that costs \$1,795. Now that is what I call self-improvement!

A Serious Parody

To the Editor:

Kudos to the New York Times for publishing – sneaking in actually – one of the funniest pieces of political satire I’ve seen recently.

Thomas O’Hare’s Letter to the Editor (Letters, July 2) is a hilarious romp, calling out liberals and progressives as essentially right-wing hate mongers. Oh and God-hating atheists to boot. He forgot to mention that we also eat our neighbors’ pets. The parody really had me going until that last line: “The Democratic Party has become the party of division, name-calling and alienation.” That whopper was a dead giveaway. As a humor writer I know too well the lure of overplaying the joke.

Big Bird

To the Editor:

Re: “President Trump vs. Big Bird” (OP-ED, March 30): the current attack on support for the humanities is not only troubling, it points to a society in trouble. As Nicholas Kristoff suggests, the humanities teach us to live in the wide world, to understand each other, to expand our sensibilities.

We spend our lives not just doing our jobs but reading and writing, talking and sharing, playing or appreciating, watching or making. The arts gives us the foundation for all of this, a cultural depth that makes us informed citizens of the country and the world. Without it, we are in danger of becoming a society of workers who cannot act beyond the task, who have no references beyond the instructions, and who know what to do but not how to think.

At least we won’t have to worry about robots taking our jobs...we will *be* the robots.

A Lottery Vote

To the Editor:

Re: "To Protect Voting, Use Open-Source Software" (Op-Ed, Aug.3):

The authors offer a reasonable means of addressing our many voting issues by changing the kind of software used to run the machines. Sounds good but the machines themselves are an even bigger problem and harder to upgrade.

Yet there is already a mechanism in place that would work well...the state lottery systems. Every state has one and they seem to tally massive data with no problems. Ever heard of them being hacked? Giving false results? Confusion about how to fill in the ticket?

Besides avoiding misplaced arrows, dimpled chads, broken levers and all the other recent debacles, lotteries provide easy access at multiple outlets and a paper record. Come to think of it, combining the vote with a national lottery might just entice the 53% of people who don't go to the polls to get involved.

No doubt there will be people who think that this approach demeans our election process by associating voting with gambling. As if that was not already the case.

Perfect Dinner Party

To the Editor:

I like to think of myself as a sophisticated New Yorker but your feature (Magazine, Oct. 29) asking celebrities about their ideal dinner parties sure scuttled that notion. I had absolutely no idea who the people were that they would invite, no clue about the food they would serve, and I never heard of the music they would play. No one asked me but, speaking for any non-hipsters in town, I would invite the seven people I know, serve the one chicken dish I have perfected over the years, and play whatever Pandora picks from my favorite stations. Come to think of it, that sounds pretty good; I think I'll set that up!

A Grand Commencement

Dear Diary:

A young fellow of our acquaintance recently invited us to his graduation. He is a fine young man and my wife and I were happy to celebrate the event with him. The commencement took place at Riverside Church, in a huge room with a majestic ceiling and light pouring in through stained glass windows. The setting was very inspiring.

At the start, the woman leading the event asked all the parents and guests to try to watch and relish the moment rather than spending the whole time taking pictures of it. Her tone suggested that even she knew this was an absurd request. In fact, once the choral singing started, the scene began to look like a celebrity appearance, with people jostling for the perfect angle with their cameras and phones. When our friend performed as part of a dance sequence, we too elbowed our way in to take videos. This, after all, is the way we keep track of important rites of passage like a graduation.

At the end, each student went on stage to receive a diploma and a few supportive words by their teachers, all ending with a rousing school song and sendoff.

We were amazed at how elaborate and heated and rehearsed - and recorded - the whole event was and mentioned this to the woman sitting next to us. "This is great," she agreed, "but wait until you see what they do next year, when these kids graduate from first grade!"

Archaeology in a Dumpster

Dear Diary:

It was an ordinary Dumpster.

Nothing unusual in the city. This was a low one, about four feet high, so naturally I peered in. It was empty.

But by the next day it was starting to fill, and within three days it was stuffed to the rim with the contents of an entire apartment. Not the furniture but all the rest: the things, the mementos, the objects. An old Princess phone, a cracked ceramic vase, a pair of slippers, a bunch of Beatles CDs.

Like most New Yorkers, I try not to think too much about what will become of all the stuff that fills my own apartment, and the Dumpster was a sad reminder of why.

On the other hand, it seemed ripe to be cataloged by any passing street archaeologist. There were framed awards and medals proving that this person loved lacrosse. There were photo books documenting their travels around the world. They liked “The Great Gatsby” enough to write notes in the margins.

And then there were the paintings sticking out of the debris like so much flotsam. Life-size portraits of friends, and not bad at all. Sensitive and careful.

There was a whole life in there — what they did, what they loved, whom they knew — now all just a trash heap waiting to be hauled away. Would that be the fate of the things I made or kept or cared about?

The following day, I decided to go back and save some of those portraits from oblivion. It was the least I could do for a fellow artist.

The Dumpster was gone. In the street I found a small section of a wooden frame, all that remained. I put it in my pocket and took it home. I have no idea why.

Truth and Reality, in Media and Politics

To the Editor:

Re “The Lying” (Op-Ed, Sept. 23): Poor Paul Krugman, stuck in the antiquated and quaint notion that reporters are journalists and that journalism is about reporting the “facts.” That may have been true once, and may still be the case for newspapers to some degree, but it is clearly no longer applicable to television news.

The endless panels parsing Donald Trump's lies into oblivion, the expansion of minutiae into headline news, the countdown clocks to nonevents—TV coverage has morphed from journalism into telemarketing.

The debates will be no different since facts and truth have no role to play on television, because everything is about impact and impression as opposed to reality. Lies are simply tactics, perfectly acceptable as long as the “brand” is consistent and the message relentless. Breaking News, CNN's tag line, is not just a snappy logo. It is an admission; the news is broken all right.

A Speech for the Generations

As the semester ends, my graduating students have only one thing in mind: getting through the ceremony so they can finally start what we all coyly refer to as real life.

That includes sitting through the inevitable, and frequently interminable, commencement address. As a professor, I have endured plenty of them and been by turns bemused, bored or just plain exhausted. You can take only so much wisdom, especially when you know that most of it sounds better than it works. I have heard all the advice, snappy quotes, telling anecdotes and smart jokes, and I always hope that my soon-to-be ex-students get more out of all that than I do.

I do, however, have sympathy for the speakers. I can only imagine what it must be like to face all those young people, filled with energy and anxiety about their plans, confident and concerned about their future, hopeful and worried about what comes next. It must be hard to figure out what to say that has not been said before.

But not for me. This year I have something in common with my graduating students. They may be ending their college careers, but I am, too. After decades of teaching, I am planning to retire. So although no one has asked me, I know just what I would say to them as they face their uncertain futures. Only six words: "I know exactly how you feel."

Pearls of wisdom gathered and polished over years of adulthood would play better, but, to tell the truth, I have little to offer in that respect. In fact, I would prefer to sit down with the students and commiserate and share worries -- although I doubt that it would help either of us.

We are also all looking for jobs. Students need to jump-start new careers fast, but so do I. Boomers for the most part do not retire; they re-career. My recent graduates are mostly working, but all of my retired friends are working. The trader became an actor. The teacher became a docent. I will return to writing full time. But there is no guarantee that any of this will pan out.

When I gently reassure students that they will find something fulfilling and rewarding, I suspect that I am also trying to encourage myself. My secret dread is that I will end up somehow competing with one of them for a job. Or being hired by a former student. Or worse, being fired.

We share other things as well. We can't remember anything. The so-called senior moment is true only in the sense that they have it as often as I do. Maybe more. Even on my worst day, I remember far more than my students can -- in spite of the fact that I have more to remember. I may not recall the name of that

actor in the movie whose title also escapes me, but neither can they. And they have only seen scores of films, not the many hundreds that I have.

And if, as they sometimes tell me, they think they can finally abandon their obsession with tests and scores once they leave school, I have news for them. Worrying about a GPA is child's play once you start dealing with PSA, HDL, BP and plenty more. Other than the fact that young folks want higher numbers and adults want lower ones, we are all constantly being tested and waiting and wondering.

So I can see why requests for my commencement address have been lacking. You cannot inspire by fretting nor uplift with worry. I would not know what else to tell them other than what I try to tell myself: hang in there. Keep trying. Be positive. And I hope it all works out ... for both of us.

The Joy Of Nothing

Are you overworked? Overwhelmed? Feeling overly stressed?

Too much to see, to do, to think about?

Boy, have we got an app for you!

It's called Idle and it's free!

Just tap the Idle icon and...nothing happens!

Nothing to do, nothing to see.

Idle is a breakthrough in taking a break...doesn't do a thing, it just sits there.

And so can you!

Enjoying the pleasure of doing nothing and nothing doing.

Give your brain a break, take a vacation from busy busy.

That's I-D-LE, Idle.

The e is silent for...no effort at all.

Inspirations

To the Editor:

David Brooks' essay "What Is Inspiration" (Op-Ed, April 15) must have been the kind of "gust of wind" he uses as an analogy because it is so perfectly descriptive of the experience. As a writer myself, those soaring instances of pure inspiration that propel me through certain projects stand out because they are both rare and thrilling.

In writing fictional family stories, for example, I looked at old photos and was somehow instantly transported into those lives. I felt that I was observing rather than inventing, transcribing not writing. And racing as fast as possible to get the words down before the wind passed on. Writing is much more often a matter of strategy and craft. This was different. It seemed to me like what Noel Coward once called a "psychic gift" and perhaps one that I did not necessarily deserve but accepted anyway.

That feeling is something I long for but, as Brooks implies, the fact that it can happen at all is itself quite inspiring.

The Cool Ghoul

Dear Diary:

New Yorkers of a certain age will remember Zacherley, the character who hosted Shock Theater on television in the late 1950s.

With his unseen wife known only as “My Dear” lying in a coffin on the set and his son hanging in a bag from the ceiling, “The Cool Ghoul” as he was called, would slyly introduce and interrupt horror movies with amusing skits and absurdist humor. It was all just ridiculous enough to create a cult following.

The man behind that persona was John Zacherle, who passed away at the immortal age of 98 last week. John in person was equally entertaining and we were lucky to have called him our friend.

One night, he came to our apartment with a surprise...a magic lantern in an antique wooden box. To thank us for dinner, he decided to put on a tiny show for us. On a blank wall, he projected dim round images from a set of old glass slides with full narration and vocal sound effects. In that sonorous baritone so familiar to his fans, he told us the story of Jack and Jill with an inimitable Zacherley twist. “And here we have young Jack, clearly a Transylvanian fellow, hoho, going up a hill for some nefarious purpose...”

Needless to say, the kids did not simply tumble back down that hill.

It was the tiniest production imaginable, so small on the wall, so dim in that dark living room, but somehow it now seems like one of the greatest shows we ever saw, and never needed tickets for.

Circus Tickets

Dear Diary:

Twenty-five years ago, my family and I were sitting at the Big Apple Circus for the New Year's Eve performance, a wonderful show. But what happened that night was nothing less than a magical New York moment.

Just before joining the performers in the ring for the midnight countdown, the lights went low and the ringmaster announced that some lucky person was going to win four free tickets to the circus FOR LIFE. Spotlights danced around the tent teasingly before eventually coming to rest on my sister a few seats away.

It seemed like a practical joke because winning is always so elusive. But it turned out to be true. We spent every single New Year's Eve since then sitting at ringside watching the contortionists bend themselves into tiny boxes, the trapeze artists defy gravity, and the clowns play games with the audience. One year one of the horses broke rank and came over to rest its head in our laps, as though it knew us from all the other years.

It was the perfect place to ring in a new and hopeful year, every year.

When the circus closed over the summer for lack of funds, New York lost one of its small treasures and we lost our bearings about how to celebrate. This is, of course, the city of dreams and no doubt we will find a way. But there will never be anything quite sitting a few feet away from that harlequin covered in mirrors and beaming the lights as it rotated on a platform while playing champagne glasses with his fingertips. A metaphor for the city itself.

Some magic can never be replaced.

The Big One

I was staring at the welcome sign in a kind of jittery disbelief. It read: Erasmus Hall, Class of 1965. Let's Party.

In fact, it took a bit of an effort to get myself inside. Would anyone remember me or want to? Would old friends still be friendly or just old? Was recalling the good old days really all that good? Was there somehow a report card involved?

At first it seemed like the wrong room, all that white hair you see. Just like mine, of course, but in my mind I am still that brunette with the slight pompadour. In my mind I am still that boy swooning at girls and trying to be clever enough to be noticed. But who was I now to those who knew me then?

There was no need for concern. A reunion is self-selected for people willing to *reune*, if there is such a word. Bitterness, pettiness, past insults or slights all have no place there by common consent. On the contrary, the mood was upbeat, warm, accepting and sometimes even heartbreakingly kind.

I quickly discovered the Reunion Dip. This is a maneuver in which you grab a hand, bend over to look at the name on the tag, then straighten up in delight and go in for the hug. A few folks looked just the same; they had the familiar faces that they had been given all those years ago. No need to Dip. But most had the new faces they had earned over a lifetime and it took a moment to see the familiar in them. Some people said they recognized me right away but I suspect that they were just being delicate.

You have a few choices when you see someone again after such long time. You can try the ironic opening: "So what have you being doing for the past 50 years?" That usually breaks the ice, but then one guy took the time to actually answer me in crushing detail. Or you can go with the probing: "Are you retired yet?" It was interesting to me that everyone who said yes to that question thought it was a great decision. For private reasons, I made a special note of that fact. But the most common opening question tended to be the simple and direct "How the hell are you?" to which the most common answer was "Still alive!"

Anyone who has been to a reunion knows that bodies change either mildly or dramatically but personalities do not budge. The cautious are still wary, the loud still make their voices heard, the sarcastic still see the world darkly. I still noticed the girls and tried to be clever. As a result, it only takes moments to return to the familiar rhythms of those early years. More familiar than faces are the connections we had back then, as if no time had passed at all. One classmate

Advice for Student Designers

Early on I knew a simple fact about myself...that I love making things. That has always been true. The process of coming up with new ideas, working them out step by step, paying attention to the strengths and weaknesses of materials, seeing new things emerge in the world, all of that has been a lifelong passion. It was only later on that I discovered that there was an actual profession in this. The beauty of being a designer is that it allows you to build a career around this passion.

It almost does not matter what I am doing as long as I feel creative about it – feel that I am making something new – and that accounts for the zigzag nature of my career. I have worked as an Art Director at an ad agency developing campaigns for companies large and small, as a Creative Director at a marketing company developing branding for a variety of clients, and as a freelance designer for many companies in the toy and game industry inventing board, card, text, and digital games. I have been a professor for 25 years creating new courses and trying to pass this passion on to my students. At the same time, I have been the author of over 35 books of mysteries and stories, and numerous essays about creativity, design, and technology.

See what I mean by zigzag?

But if you think about it, the job titles and project goals might change but the basic passion is the same. Putting words together to tell stories, shapes and colors to create graphics, or part and pieces to make games...it is all design to me, all that delicious creative process involved in making dreams real.

That is the advice I would give to anyone asking about life as a designer. I would say that no matter what you do, or which path you take, straight or crooked, the trick to success is keeping your passion – for creativity, for making new things, for helping people, whatever it is – at the center of your choices. Money and prestige are fine but they are also transient. Enthusiasm is what keeps you going long term.

That way, even if you zig or zag down your career path, you never get lost because you are always doing what you feel you are meant to do.

and I very quickly resumed a conversation we were having back then – about Bloody Sunday in Selma, Alabama – as if the interim had been no chasm at all.

But reunions are not just retro, there was also a lot of talk about the future. Being a senior citizen is a lot like being a teenager, minus the acne. Folks our age have a set of issues to resolve: what to do next, what to plan for, where to go. Just as when we graduated from high school. And just like then, these are decisions to make that will impact the rest of our lives. In this way, past, present, and future all curved in on themselves like some twisty black hole we had tumbled into.

And yet...there was a moment when we were all dancing to the big hit of that year - Woolly Bully by Sam the Sham and the Pharoahs - when it hit me. Outside, the clocks were no doubt clunking along, but not in that room. Not then. All that mattered was that moment of chatting or dancing or meeting and greeting. I realized something about myself in that instant. That I was not running out of time as I had thought. Time does not run at all, it is always right here, right now. We are the ones who choose to crawl or march or run or scramble through it.

People who remembered me or pretended to, who thought I looked good or said nothing, recalled anecdotes or not. None of that mattered. The point was that we were here. We might retire from certain employments but not from life itself. We were not done and would not go away. We are still who we are and the world is still here for us.

In the days after the reunion I felt oddly energized. I made some decisions I had been putting off, felt peppy, planned a few new projects. Reunions can be sad but they can also be conclusive. I felt grateful to be remembered and to be able to remember. In fact, I wanted to go back and hug every single person in that room and thank them. For what exactly? I had no idea.

Maybe for reminding me that I was part of something bigger than myself and my private regrets and dreads. A generation perhaps, on the march from there to here, then to now, and on to who knows what? We were Brooklyn, we were Erasmus, we were the Seniors, we were the sixties, we were boomers...and we still were every single one of those things. Still alive indeed.

I did not necessarily love that age, or my life then, or that high school, nor even everyone I knew back then. But I know one thing for sure. I sure do love them all now.

One More Season

I am not a big fan of baseball.

But I will be watching the World Series in a few weeks just as I do every year. Not for the game itself but for the way it puts me in touch with my father, a man I barely knew. As a kid, I saw him go to work but I never quite understood what his job was in the yarn industry. He copied passages out of books that he liked but I never knew why. Nor could I ever grasp what he found so tasty about the crackers and milk snack he made to watch the games. But I did know one thing about him for sure...he loved baseball.

On Saturdays, he taught me how to throw and catch in that sandlot behind the Brooklyn Museum. How to kneel for a grounder. He showed me how to oil my glove and how to stick it under the mattress with the ball still in it to create a good pocket. He taught me his fadeaway pitch, the one he modeled after Christy Matthewson. He took me to minor league games; he called the games on television.

My father was a formal man, a neat man, a dad in a time before they were allowed to be just guys like they are now and I know now that baseball was his way of loving me. I cannot recall us talking or hanging out or even spending much time together in any other way. But I also know that baseball meant more to him than it did to me because I thought it was a pretty dumb game. Tennis, soccer, sports that rushed and snapped, that was what I liked. Baseball was too slow, too orderly. There was too much time to think in it and I was too young to know how valuable that kind of time was. I remember the last time that he wanted to have a catch and I had something more important to do. Something quicker, no doubt. For a long time I dreamed of taking that moment back.

Somewhere in the family album I have a photo of him that I take out every year at this time. It is an old snapshot from a bygone era, yellowed like his index finger was from nicotine, cracked like the grooves in his combed hair, and thin as my memories of him. My father is just boy in there, maybe 14 years old. That would make it the summer of 1916. He is posing with three of his teammates, all wearing uniforms with knickers and high socks and odd round caps from a lost time of pure baseball, Sunday ball, dusty ball. The boys are leaning casually against a wooden fence under the glare of a high sun. The logo on their uniforms reads MAS; the insignia of the Murray All-Stars. The team was named for my Dad because he was their pitcher. It was the age of the pitcher, the so-called "Dead-ball era," when runs were rare and the man on the mound was the star.

With a magnifier, I can just recognize him in a pose that I would never associate with the man I grew up with, so loose and limber. He had thickened by the time I knew him and always wore trousers and a key chain. Yet in there he is decades younger than the man I barely knew and up close like that I can almost make out that familiar smile and the grin of the eyes. My Dad as a boy. It is a haunting photo in the way that photos are; it freezes one instant from the stampede of life, in a frame that you can hold but never quite grasp. There in the emulsion, he is only slightly older than I was when he died and with his whole life before him. I am only slightly older now than he was when he died and wonder how much life I have left.

Deep down I know that we live our lives all the time, not simply in the memories pressed and preserved. Not only in the aching and not even in the regrets that photographs are so good at calling up. It is only when I put the photo down and step away from the image that I can see it for what it is. It is a moment in there, just a moment. His moment. I can see it in his face, enjoying that instant in the sunlight. Before the game, before the first pitch, before the future unfolded so fatally, at that sublime pause of anticipation. He loved baseball, my Dad did, and there he is all baseball and how utterly wide the universe must have been for him then and there.

So here it is again, another World Series. I have no skin in the game; I am not rooting for anyone. But I will watch it like the most ardent fan if only to nudge that photo briefly back to life for one more season.

The Healthcare Factory

When I was sick last year and needed a rather extensive medical procedure, I came face to face with my worst nightmare. Not death, which pales in comparison. I mean the American healthcare system.

Before that, I had never been to doctors very much, was on no medication, and was only in the hospital once for a sprained ankle. The stories of healthcare confusion and dysfunction were all remote to me. But now suddenly I had appointments and emergency visits, tests and results, consults, preps and procedures, recovery and follow-up visits. I had become a patient, a failed body that might be fixed, a data set.

That change in self-perception was hard enough but the real trauma was the process itself. The hospital did give me a list of procedures and costs ahead of time but the figures were never the same as those billed to me, which were never what the insurance company covered, which were not even close to what the insurers and the doctors negotiated.

I received bills from doctors I never heard of and had no idea whether to pay them or not. Sometimes they were submitted to my insurance companies, sometimes not. Sometimes I paid first and was then reimbursed, but not according to any logic I could uncover. For two identical tests on two different days, one was fully covered, the other not at all.

Between pre-pays and co-pays and no pays, deductibles and bills, and the massive paperwork, I had to take a leave from my job not just to have the operation but also to become a full-time manager of my own medical finances. I thought about getting a second graduate degree for the time I was spending, but could not decide if it should be in medicine or economics. Or psychiatry.

And I was well insured, with three separate health insurance plans. Yet none of these covered everything and there was no one coordinating or even tracking it all. Just me and my handy Excel chart.

By the time I was done – six months from an emergency room visit to a post-op checkup – I had a seven-page chart listing every one of my visits, tests, procedures, bills, costs, insurance payments, my payments, all of it. This was the only way I could understand what money I actually owed and why. How anyone less compulsive than I am could possibly cope with it is beyond me.

So when the politicians denigrate single-payer systems and talk about more choices and more insurance companies and more competition...I say good luck. Get sick one time and see if it makes your life simpler. Or better.

I am not complaining about the medicine itself, mine you. The outcome was great, the procedures were necessary, the operation was a success, the patient survived and thrives. I am very grateful.

If only there was a way to get there without the healthcare system.

On Memory

Re “Older Mind May Just Be a Fuller Mind,” by Benedict Carey
(Science Times, Jan.28):

As long as we rely on memory tests to test memory, we are going to get misleading results. Like the notion that our ability to remember drops like a stone after the age of 25. Memory is not an isolated skill; it is an integrated function of our cognitive processing. What interests us, what we need to know, how we use what we recall: these are as important as the speed of our response time. For a truer picture of how memory works, we would have to take a much broader view of the role of recall in our lives.

As a now “senior” professor, I see this in practice constantly with my students. Far from envying their youthful ability, I often wonder when their memory muscles are likely to kick in. While they have to recall a few key points well enough to perform on tests, for example, I have to have both a broad enough understanding and detailed knowledge to create those tests in the first place. Who has the better memory in that context?

Or consider those amusing moments when my friends and I struggle to recall the name of the actor who was in the movie with the other actor who was in that television show whose title no one can recall. That is not decrepitude; it is a data processing challenge because we have seen hundreds of movies. My even my graduating students, by comparison, have only seen a few dozen movies in their lives. Yet ask them about one they saw three days ago and they can barely recall anything about it. Now that is what I call a real senior moment.

The Sid Caesar I Never Knew

Having met Sid Caesar only once when I was fourteen, I feel perfectly comfortable reminiscing about him now. He made a huge impression on me. Not the meeting, which lasted for about ten seconds – I’ll get to that in a minute – but his public persona, his TV character. In a word...his shtick.

Shtick is a Yiddish word that means “piece.” It refers to funny bits or gimmicks but has really come to stand for a kind of inane attitude towards life. Acting-out as commentary on existence. This idea is very Jewish; you might say that shtick is what Jews have brought to the world’s table, besides bagels and lox.

Shtick is performance art for people who understand aggravation. It is not about telling jokes. Jewish humor has its jokes for sure, but as every good comedian knows – and every good Jew is a comedian if not the reverse – jokes are limited. Jokes are amusing stories that begin with a jab and end with a punchline. Funny ones are funny of course, but shtick goes beyond momentary laughter all the way to existential absurdity.

It is about creating a character – even if only for this one moment – who sees what is happening, cannot prevent it, and makes the viewer feel for him. The classic shtick character is the one Sid Caesar created... a serious-looking fellow who is completely deranged by circumstances and takes it standing up.

My father was actually the one who first made we aware of this and I have, even to this day, a memory of him in my room, rather formal in his trousers and white shirt and tie, prancing around singing “La Prima-VERA, La Prima-VERA!” He was trying to give me a mnemonic to help me remember the word for a Spanish test in fifth grade. Obviously it worked and proves not only that shtick sticks but that it is, at heart, a life lesson.

Don’t get me wrong, I’m not saying that you have to be Jewish to be funny. There was Pope Hilarius after all. But I would suggest that without this eye-rolling, startled, exasperated sense of shtick, it would be much harder to face the cold hard world. Shtick is an attitude of resigned defiance as a centering device, a gyre of bemused exasperation.

Jewish humor is about the marrow of life...about irony, twists of fate, come-uppance, the joy in aggravation. It implies that life is equal parts mazel, or luck, and mishegoss, or madness. Mazelgoss...or do I go too far? I do but that does not diminish the genius of shtick and Sid Caesar knew all about it.

Watch his old videos online and you can see the humanity in his suffering everyman. The astonished look, the unexpected double-take, and above all...the tie. You have to be wearing a tie and taken seriously for this kind of humor to

work. The great clowns like Laurel or Chaplin or Keaton knew this but the shtick that Sid Caesar perfected was not about clowning around. Not the stoic defiance or the zany antics of the silent movies but men of the age of television who, like my father, looked like they worked in offices and wore ties and yet were willing to let life unhinge them and still try to maintain some kind of dignity. Like Ernie Kovaks, Steve Allen, even Imogene Coca...and of course Sid Caesar. Dupes who were convinced, despite the evidence, that they had some dignity.

Which brings me to my great encounter.

As an actor in my high school Drama Club I was asked to be in the audience of a local TV show back in the 1960's called Dial M for Music. Each week some entertainer was invited to perform and discuss showbiz while we in the audience beamed admiration. That is why they wanted budding actors. One week it was Sid Caesar. After the show, managing great chutzpah, I went up to him and said something really dumb like "you're funny." His answer was: "Believe me, it's just a shtick."

I thought that was hilarious. But of course I was only fourteen at the time. Now I think it is profound.

Making Streets Safer by Design

To the Editor:

Re "The Mean Streets of New York," by Leigh Gallagher (Op-Ed, Feb. 28):

As an Upper West Side resident living near the 96th Street and Broadway intersection alluded to in the article, I am sadly aware of the spate of fatal accidents in that area this year. I also know about the increased police presence to address the issue.

Last month I watched a patrolman give someone a ticket for walking out between two parked cars rather than going to the crosswalk about 15 feet away. I felt bad for the cop and for the pedestrian, too. They were both caught up in a fairly typical bureaucratic response to a problem: decide who is at fault and punish. But the solution is not in law enforcement.

This intersection is bustling with activity. I counted six different crosswalks, 10 lanes of cars, additional lines of parked cars, buses, bikes, cabs, strollers, 11 different traffic light clusters, and 12 pedestrian signals. It is a mash-up of local road, travel hub, urban highway and sliding puzzle. The combustion has only been complicated by the expansion of the subway station right there in the midst of it all.

Vigilant cops will not solve the problem. As Ms. Gallagher suggests, this is a design problem, a question of patterns and behaviors, and it has a design solution. It might make sense to explore painting the lanes in different colors to clarify pathways and directions or the use of a mechanical traffic cop. Or perhaps it is time to redesign those century-old three-color traffic lights to include a countdown clock for drivers. There are many possibilities if we think beyond just handing out more tickets.

Rules of the Heart

You might find the simple ritual of sending a heart to someone for Valentine's Day a respite for our challenging times. But not so fast.

That instantly recognizable symbol may have come to stand for the holiday and the very idea of love itself, but that does not mean you are free of challenging decisions and even bloopers.

The problem is that the heart symbol is abstract; it surely does not resemble the human heart, once thought to be the center of emotions. It may have evolved from the shape of the seedpod of the silphium plant, which was used as a form of birth control as early as the 7th century B.C.E. But that connection is long lost.

Can such a simple symbol really stand for all the varieties, variations, and vagaries of a complex passion? Of course not. The symbol merely brings to mind the thought, not the reality, in the same way that a sign can lead someone to a restroom but not make them go.

And that's the problem.

All hearts, like all feelings, are not the same yet we are experts in detecting tiny visual differences, not to mention emotional ones. In selecting one heart from many, we no doubt respond to subtle details that appeal to us. In this sense, the heart as a valentine message is like a Rorschach test, identifying personal choices, maybe even revealing hidden truths.

Here then, as a public service – and vacation from the news – are a few of the secret connotations you might glean from the heart you send this Valentine's Day. Whether or not you take them to heart, however, is another matter.



The Shape

Rounded shapes are read as softer and usually cuter. Everyone adores chubby babies, for example, and a rounded heart is a sign of roly-poly amour, a love to wallow in. Of course, too round in either heart or baby can seem like too much to handle.

Thinner shapes, on the other hand, seem more austere. More intellectual. Ever want to hug a stick? A thin heart for your enamorata is pretty cool stuff then, an invitation perhaps to see a play rather than to play around.



The Color

Red red is read as intense and therefore representing a deep feeling. That is a good thing passion-wise but not if it is too deep, or too dark for that matter. For example, really dark blood red will probably come across as a warning sign, unless your beloved happens to be named Nospheratu.

Lighter colors, on the other hand, actually feel lighter, less serious. This is why yellow is a no-no on the judicial bench. A pink or orangey heart is a bit more weighty than that but probably hints at platonic love or even kid love. Other colors just miss the mark entirely...blue hearts never lead to sex.



The Line

A precise outer edge for any shape looks formal and perfected. Hoity-toity perhaps but don't make too much of this since most Valentine hearts look that way because they were created on a computer.

An irregular edge or outline can look unexpected and unique and that can imply some romantic surprises from a jaunty romp all the way up to a heart-thumping free-fall. A hand-drawn heart, by the way, implies intimacy. But be careful here...lines or edges that look too cartoony may risk suggesting that you approach love with a seltzer shpritzer in hand.



The Balance

Symmetry makes images seem stable like many religious icons and bank logos. Safe and unchanging. Symmetrical hearts therefore suggest a love that will last the test of time and outlast the winds of whim, a sound idea in these perilous times.

Lopsided hearts, on the other hand, can be seen as more momentary, fleeting. A flash in the pan of amour. And really lopsided ones are not only imbalanced but can be read as downright goofy...love only as long as the laughter lasts.



The Texture

Most hearts are simple for the simple reason that the heart is an icon and meant to be easily and quickly understood. Flat and uniform. . Think of this as a basic statement of simple, classic love.

Textures and patterns add a complication to the basic shape and are therefore harder to read. Which is fine in a relationship if you like the challenge, the struggle. On the other hand, ever date someone who wore too many patterns? Ever date them a second time?



The Size

The size of a shape is a visual impression, relative to the frame it is in. A heart that looks tiny because it is floating inside the frame of the screen or card not only looks smaller but *feels* smaller, like a whisper in the ear. Usually seen as classy and understated.

The exact same heart larger in the exact same space seems to shout. A little more brassy. It is up to you which is more appealing but watch out for hearts that are cropped and seem too big to fit into the frame...that's someone bellowing their love from the rooftops. Calling Tom Cruise.



The Quantity

Very obvious distinctions here...a single heart is a direct statement of fact. Easy to see and read. Pure and simple.

Ten hearts, however, does not imply a tenfold increase in passion. Just a longer message...not just love but lovey-dovey love, which may or may not be what you want to communicate.

Fifty hearts? Over the top and out of control. You send this and you have tagged yourself as a needy nutcase, and possible stalker. Your move.

Happy Valentine's Day.

Hail Caesar

Re “Comedian of Comedians From TV’s Early Days” (Front Page, Feb 13):

As a kid growing up in the 1950s, funny to me was a serious looking man in a suit and tie acting like an utter buffoon. Sid Caesar, Ernie Kovacs, Steve Allen: these were my comic heroes. They looked ordinary, like my father on his way to work, but were actually dupes who were convinced, despite the evidence, that they had some dignity. Their medium was the visual gag, the inane snippet of shtick, so perfect for television.

They were masters of silliness raised to the height of grand comedy and Sid Caesar was the king. But of all his hilarious bits skits, the thing about him that I most recall is perhaps the least theatrical. It was that perplexed look of disbelief when things went sour, which they always did. That is not just a comic routine; it is a philosophy of life.

Looking Back And Finding A Curve

A funny thing happened from the moment of that job interview, still so clear in my mind, until just now. Twenty-seven years passed. Funny is probably not the right word, now that I have used it. Startling might be more accurate. And on some days even appalling.

No one anticipates aging in place at a job and yet, if we are lucky, that is precisely what we will all do. We will each get older while our companies or institutions remain ageless and our colleagues are continually replaced by younger versions of themselves.

This is especially visible in my job, which is college teaching. Year after year, my students are always around twenty years old, yet somehow time stubbornly marches on for me. I began my academic career later in life so that when I started I was old enough to be one of their parents. I am now the age of their grandparents. This in itself is not a bad thing – most people love their grandparents – so the students tend to give me a pass agewise. Plus, a certain amount of respect comes with aging in the academic world. People think it implies a deeper level of wisdom from vast experience. That is not necessarily true, of course, but I do not find myself correcting them.

Now that I am planning to retire, I am in the odd position of being able to think back over a three-decade career and decide what it amounted to. We use a lot of words to describe how we earn our keep: work, job, profession, vocation, practice. But the word career implies a deeper commitment and that makes it a more daunting thing to sum up. How do you make sense of what would have been an entire lifetime for most of human history?

I had been a professional writer and interactive designer for many years but when the opportunity to teach design at a college presented itself, I pursued it. Teaching is a noble profession and the notion of helping young people realize their educational dreams seemed like a worthy thing to do. I liked the idea that I could apply my practical experience to my teaching and help the students in that unique way. On a less lofty level, I had been a freelancer for a long time and the offers of job security through tenure, employer supported healthcare, and a growing pension were also appealing. It is a prestigious career as well; my mother, had she lived, would have been as proud as if I had become a cardiologist. Well, almost.

Now that I am at the other end of the journey – impending retirement seduces you into using words like journey – I find myself thinking about what I can only call the arc of my career. This is different for everyone. Over a time span like mine, there were naturally both high points and low ones, triumphs and frustrations, periods of intense commitment and stretches of laxity. Looking back now I can see that my own arc was shaped like a bell curve.

When I started out as an assistant professor, it took me a few years to find my way, to develop my courses, to understand the politics of the school, to organize and pace myself. It was awkward at first. The academic environment was new to me even though I was 40 years old by then. For a long time I felt like a kid struggling to fit in.

Ironically, the last few years have been equally challenging. My university, like so many other state institutions, has become much more like a business. Less an ivory tower and more an ivory mill in which the informal becomes formalized and the casual becomes procedural. Metrics and data have taken over from intuition and presumption. Everything we do now needs to be evaluated, reported, tested and assessed. In a paperless age there is more “paperwork” than ever before. And much more pressure to track and record every moment of our working lives. It is a new model quite different from the years of my experience and I am not sure how well I fit into it. Again.

This has no relationship to hard work, by the way. It is simply a shift towards the industrialization of teaching. People who know nothing about it think that being a professor is some kind of scam, that you hang out in a room with some young folks for a few hours a week and have the rest of the time off. Nothing could be further from the truth. They do not realize that teaching, at all levels, is one of the most intense, time-consuming, and exhausting lines of work. I know because I have had other experiences with which to compare it. The preparation, the teaching, the grading, the advising, the mentoring, the research, the committee work, the meetings...my colleagues are the hardest working people I have ever met and I admire them for it. But I will not be missing that part of the job.

If that were sum total of my career, looking back would fairly dismal. But luckily there was a section in middle, about twenty years long in fact, that was purely fulfilling. In that arc of the curve, I felt needed, useful, creative, energetic. I had become a distinguished professor, created award-winning work with my students, won many grants, published books, and generally had the feeling that my job was a career and that the career was an integral part of my life as a creative person. It was a repository of my energies and focus. One nice thing about being a professor is that if you are passionate about your topic, and I have never met anyone who was not, you can keep exploring it for your entire work life and beyond. Because of that, it is a great perk of this profession that you learn more about your own subject by teaching it than you teach to your own

students. Creative thinking, design, visual communications...my career made it possible for me to spend the time of my life immersed in what fascinated me.

Yet even for those with an unbending curve – or a rising one for that matter – there is a moment when you know that it is time to move on. Time to pass the torch or, to be blunt about it, to get the heck out of there before it is too late. Every older professor that I know is terrified of two things; being carried out of the classroom on a gurney and becoming the doddering old coot in the hallway who cannot find the bathroom. But there are smaller hints too. As when marking a paper you vaguely think you may have marked two decades ago, for example. Or sitting at that meeting and knowing that the best new ideas are the same ones you already worked on in the past century. Even my friend who is a successful lawyer has described this feeling.

So as I fill out my retirement papers, I realize that if you are lucky enough to have some stretch of fulfillment in your career, then looking back is not so bad or sad. It is simply sobering to realize that all that time has passed. And in any case, another issue takes over rather quickly...what to do next.

Folks in my mother's generation tended to go from vocation to avocation. She was a 6th grade teacher for forty years and by the time she retired to Florida, she was spending her time traveling and socializing. But for me and most of my boomer friends, the idea is not to retire from work but to redefine it, to revision it with new careers. One friend who was a Spanish teacher became a docent at a major museum and another was a commodities trader who is now an actor on television. Throughout my entire work life I have always had a second profession as a writer of mysteries and essays. Being excited to turn back to that full time makes this transition much easier for me.

But I plan to keep teaching too, and that is another way in which this change does not feel as drastic as it could. This might even bend the curve again. As many professors will tell you, the most rewarding part of this line of work is the relationship you build with students as guide, mentor, teacher, even lifelong friend. What you encounter every year is an eternally young, refreshingly hopeful group of people who are eager to move forward with their lives and even entertain the thought of changing the world. That is not something that comes naturally to an older coot like me and it is worth staying in touch with.

In the end, I keep asking myself the same big question in different ways...did it matter, did I have an impact? Did I make a difference? I suspect that the answer is not as grand but it has the benefit of being true. I will never really know. But there is one thing I am sure of...when it was good, it made a great difference to me.

Now where is that bathroom again?

Finding My Song

When I was sick last year and the wolf was howling at the door, I needed something to mask the sound. I needed something, that is, to take my mind off of myself, something not me and my obsessive worrying.

It took a while to figure out what that something might be. My writing was too familiar; the graphic art too obvious; television too easy. I needed something newer than all that but it took a while to find it. Passion being the cure for depression, as every depressive knows, any of a number of things might have slipped in to fill the space. But what eventually worked was not just unexpected; it was actually funny in its banality.

It was a ukulele, of all things.

That sounds like the beginning of a joke and maybe it is. But it is true nonetheless. When your world gets rattled, you need help to settle back in, help beyond family, friends, healthcare professionals. Something private to keep the spirits up.

This is where the ukulele came in. I bought it online because it seemed dopey and frivolous, the antithesis of what I was going through. It was also cute, manageable in scale, and inexpensive. Ukes are designed for easy access; the four strings are tuned in a way that allows you to form basic chords easily. Combine that with a simple strum and you can start playing songs right off the bat. Rudimentary of course, but a way to experience music from the inside out... by making it.

Plus, there are low expectations for what you can get out of a uke, so almost anything you do meets them. Learn the guitar you are necessarily in the same soundscape as Eric Clapton or Andres Segovia; you can see the mountains you will never reach. But with the uke, there are only some nearby hills: Tiny Tim? Don Ho? And in any case, a uke – as every player knows – is just a trick, a ploy. It is nothing more than a lame excuse to sing.

Singing is fun but lonely in a way, like a comic doing stand-up on the moon. The uke changes that by turning a private drone into some kind of performance, even if only for yourself. That uke for me, in other words, was essentially a license to sing, similar to the ticking clock that the Tin Man gets to acknowledge the heart that he already has.

When you are singing – or playing an instrument or even just taptapping in the dark – you are in a heightened space, removed from the kind of time that fits and stalls. It is a rhythmic plane that can leave sorrow out of reach. This was the key because it was the music that kept me connected. The songs that I had in

my head my whole life became tunes to take me out of myself. Songs that I could sing whenever the mood struck me simply because I played the uke: Tupelo Honey. Ripple. On and On. Margaritaville. Jailhouse Rock.

They got more upbeat as time went on.

A musical instrument is a gift beyond compare.

And a gift is a present in both senses of the term. It is about the promise of the moment and that is no small thing to believe in. Like love or compassion or laughter, music is something worth living for. You simply have to find the melodies that sound like life to you. We all have them and they make music a reason to go on, which is why we make it even in the least of places, even in the worst of times.

I cannot say whether my singing and playing sounds like crooning or howling. No matter. It is my way of living again. The songs fill the air. The wolf whimpers.

Swing Dancing in a Wheelchair

Dear Diary:

My wife and I have been swing dancers for a long time and look forward to the Midsummer Night Swing series at Lincoln Center each year. With great anticipation we walk past the fountain, hear the pulsing music, pass through the excited crowds in **Damrosch Park** and make our way to the bandshell. There on the dance floor the diversity of the city is always on display. People of all ages, all body types, all races, all sexual orientations and all levels of ability are joined together by the rhythm and the beat, under a canopy of summer stars.

This was especially true one night this season, when a woman entered the dance floor. She was alone in the midst of all those couples, stationary and isolated, but swaying slightly to the music, eyes closed. Not unusual, except that she was in a wheelchair.

After a short time, she held out her arms to the couple next to us, inviting them to dance with her. It seemed awkward at first but she was insistent, and after a few moments, they each took one of her hands and began to dance with her. It was clear that any discomfort they felt quickly passed as the rhythm took over, and soon they were just a trio dancing to the music, each in their own way and together in whatever way they could. After a few spins and turns, she squeezed their hands and moved on to another couple nearby.

It was a moment of pure New York, which welcomes and mixes everyone.

More on MOOCs

To the Editor:

Re: “After Setbacks, Online Courses Are Rethought,” front page, Dec.11.

As a college professor, one word came to mind as I read yet another article about the failed promise of Massive Open Online Courses or MOOCs. It is a word my students use quite often. The word is...duh!

The idea of a remote course that will “educate” thousands or hundreds of thousands of students is something only a venture capitalist could dream up. Every effective teacher knows that coursework is not primarily about imparting information; it is about motivating our students to want to learn about the material and giving them the skills to do so. This requires adapting to their differences not treating them all identically.

The use of the web to help accomplish this is no big mystery. Nor is it reliant on the next “big idea” approach that fuels Silicon Valley. Like every colleague of mine, I use websites, podcasts, chat rooms, videos – any supportive technology that works – to augment and extend what I do in the classroom. Managing the balance between the needs of our student and what the web can offer in this hybrid approach is the real challenge.

Nothing massive about that.

To The Editor

Re: “Humanities Committee Sounds An Alarm” (Arts, June 19): The shift in higher education away from broad knowledge towards job-related skills is a clear trend at most four-year colleges. This means a focus on STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math) rather than the Humanities like Art, Literature, Music, and the Social Sciences. This forms the acronym ALMS. The word *alms*, from its origin in Greek to Latin to Old English, relates to compassion and mercy. As Portia says in *The Merchant of Venice*:

The quality of mercy is not strain'd,
It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven
Upon the place beneath: it is twice blest;
It blesseth him that gives and him that takes:

Art, Literature, Music and the Social Sciences teach us to live in the wide world, to understand each other, to expand our sensibilities. We spend our lives not just doing our jobs but reading and writing, talking and sharing, playing or appreciating music, watching or making. It is ALMS that gives us a perspective for all of this, a cultural depth that makes us informed citizens of the world.

We understand the importance of STEM and of teaching job-related skills to undergraduates; we do that as well. But work is not the whole story; we live in a much broader context than that and have to in order to succeed in a global world.

Without ALMS, we are in danger of becoming a society of workers who cannot act beyond the task, who have no references beyond the instructions, beyond the tests and learning objectives, and who know what to do but not how to think. The Humanities Commission is sending an important message. It is time that educators, from nursery school through college, hear and respond to it.

(With Trudy Smoke)

Opening the Window of Learning

To the Editor:

The story of Gary Marcus in “Applied Neuroscience, the Six-String Method” (Arts, Jan. 26) rings true for me, pardon the pun. I am no neuroscientist but as a designer and teacher, I can see how the urge to learn and do can overcome the brain’s limitations of age (too much of it) and innate talent (not enough of it).

At 62, that “window of learning” mentioned in the article is not just closed for me; it is most likely nailed and shuttered. Yet stubborn as a geezer, I decided to learn the vibraphone last year, having had little musical experience. Because the instrument is so expensive, I ended up making my own vibes by taking measurements from images on the Web and building it from scratch, then setting up a series of online lessons, then downloading samba albums to jam with. As Gary Marcus found out too, the technology available now can actually pry open the window a crack.

I will not be onstage anytime soon, but the feeling of learning something new and exploring a new realm - sound and rhythm in this case - is so exhilarating that the older neurons who should know better are being totally drowned out by the music.

Educational Tsunami

In “The Campus Tsunami” (Op-Ed page, May 4) David Brooks offers a neat explanation of the larger issues facing higher education regarding online versus standard coursework. But as a current professor with more than 20 years of experience, I found the essay quaintly retro because in my world that storm has long passed. The issue right now is not the “whether” but the “which.” Not whether online education works or not, but which aspects of it to use in which ways. Every single course I teach – from an intimate seminar or studio to a more formal large-scale lecture – is already some combination of online and on-campus experience. And often both at the same time: video conferencing to add presence to online communication; smartphones in class for group research. The question facing every educator right now is which parts of the teaching and learning process are better served virtually or physically to make them more efficient, more effective, or more affecting, and how to combine them in what ways. In this sense, I am not preparing for an impending tsunami; I am just trying to gear up for this morning's weather.

An Ode to the Bookblog

I love books so don't take what I am about to suggest the wrong way. I have hundreds of them on the shelves and adore the look and feel of them. Plus, I have had 30 of my own books published throughout my career as a writer, designer, and educator.

Most of these have been through commercial presses like Simon & Schuster, Dell, Pearson, and others. Some of my books have been Indy publications through places like iUniverse. Each of those has advantages: prestige in the case of commercial presses, efficiency in Indy publishing.

But lately I have been exploring a different format that has turned out to be more rewarding than either of those approaches. In fact, it is so effective for what I do that it has almost become an addiction. I have to control myself to not put too much out there too quickly. I am referring here to the bookblog.

The bookblog is just what it sounds like; it uses the blog format to publish a book. But while blogs are forums for instant opinion and commentary about what is happening right now in the area the blog addresses, the bookblog is simply a way to get your book out there for the world of readers to find.

The first advantage of the format is how easy it is to use. Blog design can get quite complex but the basic uploading, layout, and posting of a book on sites like Blogger and WordPress is actually quite simple. You start with the classic format and, if you choose to, you can get fancier later on. It is possible to upload an entire book in one day. Compare that to the two months it takes for an Indy publisher to get your book out, or the years it might take through commercial venues.

The blog format is also very well matched to the structure of a book. A standard blog page has three parts: a banner across the top, a content section on the left, and a column of categories and links on the right. That translates into the cover at the top (title and graphic), the chapters or stories on the left (with or without links and graphics), and the table of contents, author's bio, and other extra material on the right.

I know that this goes against the grain of the inspiring story that every writer has in mind. The one in which your friends and family urge you to get your work published and so you send it to an agent who swoons over it and presents it to editors who start a bidding war for it that leads to a huge advance, the whirlwind tour, a multi-book contract.

This is a lovely fairy tale but anyone who has been doing this for a while – a lifetime in my case – knows that this is baloney hanging in the same window as the screenwriter who gets the million dollar advance by describing her idea over lunch. It is a professional myth. Just finding an agent is a challenge that can take months; editors may want massive changes to suit the market; and unless you have a guaranteed audience for your work, finding a publisher can prove impossible.

The bookblog circumvents all of that. Think of it as a kind of cloudwriting...getting your words in the cloud, on the web, searchable and findable, right away. The same day I put up my first bookblog, I already had a dozen readers of it. I have no idea how they found it, but they did. And the numbers kept rising from there.

Of course, there are drawbacks to this approach. You do not get the services a publisher provides, like editorial help. But if you need that, you can always find freelance editors. The same is true for designers for the book cover, which in this case is in the form of a banner, if you cannot create one yourself.

You do not get the advance against royalties that is so attractive from commercial publishers; in fact, you are giving your work away for free. But in reality, advances have been steadily shrinking over the years and they are never quite up to what the fairy tale suggests. Most books do not make money beyond their advances anyway. So if you are in it for the money, this may not be for you; but if you like the idea of people actually reading your work, then it is a great way to go. Plus there are many ways to monetize the bookblog that are not available to you as an author of a book sitting on a bookstore shelf or at Amazon.

You also will not have the support of a promotion department but that too is a bit of a myth. For books that are not bestsellers, the burden of promotion falls on the author anyway and that is the same case here. If you are clever about it, you can build an audience by creating links from your website or any other presence you have online, using email blasts, and of course through any social media sites, presentations you make, and so on.

Finally, you will have to forego the bragging rights you get from being a published author at a famous press but that kind of snobbery vanishes as you watch your readership rise every day – the blogs are great at tracking hits – and know that people are actually finding and reading your work. To me, that is better than holding a nice book in my hand.

A Second Career As Media Star?

My YouTube channel now has over 9 million hits.

Of course that is nothing compared to the videos of real celebrities who could sneeze in front of a camera and instantly get ten times that audience. But for a series of private videos that had absolutely no promotion whatsoever of any kind, it is pretty impressive, especially to me.

I should explain that most of the 15 videos on the channel involve some silly cutting up of fruit and vegetables. I am not sure what that says about me or about the viewing public but at best it suggests that little entertainments – any opportunity to laugh in this harsh world – is a welcome respite. At worst it proves that sites like YouTube really are bringing down civilization.

What is most amazing about this effort is how easy it was to begin it. I made the first video for my wife as a joke and then mounted it on YouTube for her to see. It took a few minutes to do that. The next day it already had hundreds of hits and soon thousands. Who those people were and how they found it was one of the most fascinating mysteries of the process.

Then, as with actual celebrities, the allure of fame became overwhelming and I began to make more videos and ride the wave of my rising stardom. I even stopped being jealous of movie stars, who seem universally adored, because I had my own global fan base. In fact I would have done a lot more if not for the fact that I have an actual job.

In real life, as opposed to media life, I am a professor of visual communications at Kean University in New Jersey. That is a good thing because it is not too much of a stretch to see the connection between my subject area and the videos, although if you actually see them the stretch becomes a bit of a stretch. At the very least though, this success gives me some credibility with my students in the classes I teach in video and visual storytelling.

I also write a lot of books, and I am always hoping that the viewers of my videos will go to my website to check out my work but so far that has not happened much. I suspect that video watchers are not necessarily book buyers. People often ask me how you go from a single hit – my wife on her computer at the other end of the apartment – to 9 million without even trying and my answer is...you have to ride the memes. These videos are so popular, I suspect, because they fit into one of the seven or eight categories of viral video or what you might call cultural memes on the Web. For example, celebrities doing anything, crazy pets, cutesy kids, street fights and, my chosen category...people acting like fools.

Why those particular chunks of pop culture happen to work on YouTube is anyone's guess but they do. Mine are proof.

Even knowing that, I keep wondering who all those people are out there watching my videos. YouTube helps here with some very in-depth demographics about the when and who and where of every single hit. For example, I am a big star, apparently, in Western Australia where someone even started a Facebook fan club page just for me. I visit it every so often to bask in my own stardom but I have had no contact with the person who started it because I am still trying to decide if it is flattering or creepy. I also have a huge fan base in Latvia and Poland, according to the stats. Make of that what you will.

Even though I have a lot of worldwide fame, there is no fortune. In fact, if you have enough hits, as I do, YouTube gives you the opportunity to make money at it them or, to use the fancy term, to monetize your work. That means allowing ads to be shown at the bottom of the videos. I have not done this because I find those ads annoying myself and I am guessing that it would cause the number of hits to drop off. After doing some research I found that you actually do not make that much money but the decision really tells me that, for the moment at least, the stardom matters to me more than the income.

You always hear that real celebrities have to learn to ignore the press about them and one thing I learned early on is to not read the comments people leave on the videos. I did at first and it was frequently depressing. The Web, and YouTube especially, attracts lurkers and attackers, people who love to snipe and criticize. I used to delete the really virulent ones but after a while realized they did not matter in the least; nasty comments are just another meme, a cultural artifact of the medium.

On the other hand, I occasionally get emails from people that are truly encouraging. Like this one from a girl in Indiana: "back last year when my mom was sick I used to show her your videos and we'd both laugh together. I really think that laughing helped her get better. Thanks for making us both laugh."

I made three more videos after I got that comment.

I guess there are some things even more wonderful than global stardom.

The Power of Story

We live in stories.

I am not referring to a method of communication here or even to a marketing technique. I mean something much deeper and more fundamental than all that. I mean that stories are a form of consciousness, a way we think, a means by which live in a complex world.

There is a theory of mind that suggests that we experience the world in disparate moments – quantum bursts of awareness – and only weave them into coherence in the storytelling part of the brain. In the same way that you might have a series of unrelated dream images and only tie them together by telling someone about your dream. Narrating it, in other words, turning it into a story. The simple words “and then...” become a kind of glue that pulls it all together.

I like this idea of the centrality of stories to consciousness. I once wrote a sci-fi story called *The Edge of Time* in which people stop the end of the universe by reading fiction to each other, so bound up are stories with the very fabric of our existence.

But even if this idea is too radical for your own way of thinking, it is easy to see that we also live in stories in another sense...we love them. We have carved, scratched, painted, printed, and inked our stories onto wood, hide, skin, paper, bamboo, ivory, clay, stone, silk, canvas, film and now onto evanescent digital bits. We watch and read and remember and are influenced by stories for our whole lives; and we tell them all the time. The growing science of *narrative medicine* suggests that the stories we keep about ourselves can affect our own healing. And in any case, what is most of our common communication if not an elaborate trading of stories? We are *homo fabula*, the storytelling creature, and anyone involved in creating visual communications should have this in mind as a powerful tool.

In even the most basic way, every picture tells a story.

The simplest mark – like the handprints found on the walls of the Ice Age caves – says, “I was here.” A person, a place, an action. Story 101. Jump thousands of years and you get to the TV show *Lost* which presents dozens of characters whose entire lives are revealed through interweaving parallel narratives looping backwards and forwards in time. Story to the nth degree. Yet our ability to recognize, absorb, and react to both those simple marks and that complexity of storylines shows just how comfortable we are with story as a basic cognitive ability.

In fact, we recall stories better than facts. Think of any teacher you had who made the material vivid through great anecdotes rather than a clear recitation of details. Think about telling your friends something interesting you heard which, no doubt, was not a list of specifics (not if you want to keep your friends) but a story. A funny joke, a good single-panel cartoon, and a memorable anecdote all share this power. The best of the one-minute TV spots is a classic of the form.

A true study of the power of storytelling involves a lot of things from genre and style to mode and method, controlling idea and theme to plot and antiplot, character, climax, setting, and much more. Yet all stories also have one fundamental thing in common that is a bit easier to keep in mind as we work on our visual communications. Every good story has a simple narrative structure...a beginning, middle, and end.

To create a wildly popular 3-minute video for YouTube – nothing more than a simple visual gag – I immediately divided it into those three basic narrative segments: beginning, middle, end. Act I was the introduction...the character and basic props were presented. Act II was the action...a series of events took place but were left unresolved; it was not clear what would happen next. Act III was the resolution... character and action came together to create the final upshot. In other words, the video was not so much a gag as a short storytale that lured the viewer along by creating a series of mysteries from start to finish. Who? What? Why?

As any fiction writer knows, this structure with its unresolved segments creates a sense of suspense that compels the reader to keep reading or the watcher to keep watching. For visual communicators, it is crucial that we keep this ability – this need, this fascination – in mind. We use words and images and graphic elements to communicate concepts, of course, but what ties these components together most powerfully is a unifying story.

So we should work with that story in mind. Any consistent attempt to package products for marketing should have a storyline behind it. And every iteration of advertising for it should expand on it. What is the tale we are telling? What is the storyline that we want our audience to know and remember? How does it start, what happens next, how does it conclude? How do we reveal some information but hold back other things to create suspense?

This is especially critical as the forms and forums of new media continue to expand. In an era of transmedia entertainment every brand plays itself out across the maximum number of media platforms...television, comics, the web, games, and products, as well as participatory media like blogs, fanzines, wikis, vids, and more.

Yet behind all those approaches, all that marketing information and user feedback, all the moving images and the tidal wave of words, someone has to keep in mind the narrative engine, that consistent tale to tell and retell. The facts, the details, the benefits of any product get lost but the story stays, even more

powerfully if the viewer or listener becomes part of that story. Thus a branding strategy may become a form of complex interactive storytelling and as a designer the question of the basic story being told should be as clear to you as the best typeface.

How do you do it? Same way you get to Carnegie Hall...practice, practice, practice.

Here's a good exercise for visual communicators: the web abounds with spoken jokes, comedy routines, comic books, interactive graphic novels, videos, and award-winning TV commercials. Find the best ones and study the stories they tell. Write down the structures. Narrate the tale. See how they work. Steal from the best.

Think of yourself not just as a graphic designer or ad major or picture maker, but as a storyteller – narrator, director, scribe – of every thing you make.

An Old Photo Shows New Possibilities

I found the photo under a mound of forgotten notes, books, papers, and other mementos. Just one more castoff from a typical modern life filled with stuff. But this one had a special draw, even cracked and faded as it was. It was a photograph of my sixth grade class from Public School 241, Brooklyn, 1960. There we were, stacked like soda cans on the stairs behind the school, all buff and brace in our white shirts, and facing down the camera.

I am haunted by old photos, by those ghosts of a gone past, so frozen in time and place. Reminders that life is streaming by. But this one was especially eerie. It was not just any bunch of kids but me and my classmates from 50 years ago. I recognized everyone in there, myself included, but only as an echo. Was I really that kid in the picture? Were any of us? Did we fulfill the promise of those promising faces? Or was it all just a trick inside the emulsion?

The more I looked, the more I needed some kind of answer and so, like a cheap detective, I started to track down those kids in my spare time. Rampant nostalgia? Perhaps, though I do not recall loving that time in my life especially. Or was I just trying to see if the future concluded the past or only followed it? Maybe I was simply trying to exorcise myself of the ghosts.

Working through old friends, following the clues of gossip and hearsay, and above all scouring the web, I spent months in relentless – the word cuckoo also comes to mind – pursuit of my classmates.

Case in point: I found one fellow by looking through hundreds of those teeny thumbnails that a Google Images search returns. Yet older, balder, and bearded, I instantly recognized the original boy inside the man he had become. It was like finding a long lost pal who was never reported missing in the first place.

Eventually I located 23 out of the 29 folks in that photo. Then for almost a year I contacted, cajoled, begged, and irritated my former classmates into sending me a recent photo and a bio update for a reunion website. It is not easy to get people involved in your obsession, let alone to write their life stories for you or trust you with their faces. But as these new images and tales began to trickle in, my attitude towards the photo began to change.

Here, after all, was a class of kids in an ordinary public school in that utopia of the ordinary...Brooklyn in the age of the Dodgers. We were middle and working class kids, most of us the sons and daughters – or grandchildren at most – of immigrants from Eastern Europe. Prospect Heights, the Brooklyn Museum, and Flatbush Avenue framed our lives; pizza and Coke uplifted them. We were

smart kids with good scores on IQ tests but just kids too. Anyone's kids, city kids, American kids.

And now I had the future of those kids all written down and played out. We had survived elementary school and the atom bomb and polio and gone on to live lives full of difficult families and loving memories, losses and triumphs, decisions good and bad, failed marriages and stellar ones, health disasters and miracles, all of it. Everything that was possible, it seemed to me, showed up in the biographies of my class. We started out in that schoolyard as kids and wound up as doctors, professors, judges, writers, and executives. We obeyed our parents, fought them, left them, lost them, then became parents ourselves, then grandparents.

Reading those tales was like tracking the story of an entire generation in its inevitable march through the world. Seeing the recent faces marked the wear of time on the body. I would have guessed all that would make the photo even sadder and more poignant – the loss of youth and all - but it turned out that the opposite was true. That moment in 1960 captured on the paper was gone for sure but the ghosts had come back to life. We were still here after all, with new hopes and plans, still facing down the future. There was still a gleam of promise in those eyes. And I even had some new old friends to play with.

On the anniversary of the start of my search, I looked at the original photo again. It is no longer a lonely echo; it is now another note in the ongoing melody of our time and place, which is still playing out. I look at it now with a new sense of longing, not for the past but for a future which is still out there, always waiting to happen, one moment away from being snagged in the next photograph.

Just a Number

When my father died I thought that he had lived a long life. His last age, that final number they tag on to your name like a conclusion, meant nothing to me as a boy of ten. All I knew was that he was a grown-up: father, salesman, husband. I learned abruptly that this was one of the things that grown-ups did and although I had a hard time coping with the loss, I knew at least that he had lived his life.

For years I dreamed of opening the front door and seeing him again, still in that gray suit, with those same bifocals, that familiar rising smile of his, the parted hair. He brought home chocolate bars hidden in his pockets and dared me to find them and in my dreams he had them still. He was frozen there, in other words, into that final age that made him ageless for me, that made his age just another numbing number in the math of life.

He was 59.

I have never known a man who outlived his own father who was not aware of it. "Well, now I've lived longer than my old man," a friend of mine recently said rather proudly. I knew what he meant because I have too. To do so seems like some kind of achievement or maybe just an escape from the bonds of the double helix. Men know how old their fathers were the way women know the year they were engaged.

Even though he was in the wool and yarn trade, my Dad was a fan of prime numbers. Lots of guys are. Primes are those numbers that can only be divided by themselves and one. I never understood their appeal but I can see that they are special, a unique and limited set, a secret cluster of known quantities. Science fiction writers make a big deal of them. My Dad too and so it is fitting that my Dad's number, that last number, is a prime.

It is hard not to have these numbers in mind as you go through life. There has never been a more numbered era than ours. Cholesterol, PSA, Social Security, triglycerides, age, weight, bank password; to the computers we are nothing more than these numbers and once our individual genetic codes are codified, they will be right I suppose.

But for the moment, we are more than these calculations and in any case, as we all know, all numbers are not created equal and some loom larger than others.

In fact, I have one in mind now and it's a biggie. Not to be competitive but it beats my Dad's, narrowly but enough to matter. It's no prime either, my number. In fact it is the opposite. It is an antiprime...a number that can be divided by everything, by one and two and three and four and five and six and itself.

In other words not very special at all. The number is sixty. That's how old I just became. Six-oh. Just two curvy digits yet somehow I cannot grasp it, don't know what to make of it, cannot connect it to my everyday life. It seems like a very big number but as anyone with a little age on them knows, this can be deceiving.

As my aunt told me at 90 (not a prime but at that age who's counting), the problem with aging is that it is merely physical. Inside, she said, she felt just the same as she always had and frustrated that her body felt differently. She was right. I am shocked to look into the mirror and discover creases in my skin and white hair. Just who is that 60-year-old fellow staring back? It can't be me. I am the one with the smooth skin and dark hair, the kid with big plans, the guy with the silly sense of humor. That has not changed no matter what the numbers say.

On my birthday I took down a box of photographs from the closet and found what I was looking for...a photo of my father. I was searching for something, some way to make the numbers make sense I think. His, mine. And here was this snapshot of him as a youngster, probably 14 years old there, wearing a baseball uniform, leaning against a fence with his three teammates. It is an antique uniform with knickers and odd round caps. The boys are leaning casually against a wooden fence under the glare of a high sun. They wear the insignia of the Murray All Stars; the team was named for my Dad because he was their star pitcher. The number on his uniform is 1.

Under the magnifier I can detect that familiar smile and the grin of the eyes...just as you would expect from a ballplayer at the field on a sunny afternoon. In other words, young. It is a haunting photo in the way that photos are; it freezes one instant from the stampede of life in a frame that you can hold but never quite grasp.

What was I looking for in there? Comfort, clues, conclusion? What I found was that we had switched ages in that timeless space between snapshots. I was looking at him at about the same age that I was when he died a year younger than I am now. The calculus of years becomes jumbled when you really get into it.

But then again, these are stiff and rigid, all these figures. An arthritic arithmetic. They do not really capture anything but cold quantity. Deep down I know that we live our lives in the moments not by the numbers. I can see it in his face in that photo, enjoying his moment in the sun; every now and then I can even see it in my own reflection in the mirror, a hint of the kid that never aged.

So maybe all this accounting is beside the point. Maybe that last number – prime or no – is just a quirk of circumstance. No big deal at all. A game for statistics mavens.

I know it is true that I have now outlasted my father. But still I like to think that I did not outlive him.

To Tweet or Not

To the Editor:

If you read Bob Herbert's column, "Tweet Less, Kiss More" online, as many readers do, you get not only his lament about input overload, but also links to Facebook and Twitter, a comment trail, an e-mail contact, a phone linkup, a column archive and by my count about 100 other clickable links and icons that are typical of a Times Web page.

The great irony in writing a column about what Mr. Herbert calls our "techno-tyranny and nonstop freneticism" is that the column relies on this very over-connected world to get the message out. Yet the song he suggests that we all need to hear within ourselves is alive and well, just not a gentle melody. In fact, it is bursting to get out as a tweeting, cellphoning, texting symphony from everyone to everyone else. New generation, new music. As always.

Besides, you don't have to tweet less to kiss more; you just have to learn to text with your eyes closed.

Why Go Indie?

Like Indie music or filmmaking, Indie publishing gets your work out there, free of the limitations and constraints of the commercial structure. It used to be called self-publishing but that smacks of a rotten poet who thinks he is W. H. Auden but isn't. Indie publishing sounds cooler and the web and social media make it an incredible venue for authors. Personally, half of books were published by commercial houses like Dell, Simon & Schuster, and others. But the other half were Indie published and in many ways are a much better deal. Here are some of the ways to think about when and why to go the Indie route.

Time Matters

In Mainstream publishing, from the moment you have a completed manuscript to the moment the first person might buy the finished book will take anywhere from 1-5 years. You have to get an agent to read it and represent it, which can take months; more months as they shop it around and try to find an interested editor; even more as they develop the most marketable version of it...and who knows how long in revisions and suggested changes and editing and production. And that's if things work smoothly. On the other hand, from the moment I finished my last manuscript to the moment it was available at amazon.com was – drum roll - two months. Boom!

What the Dickens

If you think your success is inevitable – the next Charles Dickens – then by all means wait for the commercial world to discover you. Nothing beats having a publisher with all their retail, PR, and sales resources behind you in full force. Short of that, getting your book into the hands of people who adore it (editors, readers, Oprah) and building momentum is going to be much much harder. So Indie publishing is a way to get going, get it out there, move it along. That is why the list of authors who went the self-publishing route is long and famous from Poe and Whitman to Woolf and Dickinson. Even Charles Dickens published most of his early books in serialized form in magazines that he himself created and produced.

Make It, Push It

Even with a mainstream publisher, you still have market your book. Most likely is that they will put it in their catalog and send out a sales sheet, along with hundreds of other books that season. Bookstores won't push it either. They too have bigger fish to fry – Nora Roberts for example. So either way – Mainstream or Indie – marketing, pushing, selling, and promoting the book will be up to you. And since most books are now sold online, the impact of retail stores is less significant than ever. Since success is going to depend on your efforts anyway, you're going to have come up with your own marketing strategy either way.

Get The Web Out

The Web is the best friend authors could hope to have. Tons of ways to do this through websites, RSS feeds, Facebook blasts, Twitter tweets, YouTubes, Kindle teasers, newsgroups, and more. If you don't already know about any of this, then you will have to learn about it. And since you'll have to do this no matter how you publish, you begin to wonder why you need the commercial publisher in the first place. And then there is the publishing version of Catch 22...mainstream presses will only invest in you if you can prove sales but how do you do that without getting published? My YouTube videos have had 6 million hits. They are not promotions for my books but they direct viewers to my website...that's way more interest than any publisher could ever hope to generate for free.

You Know What You're Doing

Both Indie and Mainstream publishers offer authors services like editing, proofreading, cover design, book layout, etc. The difference is that Indie publishers make you pay for it. But you can pick and choose just what you need so that if you (like me) are an old hand at this or have extra skills (I'm a graphic designer too so I can do all the books design and production), then you need fewer services from them. By the way, the person who did the page design for my last book (you don't pay for this) actually read it and suggested some layout changes to make the story clearer; this would never have happened at Ballantine. And don't hope to rely on a Mainstream editor to work too closely with you either. Long gone though are the days when an editor like Matthew Perkins would work day and night to turn a box of scraps and jottings by a writer like Thomas Wolf into a great novel. Publishers are businesses, not support groups; they expect completed, workable work. On the other hand, if you know what you want, then another appeal of the Indies is that they do what you ask and don't start changing your book to fit into their own marketing plans.

Know Your Audience

Successful publishing is about establishing a market, a core, a fan base. Any proposal to a commercial publisher has to contain something far more important than the writing...a market analysis. Who is going to buy the book, why do you think so, and how can you prove it? Good questions. But if you can answer them, if you know your audience and can identify the market, then why not promote and sell your book directly to them yourself? If that all sounds like too much work beyond the writing itself, then look into the many resources on the web who will do it for you.

Pay Your Way

Indie publishing means paying to get your work published...and hopefully making it back as the book sells. Mainstream publishing is getting paid up front and trying to make more. The average advance for an ordinary book from a commercial publisher is \$0 up to \$5,000 or more, depending on many factors. Indie publishing is also zero to anything you want to spend. So the question is how badly do you need the advance versus how much can you afford to spend. But remember that an advance is against royalties...you have to sell many more books to make money beyond the advance. On the Indie side, you make money when the first book is sold.

Flaunt It

I used to be coy about Indie publishing because it sounds like a desperate effort. But now I flaunt it. I'm selling my books to my fans and doing it on my own terms. Even literary snobs understand that making four times the royalties and targeting my audience is better than having a fancy name to toss around but no book sales. Some authors, like Edward Tufte, have built an entire business around publishing and marketing their own books. Besides, if your Indie venture works out, mainstream presses will come sniffing around anyway...but then you may be feeling too independent to call them back.

Using Images

One of the ways the field of graphic design is radically changing relates to the increasing emphasis we are placing on images for communication. The digital revolution and especially the technology of the web have pushed this steady evolution into an explosive mode. We are bombarded with images on our streets, in our homes, and in every device we use to keep in touch. Still and moving images dominate the media to the point that it is rare now to see isolated text or even isolated images. Instead, our visual surround is becoming a vast matrix of images, a virtual world we increasingly live inside.

As designers, we therefore need to understand the impact that images have and the ways we can manipulate and present them to achieve our goals. We need to understand, in other words, the kinds of information that images can convey, the way people look at images, and the impact our choices have on viewers.

One thing to keep in mind when working with images is that we understand them in many ways and on many different levels. Looking is an active process in which we very quickly build up the meaning of an image by probing it with our eyes and brain. For this reason, very few images have one single impact or meaning; most images affect us in a number of different ways.

But image creation is not accounting; there are no common rules to follow. The goal in using images, as it is in all of design, is to become sensitive to the impact of the decisions we make and to understand what our options are as we pursue our objectives. As we select and alter images, we have to remember that many parts of that image may be significant depending on its final use. That can include details that we choose to emphasize or eliminate, colors and tones that we adjust or create, and the sense of balance, hierarchy, or rhythm that we decide to manipulate or impose.

Take the first issue about which details in the image matter. Ask yourself what the focus, the main point, in the image is or should be. What do you want people to notice first, second, third? Even a simple tool like cropping can have an impact here. Or you can enhance certain parts of the image and diminish the effect of others by selectively sharpening or blurring. You can also adjust the tones of the image through contrast and brightness to create different moods.

The colors and shapes, which are thought of as two of the visual elements of an image, have a different and subtler impact. Ask yourself which colors matter and what the palette or overall color scheme communicates. Shifting the colors generally—or adjusting specific areas of color—can have a profound effect on

the impact by making the image softer or harsher, warmer or cooler, more or less intense.

And along similar lines, what kinds of feelings do the shapes convey? Angles and sharp edges can be softened to make images more seductive or, on the other hand, can be hardened to give the image a blunter effect. Busy images can be simplified for more direct impact, as is often the case with logos that have to be recognized quickly, whereas images that are too simple can be enriched for more in-depth viewing, like many book covers.

Composition plays a role here too. Balanced images are seen as stable and calming; imbalanced ones are dynamic and moving. For example, images that are religious in nature tend toward the former, whereas those that relate to music tend toward the latter. And again, the rule is that there is no rule, just your awareness of the effect your decisions have. Keep your goal in mind, your sense of what you want the viewer to see or feel, your objective for the communication.

The question about whether to create our own image or use or alter an existing one is a consistent issue for designers in a world of images. Different projects require different solutions, but in general, we always want to leave our creative stamp on everything we make. Ideally, you can create your own images that reflect your unique skills and talents, but even when that is not possible, try to make each image your own by altering, adjusting, manipulating. A poster or page that you design should work because all the elements—including the image—work together to achieve your goal, not simply because it relies on a strong image that you found online.

And then there is the relationship of images to text to consider. This too is a complex challenge with no simple rules. Words tend to provide more precise, in-depth meanings while images tend to have a broader, more immediate impact. When an image is used to support written text, it can serve many functions. If it is used to illustrate the content of the words (for a magazine article, for example), then the question is which part of the text is worth illustrating and whether you can create an image to achieve that in a compelling way. If the image is used to demonstrate an argument made through the words (like a chart, for example), then the question shifts to whether the image is clear, accurate, and precise. Images can also be used to simply support the general mood or tone created by the words, in which case the subtle impact of shape, color, balance, and hierarchy become more significant.

But of course, in many cases and increasingly, the image is the focus of the communication, and words are used to support, explain, or expand on it. Then the question becomes how to present the words in a way that clarifies rather than confuses the impact of the image—where to place them, how big to make them, how to connect them visually to the image.

And one final point about the new world of the image: We never see images in isolation any-more but almost always in conjunction with other images—adjacent, linked, connected, overlap-ping. So in addition to all the decisions you make about individual images for various projects, you also have to keep in mind the entire image landscape you create, how the parts interact, and what the overall effect is.

Plenty to think about and keep in mind now that we are just at the beginning of this image revolution. New developments, media, and innovations are happening all the time, leading to new types of images and new uses for them. All of this will require designers who are sensitive to the impact of every choice they make regarding each image they select or create.

Stay tuned.

Remembering Wendy

Wendy Wasserstein and I went to the same summer camp for a few years around 1960. It was one of those standard bunk-living, General-Swimming, soccer and tennis playing camps out in the wilds of Pennsylvania. I knew Wendy because we were the same age and whenever there were co-ed events, we found ourselves at opposite ends of a Ping-Pong table or a dance floor.

But Camp Navajo was special in an important way because every summer we put on a major musical production. Sets, costumes, rehearsals, the works. In those days I wanted to be an actor – well, not so much an actor as some kind of movie star – so I always tried out for the main role and I usually got it. More for my enthusiasm than anything else I am sure.

Wendy was a shy and gentle and sweet and chubby girl with a big wide grin...half hilarity, half mystery. I liked the way she watched people all the time, silently, thinking her thoughts, never imposing. I don't think she ever performed in those plays – too shy I guess – and she certainly did not write them. Rogers and Hammerstein did that. But I do remember that she used to hang out sometimes in the Rec Hall watching the rehearsals. I never really knew what she was doing there as I flubbed through my lines and songs but now of course I realize she must have been rewriting in her head.

One time we were putting on Camelot and I was practicing Lancelot's big number – "Camelot! In far off France I heard your call..." – and suddenly there was a weird croaking sound coming from stage right. Everyone turned in time to see that the castle wall, this great faux-stone edifice of plywood and poster paint, was about to collapse onto the stage. We ran over to prop it up but it was too heavy for 12-year-olds to resist. Then suddenly Wendy appeared, took a position in the middle and told us to stand further apart. She was right...we had been too bunched together to support the weight. Her move gave us just enough heft to hold the wall until one of the counselors got there and helped us shove it back in place. I noticed that she had that big grin on her face the whole time.

I always liked Wendy even though I didn't know her that well. She was quiet and observant and thought things through and we sure need that in this world now.

Besides, even though she went on to bigger productions, back there on a camp stage near Honesdale, PA one summer in the early 1960s, Wendy Wasserstein saved Camelot. That's got to count for something.

Testing Testing

From early IQ tests, through grade school report cards, exams in high school and college, and the endless medical tests of adulthood, our mania for rating and grading impacts every aspect of our lives. No surprise then that it starts before kindergarten as recently reported in “Tips for the Admissions Test” in the November issue of *The New York Times*.

Our key method of applying judgments to individuals is now test scores of some kind. Intelligence tests to determine who is smart, class tests to figure out who is listening, aptitude tests to decide who has potential, standards tests to limit those who can apply.

Even the word health no longer refers to how we feel; it now means how we tested on cholesterol blood pressure, weight, body-fat, cardiac stress, and other scales. A slight change in any of these scores can put anyone on permanent medication, change our finances, alter our future and our attitudes about our own lives.

As a teacher, in my own little rebellious effort, I once tried to eliminate testing and grading for a semester and simply pass or fail students based on their overall effort. It did not go over well. “How would we know who was actually learning?” was a constant reaction. My answer was: the same way we did throughout the 40,000 years of history before Stanford and Binet. By outcomes. By the learners learning and the others not. But that not seem to fly.

Can we at least remember that testing and grading are not the only methods for making decisions about human beings? Can we keep some sense of ourselves as untestable, ungraded, non-assessable? And can we who test fight the impulse to think of the tests as distilling some essence and the takers as mere points on a scale. Numbers should amount to something but should not be numbing us to real lives.

a narriage proposal

Marriage simply will not go away.

Not the institution, I mean the word itself. It keeps popping up all over the media like a political hot potato. Marriage is another of those words that you cannot use in mixed company without getting burned. You could almost call it the “M” word.

The central issue in the media is whether gay couples should have the right to join together in matrimony just like everyone else or whether this would mark the end of human decency. To hear all the heavyweights weigh in, you would think the fate of the civilized world was at stake.

Yet it seems to me that there is a simple answer to this problem. It is a design problem with a design solution. An alphabetic one in fact. A visual communications fix, swift as a change in font. I firmly believe that this solution would both give gays the status and rights they seek while at the same time protecting the others from diluting their vows. My modest proposal will cure all the ill will with one swift tap of the keyboard.

To wit...let us quickly and publicly allow gay couples the unalienable right to get narried. No, that is not a typo; it is a solution; this is a Narriage Proposal. All we have to do is change the word that loving gay couples use to seal their commitment to narriage. It stands for not-marriage.

With this plan in place, gay couples could legally and openly propose narriage, have a narriage ceremony, get narried, and even have their narriage annulled, if it came to that sad state of affairs known so well to couples who are you-know-what. Does this not solve all the problems with one simple twitch of type?

Marriage, the great and hallowed institution we all so honor and cherish, would remain unchanged, unchallenged, and unmarred. And an entirely new institution – a virtual twin but not a conjoined one – would be created to honor these other unions.

Besides being simple and swift, the proposal also has the advantage that all fluid changes have. This is known in design theory as the rule of adjacency. The change is so close to the original that it requires only minor behavioral adjustments. Like color television or ear buds. In this case all it takes is one teensy hop to the left on the keyboard for all those documents that have to be

typed. The merest flick of the tongue and purse of the lips in common speech. Existing master documents could be easily converted with a deft swipe of white-out to get rid of the last upright of the letter M, or the last hump of the letter m. It is a rewriter's dream.

I can hear the critics already. This is nothing but a linguistic trick! We're protecting an institution not a word! We're saving civilization from sin not semantics!

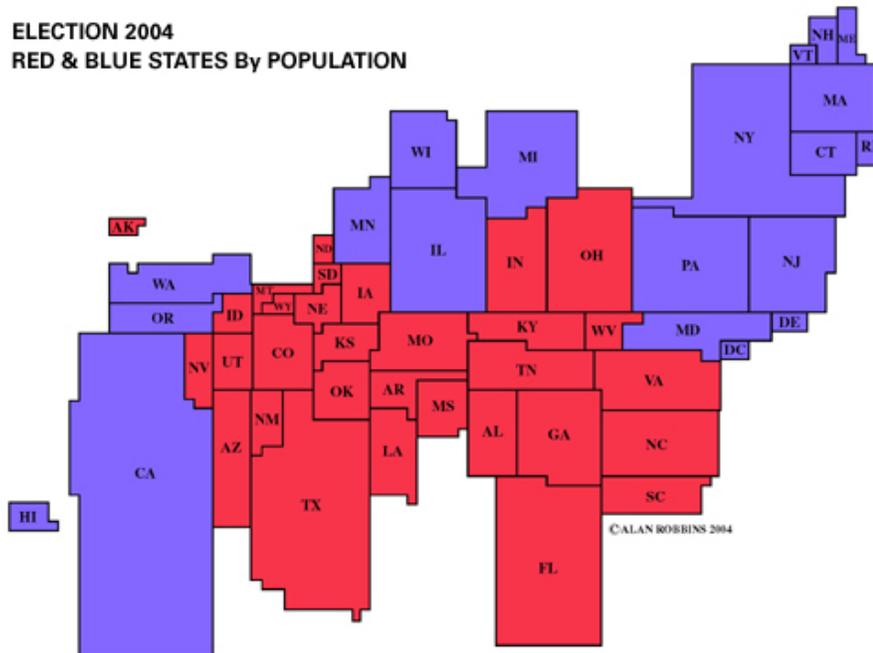
But my proposal is more than that. After all, every discussion of this heated topic comes down to the same thing...that word itself. Not communion, not commitment, not co-mingling...but marriage. Marriage through the ages, marriage in the bible, marriage in the courts, in the hearts of men and women. The word is the very heart of the matter, which is precisely why we have been hearing so much of it.

But I say, let us not be slaves to the semiotics of the word. What we have here is merely a familiar line-up of letters and only the first one will change. Should we divide ourselves over a single M? Nay...let us give these couples the rights they seek while not taking away from those who seek them not.

Or something like that.

What I mean to say is, let us leave marriage to the marriageable and nariage to those who would narry. Fellow citizens I ask you, would you rather use a sword to carve an amendment to the constitution or take a red pen and simply amend the dictionary?

Say amend somebody!



We've seen it so many times, that it is one those images that have become truth. Another example of the way in which visual information creates reality. I am referring to the electoral map that is shown ad nauseam during every election cycle.

The map is used on all the news programs to show how the country is leaning but, of course, it is completely deceptive. This is especially clear in close elections like the 2004 Presidential election in which the map suggested that the entire country voted Republican except for a few slivers of dissent along the edges.

The image was compelling but wrong because it visually mashes two different pieces of data...the number of votes in the Electoral College as reflected through the size of each state. While it is true that the map of the United States is a familiar graphic, this particular combination only makes sense of our idea of democracy is "one acre, one vote."

Full disclosure...I'm Blue. But the point is the same whatever the colors mean. Switch them and you still have the same problem...a misrepresentation of the truth behind the image.

The map you see here presents the size of each state according to its population not its acreage, based on a grid in which each cell represents 100,000 people. It therefore shows the distribution of voters not land and gives a much more accurate visual representation of the country. For example, the slivers of blue at the edges of the country on the old map suggest a separate and elite pocket of democrats; in fact however, most people in the country live along the edges. Montana, for example, is more than twice the size of New York but has 1/20th the population.

This is still not perfectly accurate since the states are colored according to how the Electoral votes went. An even better map would break down each county into Red or Blue but that would produce a patchwork that really conveyed nothing quickly. Still, this population map gives a much clearer sense of how the country is divided. Namely, fairly equally in terms of population, which is closer to the reality.

Election Advice

Elections in other countries always seem to be our problem. Will they be held on time? Will they be inclusive? Will they be free and fair? Represent the will of the people? And if they are taking place in former dictatorships, the citizens too are overcome with doubt and confusion about the process.

As the greatest democratic power in the world, it is our solemn duty to help them prepare. Perhaps a practice ballot like the one below can be used to explain some of the subtleties of the voting process to the uninitiated.



First, take a deep breath about all this because you don't really have to vote at all. It's not only voluntary, frankly it's a pain in the neck. Here in the USA, almost half the people who could vote don't. In our last Presidential election, only 60% of all eligible voters actually went to the polls. The rest – that's about 100 million people, by the way – didn't bother. So no need to feel any pressure just because there are some dumb elections on the way. No need to even show up. Do what we do. Make your voice heard...stay home!



Heard talk about all those unstable towns in the North that won't be able to participate in the election. Don't sweat it. Here at home all sorts of people can't vote. Teenagers, for example. And the roughly 5 million people who have criminal records. In Florida, the votes of 19,000 people were thrown out because they were mistakenly identified as criminals. Doesn't sound like much but Florida is the place where the election was won by 537 votes! Do we worry about it? Do we go back and do it again? No way. Voting isn't all it is cracked up to be. Believe us, you'll be sick and tired of counting ballots in no time.



Naturally, you are concerned about the integrity of the voting process itself. Well you can relax about that too. Here in America we assume that tons of votes will be lost, destroyed, or misrecorded. Happens all the time. We lost

somewhere between 4 and 6 million votes last time due to things like incorrect purging of registered voters, handing out ballots for the wrong precincts, lousy ballot design, machine screw-ups, inaccessible polling locations, lack of multilingual help or handicapped access. The list goes on and on. Face it, this stuff is a crap shoot. We're used to it. You will be too. And don't even ask about our butterfly ballots. Puh-lease!

WHO'S COUNTING

We know you've heard stories about elections that were messed up during the counting process. We've had a few problems along those lines ourselves. Have you ever heard of a hanging chad? No? Well, never mind. We've solved the problem this time around though. Our newest voting machines are high-tech computer gizmos. While it's true that there is no way to check on the results, we're not concerned. Not a bit. All the new machines are produced by companies that support one of our two candidates, so we're sure the technology is going to work this time around. So calm down about this one. We'll lend you the machines when we're done.

I GIVE UP

No doubt you have read a great deal lately about majority rule and how this is the basis of any democracy. Perhaps you're wondering how to make sure that this principle works. Hey, settle down. We don't worry about that. In our last election, the guy who got elected actually lost by half a million votes! It's much more exciting that way. In fact, we don't even vote for our President. It's true. We have a much better system. You see, we vote state by state on a winner-take-all system of representatives called the Electoral College that...oh never mind. You'd never understand it, we sure don't. Just think of it like a lottery... somebody eventually wins and everyone's happy.

WHO ME?

As the day approaches and your candidates are selected, you may wonder whether your choices are really representative of the people. Are the candidates going to understand your needs and concerns? Nothing to fear here. They won't. You know it, they know it, everyone knows it! We know it because we designed it this way. Here at democracy's epicenter only white, Christian, male, millionaires can be President. And among these, only the ones who agree to take billions of dollars to help out the corporations. Do they represent the diverse

interests of the people in our country? Of course not. They're not supposed to. Who needs all that pressure? Narrow choices...that's the ticket.

 **NOT A CLUE**

Don't waste time fretting about the folks who are running for office either. You won't know who these guys are or what they really think anyway. Take a page from our book and just sit back and enjoy the show. Elections, you'll find, are not about anything real or substantive; they're about sound bites and spin and one-liners. Who knows what the candidates really think...who cares? We don't and we're happy as clams. As long as they tell us there'll be no new taxes...we vote for them no matter what. It's the only way. Who has time to go into every issue under the sun? We're way too busy spreading liberty and sponsoring elections.

 **SAY WHA???**

You've heard about Swift Boats and the Texas National Guard? As we say at home...Fuggedabout it! Why worry about things like truth and reality. That's not the American way. In fact, innuendo and outright lies are at the very foundation of our elections. Anybody can say anything about anyone and get on the evening news. That's freedom of speech in action. It doesn't matter what's true, only what grabs you. So forget all that nonsense about honesty and integrity. Even we don't know what's what most of the time. No idea. Take it from us, by the time of the actual elections, you'll be so inundated with false charges, personal attacks, and uncheckable claims that you'll be thrilled to stuff that ballot into the box and get on with your lives.

A Million Hits

It all started as a joke for my wife because I love the sound of her laughing.

I was fiddling around with the iMovie software that came with my new computer and decided to make a short video...a gag with oranges that I had been performing for years to entertain friends and small children.

I grew up in the age of early television with Sid Caesar, Victor Borge, Ernie Kovacs, Steve Allen. Funny to me has always been serious looking men acting like utter fools. So I invented a persona for the video...that of a somber-looking gent meticulously turning himself into an inane cartoon. A kind of dignified buffoon. He is not me, of course, although I suspect that a lot of people who see the videos miss this key point.

The bit worked; my wife laughed and I was happy.

Then came one of those telling moments when an offhand decision changes everything. I decided to share the fun and send the video to friends and family. The easiest way to do that was to mount it on YouTube.

The means of converting digital movies into a format that can be seen by anyone online was the genius insight of the kids who created YouTube in 2005. That is why there are an uncountable number of videos on the site because the moment you calculate a number (84.6 million when I last looked), it is already surpassed. It took about ten minutes for me to mount my private little video for all the world to see and suddenly my dignified buffoon was a global avatar.

Within a month I watched the number of hits climb into the tens of thousands. Bolstered – although perhaps seduced is a better word – I made three more fruit-gag videos to create a series called The World's Funniest Dinner Tricks. That's when things went cablooney. Virality is both astonishing and terrifying. One day, one viewer...my wife. Two years later, a million people have seen the videos.

One million.

That is probably more than the number of people who have rented Citizen Kane from Netflix. I am not comparing myself to Orson Welles, of course; he never did funny stuff with fruit as far as I know. But then, video is neither film nor TV, the markets are very different. YouTube videos only reach those kinds of numbers because they are short, dumb, and free. This is an unexpected consequence of the video revolution: teensy cameras in all those phones and computers, vid-friendly sites that work by viral networking. Forget fifteen minutes of fame...how about every home movie jokester with a bigger fan base than most directors who went to film school?

Yet that number is also numbing. Who are all those people? Comments that are posted give you some idea and even though they are only a tiny percentage of all viewers, they do hint at who watches this kind of stuff.

Kids mostly, I think. Who else would suggest that I was too old to try to be funny? Ouch. Luckily, the vast majority are positive and succinct...peppered with webisms like lol, lmao, lmfao, omg, and all the rest. If you don't know what they mean, go look them up on an online dictionary. I had to.

Some were amusingly mean ("you stupid mron"), some vicious ("waste of time, why don't you die"), and one was so hateful and cruel that I can't even repeat it. Lowest denominator of an anonymous world, I guess. And then there are the ones in other languages that I gave up trying to understand as BabelFish failed to decode the idioms. "He no make dog with good falsity?"

But as comments play off other comments, I even have defenders like this one: "hey, dude, lighten up. He's trying to make you laugh. Give him credit." Or this one, no doubt from someone of my more genteel generation: "Most of you are too young to understand that everything takes work, time, effort. Someday when you grow up, emotionally, you will learn to be kinder to people who are trying things, even if you can't appreciate them yet." I actually wrote that guy a note of thanks.

YouTube also gives you statistical tools so you can track the metrics of your audience; I'm doing rather well with men in Western Australia. But even I know that all of this is just an excuse. As is the fantasy that this will lead somewhere...the commercial deal, a movie contract, that Hollywood call. A fruit concession on Broadway?

It has nothing to do with any of that.

The Web gives us an instant connection to huge networks and video makes it vivid and intimate. The simple fact is that having had a taste of a global audience, even though this is not the revolution of my generation, I am hooked. Just like everyone else who either mounts videos (which seems to be everyone else) or just watches them. It's the new connection, the new chatter, the next buzzbuzz. Move over email, bye bye texting.

Which brings me back to Victor Borge. Too young to know who he is? No problem, clips can be seen in full all over you YouTube. He was a performer who said "laughter is the closest distance between two people."

I would amend that: a video is the closest distance between a million.

How a Teacher Matters

As a teacher, I often find myself envying plumbers.

They arrive on the scene, suss out the problem, devise a solution, fix it, and move on to the next challenge. So neat, so clear. By contrast, I am not so sure what it is exactly that I do for my students, what service I perform. Yes, there are ideas to convey and skills to impart but is that all there is to it? Am I essentially a training machine?

When most people talk about a teacher who made a difference, it is about someone who went out of the way to help them at a crucial time in their lives. But that is by definition a rarity or it would not be out of the way. So what exactly, on the most basic level, makes a teacher matter?

I got a hint about the answer when, at an elementary school reunion, I saw my own 6th grade teacher. It was amazing to see her again but, as I thought about it, I could not think of a single thing that she taught me or that I learned from her. She existed for me now only as a name and vague presence at the front of the room all those years ago.

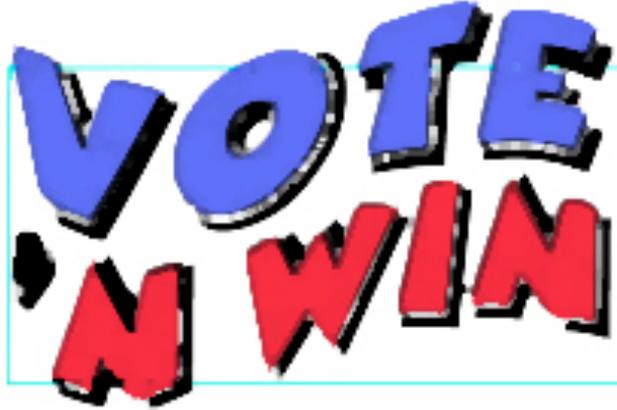
She was as spry and thin as ever, seemed thrilled to see us all again, remembered each of us, told stories, traded recollections. She reminded me that my father had passed away that year and how it affected my writing in class, something I never knew she knew. She made a little speech about how we had challenged her because she was a new teacher and worried that she could not answer our questions.

Meeting her in that context, it was obvious that she was then and is now more than a teacher. She was a woman, a person, a human being struggling to make a life, just like anyone. And standing there talking to her, seeing her again all these decades later, it suddenly hit me why a teacher matters. Not for what they teach or what we learn. It is not about the lessons or the skills. It is simply about sharing a time in one's life, a unique moment of being alive together with a purpose, and hopeful about a future.

We both idolize and demonize teachers, presuming that they are major influences on young lives and blaming them for a whole range of social failures. But the truth is both simpler and richer than that. Teachers are the ones who teach us, just by being there, that our lives are our own and our futures are full of promise. They are often beloved only in retrospect, only when we ourselves have a life to reflect back on. In all the time that has passed, I had no idea what I felt about her as a teacher. But standing there with her, decades later, I suddenly thought she was the greatest one I ever had.

So I stopped worrying, for a little while at least, about what I was giving to my own students and thought that maybe, some day, they might invite me to a reunion and realize that about me.

I doubt that even plumbers get that very often.



Chaos theorists love to talk about the Butterfly Effect.

This is a way of explaining how seemingly minor events can have repercussions in complex systems that eventually produce significant, and unexpected, outcomes. The name refers to a butterfly that flaps its wings in Taiwan and by a complex series of interactions, causes a rainstorm in New York a week later.

Kind of like the last presidential election when a different butterfly – namely the ballot that was used in Florida – created an unexpected effect. Not to mention a storm of controversy. 23,000 people who used it claimed to have either punched the wrong hole or a second one in an attempt to undo their initial choice.

Yet following a few basic rules of information design could have prevented the problem.

First, we see better than we move. Visual acuity is much more precise than physical dexterity. Although the holes on the ballot were distinct visually, they were too close together for effective punching. Like those teeny buttons on digital watches that allow a moment's confusion to become an annoying alarm in the middle of the night.

Second, never buck the power of habit. We overcome most poor designs by practicing...how else to manage the absurd QWERTY keyboard? But the Florida ballot changed the usual layout. It put Buchanan's name next to the second hole down the line, which many people assumed would record a vote for the second most popular candidate. That was their typical way of arranging the names. But

in this case, Buchanan was not the second most popular candidate and that led to more confusion.

Third, all designs should be reality tested. What works on the drawing board may fail miserably in the coarse conditions of real life. Many officials inspected and approved of the butterfly layout, but no one tried to use it under real voting conditions in which the card was placed at an angle and did not line up precisely with the template, and the user was under pressure to finish and move on.

Finally, remedies should always be built into the design. This is the reason that screens on ATM machines have a “clear” button. Paper, of course, cannot be unpunched but thousands of people apparently had no idea what to do if they inadvertently made two holes.

Of course, the problem was not with the ballot alone. All sorts of failures emerged from the rest of the process including misplaced arrows, dimpled chads, missing postmarks, broken levers, lost slips of paper, and more. Even in chad-free domains, voting can be a confusion of lines, levers, and clunky machines that seem to be remnants from another century. And as everyone knows, the new electronic machines with no paper trail promise to be far worse in every way.

What we really need is a new standard national system that can be used equally everywhere in the country and that takes advantage of the digital reality of the rest of our lives. Well believe it or not there actually is such a system already in place. It works smoothly, fairly, efficiently, accurately, and nationally. It’s instant, cheap, and familiar to everyone. No one complains about it. Everyone trusts that it is accurate. It’s even fun.

I’m talking about the lottery.

Why don’t we use the lottery machines, which work perfectly well, for voting?

Once every four years, we should turn the lottery machines throughout the country over to the election process. Lottery machines in each state are tied to central computers that instantly tally the numbers. The machines are accurate and trustworthy; have you ever heard of anyone complaining that the machine printed out the wrong numbers? Or mistakenly awarded them millions?

In addition, you immediately get a receipt that you can check. And the machines are simple to use...all you have to do is fill in the boxes for your choices and hand the card to the clerk who inserts it into the reader. The machines instantly reject any card that is improperly filled out.

There are other advantages to using lottery machines too. They are always located in retail areas where people tend to go anyway, not in churches and schools off the beaten path. Granted, this might lead to long lines on election day, but no more than we already have at voting locations and certainly no longer than the lines for mega-jackpots, which no one seems to mind waiting on.

Certain minor details would have to be added like an ID for each voter to prevent fraud and a one-time use ticket. Other than that, it is the exact same process that everyone uses now with little confusion. Anyone without access to such a machine could mail their card in, just as they do now.

All of which would improve the system, simplify the process, guarantee the results, cost next to nothing, and be available right away. Come to think of it, we could increase voter turnout substantially by combining the vote with a national lottery.

Kill two birds....vote 'n win.

Naturally there will be people who think this approach taints our election process and demeans voting by associating it with gambling. As though the two are not already joined at the hip. And besides, voting and gambling are simply two different ways of tabulating data. Right now one works pretty well and the other is a national disaster. Chaos, as the theorists tell us, is a fact of life in the universe and we have to learn to live with it.

But that doesn't mean we have to vote for it.

How to Listen

It is one of the unheralded building blocks for creative thinking. By careful listening we can make better connections with people, glean more helpful input, and learn to absorb rather than simply impose. But there are some simple rules to being a good listener.

Watch Your Body

Postures and gestures are powerful forms of communication and your body language can literally control the content and tone of a conversation. Yawns and droopy eyelids don't encourage accuracy; knotted arms and tight lips defy intimacy. The body language of a good listener expresses silent attentiveness. Leaning slightly towards the speaker demonstrates that you're alert and concerned. Expressing agreement while the other person is talking encourages the speaker to continue and this will stimulate the dialogue. And don't forget to make eye contact to show your connection but casually, not by staring them down. One last thing...clasp your hands or rest your face in your hand. This communicates comfort and also stops you from tapping, drumming or fidgeting.

Pick The Place

The physical context of the conversation is also important. Glaring lights and sounds don't induce openness. If you're seven feet away across a massive desk, or under a grimy car, don't expect people to shout their deepest secrets. Instead try to match the surroundings to the kind of interaction they will support. The physical distance between speaker and listener is crucial, though different in every culture. Two feet apart is our standard for polite discourse in the West; but other cultures may differ. Temperature matters too (colder rooms force people to reach conclusions, warmer ones to ruminate), as does space (cluttered or small rooms are better for being specific, huge or empty ones induce overviews), and thresholds (don't expect talks in a doorway to get very far, or discussions by an open window to be very intimate).

Empathize, Don't Criticize

Most people talk to express their feelings and feel better when they perceive that they have. Unless it is your specific role to solve the speaker's problem, don't try. You're much better off supporting the speaker's own self-expression than imposing your own. A good listener is supportive, not judgmental. A simple "I know just how you feel," or "that happened to me once too" is pure

magic for lubricating the situation. Even if the speaker has brought you a specific problem, it's often better in the long run to help them express it than for you to try to solve it. Play the role of a good shrink, whose immediate goal is to get a full description not a quick resolution. Ask questions. A wise counselor helps the client find the answer themselves, no matter how obvious it may be to everyone else.

Don't Interrupt

Your mom may have said this and, as usual, she was right. Many people see conversation as a battle; they spend all their listening time getting their next point ready to fire like a cannonball. They feel that if they don't say it immediately, it will get lost in the barrage. Instead, drop the war plan and think of the conversation as a mutual project, like cooking a meal together. There's a common goal, a reason for cooperation, and a rhythm to the process. And plenty of time for both parties to make their contribution. In some formal situations, taking notes can be an effective way to both avoid interrupting and keep your thoughts intact. Writing down key comments or main ideas even if you never say a word can help synthesize and organize the points of the discussion.

Clarify Your Own Needs

Even while listening, it's important to make your own needs for the conversation known. For example, you can clarify the topic of discussion right from the start by stating it out loud. Then if you find the conversation losing its focus, say so. You don't have to be cruel about it, just clear. Say, "I think we're losing focus," or "let's get back to the main point". If the speaker is getting bogged down in details, ask them how it relates to the overall topic; or if it's getting too vague, ask for an example. Reiterating the speaker's main points every so often will also help keep both of you focused. As a listener, you can also set parameters for the length of the discussion by telling the speaker how much time you can spend and ask if that's enough. If it isn't, reschedule.

These ideas are based on a view of the role of a listener that is not passive. A good listener isn't simply a sponge for everyone else's chatter but picks strategies according to the requirements of the situation. A good listener has tacitly agreed, and should therefore demonstrate to the speaker, that they have committed themselves to their mutual goals for the conversation. This encourages the person to whom they're listening to be a good speaker as well.

The Albert Code

Mnemonics are always useful in creative thinking, so it should be no surprise that a helpful one can be found in the name of that icon of innovation, Albert Einstein. Notice how each letter of his first name stands for a uniquely Einsteinian approach to creative thinking, if you allow for some creative wordplay.

Answerphobia...an aversion to answers.

Einstein's early explorations into the structure of the universe began with thought experiments like imagining what a beam of light look like if you were traveling alongside it at the speed of light. No one, including Einstein, had an answer for that. It was new kind of question, not meant to be resolved with an answer but used as a starting point for an inquiry.

Loosivity...mental mobility.

At the turn of the century, the man who knew most about the physical universe was Henri Poincare. He was 25 years older than Einstein, had much the same information, saw the same limits in Newtonian mechanics. Poincare even came close to developing a theory of relativity of his own. But he didn't. In many ways, his entrenchment in existing ideas prevented him from seeing things in a new way. Instead it took a young 26 year-old upstart like Einstein, not vested in old patterns, to come up with a revolutionary view of things.

Basicity...thinking in essential terms.

Einstein's often quoted remark that "God doesn't play dice with the world," reflected his belief that the laws of the universe were knowable and that these basic laws could explain the complexities of nature. When another piece of the relativity puzzle fell into place he said that the new discovery was "so simple, God would not have passed it up." This idea of simplicity was a driving force behind his understanding of the world, not to mention his famous aversion to socks, a choice, he said, to simplify his life.

Effortance...self- motivation.

Geniuses guide their efforts through personal enjoyment rather than external rewards like money or job requirements. They have to do this in order to make a sustained effort over an entire lifetime despite setbacks. Einstein, in fact, compared his own emotional state while working to that of a "worshipper or

lover". Immersion in areas of one's own interest may seem selfish on the one hand, but pushing through challenges relies on it.

Realistics...real world outcomes.

Contrary to the stereotype, creative people do not tend to be self-absorbed loners but actively seek out feedback and criticism. They have a need to fit their projects into the realities of the world into which the project must fit. Einstein, despite his persona as an eccentric, was a master of the politics of science, and politics in general. He carried on voluminous correspondence with people in all different fields in an effort to apply and secure a place for his theory in the real world. His letter to Roosevelt in 1940 warning of the dangers if Germany developed an atomic bomb was the effort of a practical man looking at actual political consequences.

Tryness...willingness to take risks.

Explorers and pioneers put their lives on the line but mental risk takers also push themselves by placing their egos in jeopardy. As Einstein wrote on a souvenir photo to a friend, "A thought that sometimes makes me hazy: Am I or are the others crazy?" Failure is one of the risks. Einstein worked on a Unified Field Theory, one that would explain all the forces of nature, for the second half of his life. He never achieved it. When he was asked why he continued to work at it, he said that only someone with his established reputation could afford to waste time on it.

So there you have it, the keys to creative thinking hidden as a code in the name of the great physicist. So simple, so obvious. So Einsteinian.

To the Editor:

A Museum of Decent Art

Instead of monitoring existing museums as reported in "Giuliani Names His Panel to Monitor Art at Museums" (First Section, April 4) the mayor should fund a new one. The Museum of Decent Art (MoDA) could be a haven of visual morality. No hints of nudity, violence, sex, religion, indecency. And since you can infer anything about the minds and hearts of subjects in paintings, just to be safe, there would be no depictions of people at all. Hermann Goering knew very well that abstraction is itself an insult to the eye and brain, so none of that will do either.

That might leave landscapes, but following Plato, any art form that imitated nature appealed to the baser instincts. He barred them from the Republic. So must we.

In fact, the only way to guarantee a decent experience is to insure that the walls of the Museum of Decent Art are blissfully empty. You pay at the door, wander through at your leisure, sit and contemplate, chat in a low voice, think decent thoughts, and be assured that no image of any kind will intrude on your rectitude.

MoDA is the ultimate safe haven, a sanctuary from the chaotic indecency of the world of Giuliani. No art...for our sake.

The English Tale

The tailor told me his tale as he began to weep
How he worked on a farm to produce produce,
Had scraped together scraps for the garbage heap
But the dump was full and had to refuse refuse.

So he broke down and broke in and gripped
His bags, carrying them all the way to the edge
But like the sewer who fell in a sewer, he slipped,
Tumbled right in and cut himself on a ledge.

That's when he came to me for his gash to tend,
Though a doctor, I shed a tear at the tear in his vest,
But I could not intimate this to my intimate friend,
For I knew I had to subject my subject to a test.

"I object to that object", he cried, after inspections
Of the needles which, needless to say, is how goes it
Luckily, he was number after a number of injections,
But I was too close to the cut to be able to close it.

And so I wound a bandage around the wound,
Knowing insurance was invalid for the invalid.
And in a voice not meant to make him sound doomed
I said, "it's tough but that's just how it goes, kid."

Then I recalled that pie made of pleasant pheasant
And thought that a taste might soften the hurt.
So I went to get it and present the present.
But sadly the desert had claimed the dessert.

A dove dove into the bushes as he went down the hill,
And watching him, sad that I could not help him still,
I recalled cryptic words that seemed to fit the bill,
Was it...only the wind can wind the windmill?

Of Ows and Oughs

It's at once so low and tough
To pronounce both cow and cough
Though of both on and of off
I've surely had more than enough

Yet it is never an obvious gaff
To say cow and then say calf
But I know it's much better by half
To know a simple low from a laugh

It is exactly this kind of stuff
Like saying a bow or some bough
That causes a row and makes it rough
To know your dough from your DOW

Yes often I ponder and wonder now
If the words I use threw and through
Make any sense at all and just how
Many do. So few! And so...phew!

A Layme Spoofe of Chawcer

Funnie but taken entyre and whole,
I fain not touch it with a ten foote powle.
Aye, but wouldst I frisk a lady's lumpy vest?
That is the true test of manliness,
and safest bet against the terrorist...nyet?
Nyet not, my frisky friend, and yet and yet
A lady's lumpy vest doth me give un baguette.
On this subject, then, it beseems to me best
to give to Chaucer himself the final jest:
By god, quoth he, for pleylnly, at a word,
Thy drasty rymyng is nat worth a turd!
Which somme may saye for all and all
Is all we have agaynst the wretched fall.
Yet offended, have I, the great medieval C!
He should be quothed, says he, in true ME!
(We postmoderns believe in nothing but another word
however much it resembles someone else's turd.)

A Usage Lament

Oh why oh why do writers write
But fingers do not fing,
And miters never seem to might
While bringers always bring.

And grocers, you will clearly see,
Have never been known to groce;
Nor hammers ham, nor beers be.
No decent docent would ever dose.

And here's another prickly pen,
If one geese is called a goose,
Why isn't a man from Portugal then
Simply known as a Portugoose?

We could go on and on like this:
If the plural of tooth is teeth,
By the logic of all Englishness
Should the plural of booth be beeth?

With one goose you get two geese,
My teachers have always taught.
But with one moose, it's not two meese
And why haven't preachers praught?

I'd make amends for this muddled story
but can I not make one single amend?
I could comb through the annals of history
but a single annal I can't seem to wend.

Tell me in what other tongue it's known
That people can recite at a play,
and then turn around and on their own
play at a recital the very next day.

And don't get me off on dis today
About which I have always felt pained.
Has combobulated ever been your way
or grunted or turbed or dained?

Flammable and inflammable we all knew
Told the same combustible tale.
As did quite a lot and quite a few
Against which it's useless to rail.

Tell me how, in spite of my doubt
Your house burns up as it burns down,
Why you fill in a form by filling it out
and an alarm goes off by going on.

Oh it's all too much, too much to take
With its cans and coulds and mights and may.
If only English would give me a break
And help me state what I'm trying to say.

Lights that are out are not visible?
But stars that are out most surely are!
And although numbers are divisible,
They make you number, it's too bizarre!

No matter how hard I try and strain
I cannot seem to rehearse a hearse.
And by the same rule and the same refrain,
Cannot find a way to reverse this verse.

So I wind up my watch and I start it,
Yet end this poem when I wind it up.
And accept that I cannot defeat it
For English has beaten me down...or up.

Life in Old Technologies

“Do you still play vinyl?” the salesman asked, with a slight air of bemusement. The fact that I did meant adding a turntable to the list of components that I was buying for my new stereo system.

It seemed like overkill. After all, I already had a tuner, CD player and dual tape cassette. Did I really need a fourth way to listen to background music while I ate dinner? But I had no choice, because I still owned all the albums I had ever bought. How many more components would I need as newer and better audio technologies came along? And how much space would I eventually need, since the new never seems to replace the old but merely piles up on top like so much techno-sediment?

I remember buying a tape cassette deck several years ago for the sole purpose of recording selected pieces from my albums. After a few months of disk jockeying, I expected to throw out the L.P.'s and just keep the tapes. Instead, dozens of new tapes are on a shelf above scores of albums. And when CD's hit the stores, I hoped to dispense with tapes and vinyl. Needless to say, the CD's take up a third shelf.

The reason for this redundancy in technology is practical. At the moment, vinyl offers something that CD's, for all their sophistication, cannot give me: the album music I have already collected. Even if I taped my collection, or if the music became available in the newer formats, I doubt that it would be worth the time and money to replace it.

My living room, of course, is not the only scene of this battle. The question of how and whether new technology supplants the old affects most any investment in our world.

The issue was raised again recently with the announcement that a consortium of phone and computer companies was going to develop super-fast modems and software. This may enable the Internet to offer video-quality images and thereby compete with cable TV.

But which system will prevail? Will TV's vanish into the expanding Internet, or will on-line technology slip into the vast television enterprise? The right guess will determine the value of stock portfolios for years. And yet, in the near future, it seems obvious to me that neither will gain the upper hand.

All technological change goes through a redundant period in which the new exists with the old. The telephone, for example, was in widespread use by the late 1880's but did not immediately replace the telegraph, which had been invented 40 years earlier. In fact, telegraphy was still popular all the way up to

World War II, because it offered some things that the phone could not: printed messages and personal delivery.

In the same way, Polaroid cameras haven't replaced 35-millimeter photography because the older technology has the edge in reproduction and flexibility.

And television and the motion pictures that futurists were sure would be overwhelmed by it have already co-existed for almost 60 years, for a simple reason: There is nothing like going to the movies.

Even when an older technology does not retain unique advantage, the principle of overlap still applies. That is because habits and costs change slowly. The fact that some loyal typists still use typewriters, for instance, means that they have lasted into the age of the word processor. Ditto for dittos; when I taught at a high school in 1975, we still used a mimeograph because it remained so much cheaper decades after the mass production of the first dry copier.

With this in mind, I know exactly which technology to be on between cable-based TV and the phone-line based Internet. I'll go for both. Not only because gizmos die hard, but because the older medium will maintain some edge. The Internet can offer amazing interactivity, but TV will still be able to deliver one-way entertainment to couch potatoes.

That should keep both technologies busy for a while. And if I am right in my investments, I may even be able to afford all the new equipment I'll need.

Poor, Poor Luddites

To the Editor:

Harold Bloom's dinosauring advance against computer screens derails when he switches from the tiny experience of reading Crichton on a Pocket PC to a grander rave against on-screen reading. It is one thing to wax poetic about books, another to presume that nothing beyond a book can deliver a personal literary experience. The contract between author and reader is never final but fluid, always renegotiated at every new round of technology. In fact, reading Shakespeare in book form is just such a negotiation, since the work was penned to be heard not seen. And encountering Austen on a screen is a mere sidestep from the book, compared with the loss of "achieved otherness" when her personal, hand-written manuscripts were turned into cold, hard, typeset books.

Mr. Bloom does not lament those changes because they are not his. Like most Luddites, he is most interested in fixing the world at the moment of his own empowerment through his own generation's technology.

Snapping in the Wind

In the last few months, I have saved myself hundreds of dollars by invoking a little-known secret of the technological universe. Amazingly, the secret does not rely on digital expertise, arcane wisdom or high-level data access. In a moment, I'll tell you exactly what it is so you, too, can benefit.

This handy piece of knowledge has come into play three times this year alone as, one by one, my stereo turntable, my VCR and my radio all broke down. The estimated repair bills totaled almost \$500. But my chief concern was whether all my home technology had reached a point of critical obsolescence. Like a techno-chondriac, all I could think about was how much more I was in for over the coming months.

Then I recalled the secret of the universe that allowed me to repair all three devices by myself; and for about a dollar each.

The trick did not involve a hammer and a hope; it was much more basic than that. Out of sheer curiosity - and boldly ignoring the dire warnings on the casings - I unplugged the devices, took out a screwdriver and opened them. Inside, I found the same cause for the breakdown in each: A small rubber band had snapped.

A rubber band? Yes, some household devices still rely on this simple product for crucial operations. So my secret of the universe is simply this: Look for a broken rubber band before assuming a fancier cause.

This is probably a modern cousin of a similar principle in philosophy called Occam's

Razor. This principle is named for William of Occam, the 14th-century thinker who wrote: "It is vain to do with more what can be done with fewer." In other words, simplest solutions first. Or, replace the rubber band.

You would think the digital revolution would have replaced this lowly item with a microchip or some form of software. But there has been a minor wrench in the evolution of machines - namely, us. No matter how microscopic or virtual our devices become, they still must be used by human beings who need to turn, push, twist or flip buttons or switches to make things work. Developments like voice recognition may eliminate this, but for now, the standoff between the digital and the physical gives rubber bands unexpected eminence.

By 1871, just a year after Benjamin Franklin Goodrich started the first manufacturing plant, rubber was already being used for a wide variety of applications, from fire hoses to cigar straps. A century later, bands of rubber are more likely to be found in digital machines to operate their physical parts - to

transfer the power of the motor, rotate a knob, seal off junctions or hold components in place.

In the case of my stereo, when the tone arm refused to move, the repairman was certain he had to replace the entire assembly. But upon opening it, I noticed that a tiny rubber band on a counterweight that acted as a bumper against the casing had partly melted. As the arm reset itself, the soft rubber stuck to the casing, essentially gluing the tone arm in place. The cost of the off-the-shelf replacement was 89 cents.

A different repair shop wanted \$25 just to look at my VCR; the owner was sure that the whole rewinding mechanism was defunct. Not so. Inside, I found that the rubber band that transferred power from the motor to the rewinding spindle had snapped off. I replaced that for a whopping \$2, only because it was a special type of band.

By the time the tuner on my fancy radio stopped tuning, I was fairly certain what to look for. Sure enough, I opened the case and found it lying at the bottom. This rubber band had linked a spindle on the knob outside to the tuner inside, allowing the user to change stations. Another problem solved for under a buck.

And when my desktop copier stopped taking paper – preventing me from making a copy of this very essay – guess what proved to be the source of the malfunction?

Egg On Your Interface

Recently, I tried to boil some water and turned on the wrong burner. A minor mishap, until you consider that I've done this thousands of times in the 20 years I've owned my stove.

Everyone I talk to seems to have this same experience. The difference is that most people blame themselves. They're annoyed at not being able to learn something so simple. I'm annoyed, too, but at the stove makers rather than myself. This sense of superiority isn't due to an overheated ego. It is a result of my work as a designer, especially of computer games.

You may not see any relationship between boiling a pot of water and clicking on an icon, but there is an important one. It's in that slippery area of contact between machines and humans that designers call the interface.

Interface refers to the parts of machines that humans manipulate. In other words, the control panels. When they work well – a dial on an old radio, for example – there is a natural connection between the function of the device and our behavior. Dials, as a general rule, are good controls because they're analogous. Turn more, get more; turn left, go left. But dials are a dying breed.

In the evolution of interfaces, levers became switches, which became dials, then buttons. They have now morphed into clickable icons. And as we continue our sprint from an industrial to a digital age, the interface problem becomes tricky because there is no direct physical link between the action and the results. This makes it harder to manage a standard problem of interface design: making the controls easy to handle, rather than simply usable.

The controls on my digital watch are designed to accommodate the mechanism of the watch, not the layout of my hands and intellect. There are four tiny buttons that must be pressed in bizarre sequences to access dozens of functions. Luckily – or maybe as a result – I use the watch only to tell the time. To set the alarm, I have to consult a teensy 12-page manual that outlines an eight-step process for pressing and releasing three of the buttons at the same time. It's a great plan for a six-fingered memory expert, but not so great for me.

This same focus on engineering over manipulation is the reason that "12:00" is blinking on VCR's everywhere. The buttons were made to accommodate the layout of the electronics, not the patterns by which people do things.

But the problem isn't simply digital; it's an aspect of all machine design. Stoves are perfect examples – particularly the older models like mine on which the burners are set up in a square array while the knobs are arranged in a line. Without a visual relationship, there is no quick way to see the connection. It was

designed for efficient function: a square of burners and a row of dials fit best in the limited space.

If my use of the device were the key factor, however, the patterns of knobs and burners would match or be color-coded, or any number of alternatives. And my cellular phone wouldn't come with a 40-page instruction booklet outlining dozens of arcane features. Like most people, I only want to use the phone for one basic thing: to talk to someone.

What we need is a science called practology, a way of thinking about machines that focuses on how things will actually be used. After all, the interface is essentially what protects us from the inner face, the inner workings of the device. Good interfaces are intuitive, immediately usable by both novices and sophisticates: a piano keyboard, for example.

Bad interfaces force us to relearn procedures every time we try them: a video game, for example, that hits you with a dizzying swarm of icons that you can never really manage.

Of course, some designs become comfortable only as our habits rise to the occasion. It is hard to imagine now, but there is no particular reason for directing a car with our hands and adjusting the speed with our feet. Early cars had tillers, not steering wheels, and the brake was operated by hand. The mass-produced version could just as well have used pedals for direction (press left, go left; press right, go right) and handles for speed (push forward to accelerate; pull back to slow). Yet now, 80 years after the pattern was established, steering wheels and gas pedals seem the most natural system in the world, thanks to the power of habit.

As finicky as we humans are, we're also adaptable. We can often more easily adjust our behavior to fit interfaces than change the designs themselves. This flexibility, of course, helps explain why machines are changing so quickly in the first place.

So why can't I turn on the correct burner? Part of the answer is in the pattern of repetition. I use my stove intermittently, at least when compared with my use of the steering wheel in my car. A professional water boiler, presumably, would have no problem working in my kitchen.

In other words, designers can get away with bad interfaces if people often repeat the required behaviors. That's why you can become familiar with a befuddling word processor you use all the time, but not with the cumbersome E-mail system you use intermittently.

But whatever the interface, it's the designer's job to take your needs into account, not the other way around.

In other words, blame the stove maker, not yourself.

Mad at Your Modem

I sensed trouble the moment I heard those fateful words, "no problem." The salesman was referring to the modem he had just sold me. "Installs in minutes," he promised. "It's a snap."

Like most modern doodads, it looked simple. It was the size of a credit card. No gears, dials or rivets. Slip the modem in, follow some on-screen instructions, and bingo: I'd be surfing the Web in no time. But four days later, after endless calls to the various help lines, I was nowhere near my e-mail. It was drifting away like flotsam in a digital squall.

I was at the stage I call the "defenestration point," when the operating procedures overwhelm our ability to absorb them and frustration is so high that we're ready to toss a device out the window.

I'm sure you have similar tales – not just about computers, but about every new contraption you buy. The jiffy setup seems to have taken an early exit off the information highway.

Why do machines seem to be getting harder to use rather than easier? Is it because of their evolution into more complex life forms, or because of our devolution into a dumber one?

Neither. The problem is the delusion that things were ever different. New technology is always bewildering. The relationship between humans and machines involves a continuing struggle of adjustment that is especially intense at first.

In the dim myth of the past, everyone's first television set was easy to set up. It looked like a piece of furniture and was supposed to function with the same simplicity. Plug it in, turn it on and welcome Milton Berle into your living room.

Not quite. I remember everyone in my family fiddling with the volume, channel and horizontal and vertical control knobs. Not to mention that ring around the channel selector whose function we could never quite grasp. And then there was the arcane artistry of adjusting the rabbit ears. Remember test patterns? Managing the reception was so formidable that it was left to an expert: my father. Despite the dire warning, my mother even opened the back of the television and vacuumed out the dust. The picture actually improved.

Even as machines are redesigned to be more efficient, the defenestration point stays with us. A device may not become more complex, but it is sure to become more multiplex. Today's television sets are easier to use, but they are now only one piece in an intricate web of components. In place of antenna adjustment, we get the Medusa of wires hooking together the cable-ready television, the cable

box, the videocassette recorder and that baffling A/B switch. Even with my genetic predisposition – remember, my mother once vacuumed a vacuum tube and lived – I had to call in the cable guy when I reached the defenestration point on that one.

The telephone also looks deceptively simple. Pick up the hand-set and dial a number. Yet it is common now, especially in offices, to have to ask someone how to make a call before you can complete one. For the inaugural call on my new cellular phone (to my wife, 10 feet away in the next room) I had to dial in three separate phone numbers, navigate a voice-mail system, create and input my code, dial back to verify, then tap in a long string of numbers, including the number I was calling. Five tries later, after studying the Instructions as an Apollo astronaut would, I still couldn't get through and had to start over the next day.

But don't blame microchips for the problem. The moment that the telephone went beyond its basic use of placing a single call to a waiting respondent, there was trouble. That sets the defenestration point for the telephone a few months after Bell's first demonstrations. In those days, the challenges included manipulating the earpiece and mouthpiece, and carrying on a disembodied conversation. Consider this segment from an 1877 advertisement for the new invention: "After speaking, transfer the telephone from the mouth to the ear very promptly. When replying to communication from another, do not speak too promptly. Much trouble is caused from both parties speaking at the same time. When you are not speaking, you should be listening."

Yet, we still gaze out the window and dream of a simpler past. We imagine 19th century typists, for example, easily knocking out a few pages on their labor-saving devices. Not so. They had to stop frequently to readjust paper, unjam type bars, unsnarl ribbons and clean smears.

Before the Q-W-E-R-T-Y layout was patented in 1878, every typewriter had a different keyboard. And it was common to have to stop working to re-attach the weight that turned the carriage, which frequently snapped off its string and landed on the typist's foot.

So next time you reach the defenestration point, step back and relax. It isn't conspiracy or stupidity that's doing you in. It's simply ingenuity moving faster than habit. Evolution. The natural order of things.

E-mail Making Its Mark

I reached a watershed in written communications the other day by sending an electronic-mail message composed of a single word. The ultimate in digital pith.

A colleague had written to ask me whether an elaborate schedule she had arranged was feasible. With the glee of a practical joker, I bounced her lengthy message right back to her, adding only my one-word response: "No." As a writer, I like to think of this as terseness raised to the level of art. But most people probably see it as the further destruction of civility.

The brave new world of e-mail raises issues like the conflict between artistry and vulgarity. But there is nothing really new in this debate, and nothing especially digital. Every leap in communication technology prompts the same controversy, as we revamp our communication to match the new medium.

Despite the "Interneting" of the globe, our struggles are not that different from those of our colonial ancestors. Almost identical issues were raised in their own communications revolution – the birth of the postal system.

In the late 1600's, King William III of Britain set the stage for this revolution by giving Thomas Neale a monopoly on all postal services in the American colonies. Britain would later take back the rights, but the impact was clear: Messages could be sent from point to point with more consistency, and letters became a more popular form of communication.

The postal system grew at astronomical rates to accommodate Americans' popular hunger for discourse. In fact, more than three-quarters of the Federal Government's growth from 1776 to 1876 was in the postal office alone.

As letters became more common, questions of style and substance in composition were often raised -- the same kinds of debates that we hear today over e-mail.

A 19th-century guide to writing letters lists the seven C's of proper correspondence: Letters must be clear, correct, complete, courteous, concise, conversational and considerate. Nowadays, with e-mail, it sometimes seems that only conciseness remains. Shorter sentences and more brusque construction are the e-mail norm.

Part of this, of course, can be attributed to the computer screen itself, which can make big blocks of type difficult to read. A typical line of type on a PC, for example, is 75 characters wide, versus 50 in a book, and the resolution is much lower. As a result, we can expect the trend in terseness to continue for a while.

One of my e-mail correspondents doesn't even compose complete responses to my messages. Instead, she sends my own letters back to me with her

comments inserted. At first, I found this disconcerting, as though she couldn't be bothered to send me a letter. But I have come to realize that her method is simply more efficient.

The e-mail focus on function over form gives some of my communications the look of high-seas semaphore, but there is an art to that, too. Hemingway once boasted that he could write a compelling short story in six words: "For sale. Baby shoes. Never used." Leaner language doesn't necessarily mean thinner meaning.

Standard usage is also undergoing an assault – or renaissance, depending on your point of view.

Just as we have seen during other times of change, new words are entering the language. The new list includes a storm of words starting with a "long e" – what we might call an e-mailstrom of eologisms, including all the e-ddresses of your new e-pals. We are also seeing more abbreviations, like F.Y.I. and F.A.Q., for "frequently asked questions."

This, too, is reminiscent of early America, which gave us terms like C.O.D. and the greatest shortcut of all: O.K.

Yet it is punctuation that may be in for the biggest shake-up. The most popular literary punctuation mark, the co ma, works well in letter writing as a way to handle embedded thoughts, but digital messaging is shallower and more intense. It requires more "glue" in punctuation, similar to the musical use of pauses between notes.

There are now roughly 30 symbols on the standard keyboard, and I receive e-mail messages that are peppered with hyphens, dashes, slashes and ellipses, as writers explore the different ways to tie together a series of quantum bursts of information.

The surge of letter writing in the early 1800's, of course, led to renewed emphasis on penmanship, with the use of copperplate and other forms of expressive, cursive writing. E-mail doesn't give us such subtleties, but the desire to manipulate emphasis can be seen in the increased use of color tints, underlining and other visual accents like emoticons –those silly symbols that resemble faces turned on their sides. (Type a colon and an end parenthesis, for example, to get a sideways happy face.)

Some computer keyboards now offer built-in emoticons. We can now insert happy faces and other pictures with quick strokes of the keyboard, creating a kind of rebus enhancement to the content.

The greatest battles, however, are fought over spelling. Purists of every age say it is a lost craft and bemoan poor spelling as a sign of the fall of civilization. In e-mail, the chief reason for misspelling is probably practical – we just don't want to take the time to edit our messages, even with electronic spell-checking at our disposal.

But we should remember that standardized spelling is a fairly recent phenomenon. It wasn't until the early 17th century that English printers began to

use consistent spelling, and it wasn't until 1755, with the publication of Samuel Johnson's dictionary, that an accepted guide was available. Even that was challenged as early as 1789, when Noah Webster began to push for a unique American orthography to act as a "band of national union."

As a writer, I find the typos and poor spelling of e-mail a bit vexing. But I'm not a purist, and I enjoy some of the gems I receive. In the verbose message noted earlier, my colleague referred to a seminar in a distant city as a "confarence." And her final salutation, "love and kisseres," sweetly added one extra smack.

A Communication Taste Test

For the last few years, I have been conducting secret research. The results are intriguing and illuminate something fundamental about communication design. And like some of the best findings, this one was based largely on a chance event – my discovery of an old set of children’s blocks.

The unwitting subjects of my study have been dinner guests over the last few years. As any host-researcher knows, there is an odd gap between the time the table is cleared of the main course and when coffee and dessert are served. A few years ago, I noticed a set of wooden blocks on a shelf and set them on the dining table so guests could play with them to pass away this time.

Of course, I had no idea that this little gesture would point to a basic issue in information processing.

What I have discovered is that people fall into two categories. Not herb tea or decaf cappuccino drinkers, but rather tower builders and maze makers. In other words, the ones who build the blocks up and up as opposed to those who build them out and out.

I assumed at first that this was a gender issue – men up, women out. But that is not what the research shows. Age is not a factor, either. In fact, it has become clear from a combination of careful observation and careless chitchat that the difference between the two groups is cognitive.

Tower builders are linear thinkers. They process the world systematically, sequentially. I call them lineasts. They build their monuments the same way they assemble their world view, step by step. They consider each piece carefully, adjust each new placement and try to beat gravity by the sheer force of their logic and precision. Their goal seems to be to create a kind of unassailable coherence, a structure both familiar and impressive –something we can all identify with. The risk, of course, is great. One false move, one misplaced assertion, can bring it all tumbling down.

Maze makers are different. Lets call them optophiles because they love options, choices, parallel lines of reasoning. They tend to create dynamic patterns that may be confusing, but also draw you in by their complexity. Maze makers work differently, too. They build by constant adjustment and re-evaluation, moving and shifting.

Maze makers are not looking for simplicity. On the contrary, their goal seems to be to create a rich interaction of forms. There is a big risk here, too, because even though it won’t come tumbling down at once, their work can easily dissipate into chaos.

After-dinner whimsy, or an insight into the human mind? I know what you're thinking. But it happens that the distinction shown by my research reflects a current conflict in the area of communication design: whether to present information in linear or interactive formats.

Linear structures of information – like novels, movies, essays, plays – are designed so that the material unfolds a tidbit at a time. Step by step. That's their strength. Nothing can compare to the dramatic impact of a tale well told.

In writing a novel, for example, I do something like tower building – placing each event, each telltale moment, in a carefully constructed sequence to achieve a clear, impressive whole. In fact, to help this process, I often create plot lines, story lists, outlines and other word towers to make sure the project is coming together coherently.

Reading a novel, or experiencing any other linear format, is a lot like climbing the tower. There is a certain neat determinism to the experience, the feeling of moving forward in one direction. Lineasts love that.

But interactive design is more democratic. Selection buttons, hot spots, hypertext links. The information comes only through your choices as you navigate the maze of possibilities. Optophiles adore these choices and feel no anxiety about surfing a sea of data, picking and choosing nuggets.

As an interactive designer, I work with now charts, branching trees and other mazelike structures in shaping new software titles. Rather than control each step of your experience, I try to set out a pattern of possibilities, any one of which, if I am successful, will reward your efforts.

What drives lineasts crazy about this is how easily they can lose track of where they are, where they were or where they are going. But it is just this freedom of choice that appeals to optophiles.

My hunch is that most of us are a combination of the two types, and that these are tendencies rather than alternatives. And since certain kinds of information lend themselves to one form or the other, I am certain that there will always be both – novels as well as home pages, for example.

Linear storytelling will always be a powerful way to convey drama, giving the designer a framework in which to build a coherent sequence and manipulate you through it. An interactive "Hamlet" cannot work as well as the original because Shakespeare already picked the best path.

Research, however, must proceed interactively. To track down specific information, there have to be ways to navigate efficiently through vast amounts of data. Imagine trying to look something up in a linear encyclopedia in which, instead of the interactive device of alphabetized key words, you had to read every entry from the beginning until you reached the one you wanted.

Knowing that each approach is distinct but equally useful, I have tried suggesting to my lineastic guests that they experiment with building out, and to the optophiles that they try building up. All are willing to do it but, it seems to

me, always with a slight sense of distress, as if they were combing their hair the wrong way.

If you want to replicate this experiment, a word of warning: Do it before dessert, not after. Before, you get the two neat groups. But after, there is only one category. Folks don't want to build anything; they just want to wrap it up and head home.

The Great Multimedia Debate

A daddy tucking his daughter into bed whispers, “And the handsome prince gently slipped the shoe onto her tiny foot. Now guess what happened next.” The daughter says, “Is there a choice menu?” Relax, this essay isn’t going to be interactive. No decision buttons, no menus, no hypertext links. In fact, no choices at all. Instead, I’ll just tell you what I think.

If you find this comforting, you’re either older than 40 or suffering from perfluxity – or both. Perfluxity is the feeling that you’re drowning in a flux of information. It’s the hunch that the world has recently shattered into a billion bits of data and your only glue gun is a tiny cursor skidding around in cyberspace. On the other hand, if you’re under 40 or otherwise cozy on the Infobahn, you’re probably already bored to tears by the linear nature of this essay.

Interactivity – structuring information so that users can adapt it to their own needs – is getting a huge amount of hype. CD-ROMs and other forms of multimedia can present data in audio and visual formats at the same time. The variety itself can be overwhelming. Interactivity is a way to harness the flux. Instead of being a passive viewer, you manipulate the data- storm, picking and choosing only the parts that interest you.

There’s no doubt that multimedia presentations make some kinds of information more accessible. Catalog searches, list browsings, library research and reference work. Is there anyone who would rather grope through card catalogs in the library to find a book? Sure, the paper felt good to the touch, but who has the time anymore?

But the big debate surrounding interactivity right now doesn’t concern research. It’s about entertainment. It is the highly touted promise (or threat, to the perfluxed) that not only computer games but TV and movies, too, are all going to be interactive. Do we really want to vote our way through every explosion in the next action/adventure flick?

As a multimedia designer as well as a mystery novelist, I’m struggling – along with all the major software, publishing and movie companies – to find the answer to this and an even bigger question: is it even possible to tell a good story interactively?

The linear stories told in novels, plays and films tend to be deep and narrow. They focus on a few well-drawn characters and events, carefully developed and deeply textured. This approach is great for the telling of heroes’ journeys, for memoirs, short stories, murder mysteries, fairy tales and essays. You know

where you're going and you can't wait to get there. The last thing anyone wants is 45 alternative endings in a digital "Tale of Two Cities." What we love about Dickens, for one thing, is his ability to pick the best ending.

Nothing can compete with the seductive power of a tale well told. As a novelist, I want to tell my story in a precise series of events, of disclosures. I want to guide you through it, word by word. The experience is intimate, private and manipulative, like a whispered fairy tale. In fact, directing your interest and attention is part of the art, part of knowing how to unfold the tale – when to speed up, slow down, pack in details, gloss over.

The sense of being led is precisely the joy of linear stories. When it works you get "Cinderella" or "Oliver Twist." When it fails, you get my cousin Marty, the master of the world's dullest yarn. To be stuck at dinner hearing him drone on endlessly is to experience the drawback of linear narrative.

Interactive stories, on the other hand, are broad and shallow. There's a lot more going on. More information, more details, more possibilities. But none of it is as cohesive. It's up to you as viewer or reader to tie it all together. To be an interactive user, you have to pay attention, take action and make choices.

It's what you might call Frag & Frac. Frag as in fragmented. It comes in pieces that you have to assemble. And Frac as in fractal. Just like those complex patterns in fractal geometry, the more you look, the more there is to look at. All this makes for a very intense and immediate experience, more like barkers at a carnival than whispers. For it to work, you must be willing as a user to be playful and exploratory, to let go of the guiding hand.

Today's multimedia titles show the strengths and weaknesses of this form. There are a number of excellent CD-ROM encyclopedias, art-museum tours and medical references. In these, you get to pick your own pathway, investigate at your own pace, go deeper into some areas while ignoring others. It's perfect for customizing information.

But narrative, the telling of a story, is another matter. You can play some of the latest computer games for 80 hours, meet scores of characters, make hundreds of decisions and end up completely untouched in any way by the material. The story, which both unifies these elements and gives them emotional impact, easily dissolves into the vastness of the details.

My current multimedia project is a black-and-white mystery movie on CD-ROM. It involves a desert town you can explore at will, filled with scheming people you can talk to. There's one overall story about a stolen statue, but it doesn't unfold by the numbers. Instead, you have to discover the plot as you wander about, getting a piece here, finding another part there, looking and listening. And, unique to this form, there are also a number of secondary plots you can pursue if they interest you.

It's a perfluxing multiplicity of choices. If I can pull it off, you'll still have the sense of a plot moving toward a conclusion as your choices continually narrow toward the end.

But I'm also hedging my bets. I've written a complete, linear mystery novel and put it inside the movie. It's in your hotel room, on the night table next to your bed. Use your mouse to click on the hotel, then on the door to your room, then on the book. To escape from the perfluxity elsewhere in the movie, you can just read the novel by clicking on the pages on your screen, one by one by one.

A Hue and A Cry

This month I found and returned eight stolen cars, which brings the total to fourteen for the year. I am not in the repo business and I don't work for an insurance company. I found the cars simply by walking my dog.

My neighborhood was a dumping ground for stolen cars, taken from other neighborhoods and left here, or stolen right here, driven around the corner, and dumped a block away. It was hard to understand the thieves' motives since the cars were usually older models, sometimes ransacked, sometimes not. The radios were often left. But one thing was clear...the thieves knew they would never be caught and the cars never found because the cops had other priorities.

The clues that a car had been stolen were not subtle: a shattered window, a severed steering wheel lock, glove compartment contents strewn all over, four or more tickets on the windshield. The job for the local cop was obviously to give out tickets, as many as possible, not to report stolen vehicles.

I reported all fourteen of the cars I found to the local precinct but not much happened. Too busy to follow up, they said. So I took it upon myself to contact the owner, who all seemed happy – if perplexed – to get their cars back.

Ransacking the cars for information, I used to worry that someone would see me and think I was the one breaking in. But I've come to accept a truth that the thieves have known all along...people don't notice and if they do, they don't care.

I am also no longer apologetic about contacting the owner. Whereas I was once concerned that the owner might not want the car back and think that I was intruding, I now consider it my civic duty because I simply do not want stolen cars sitting on my block for months. I don't want thieves to think they can break into cars in my neighborhood because no one will notice or care.

Before the development of the police system in this country, all men over the age of 16 were called on to stand "Watch And Ward" duty in their communities. They watched for disturbances, questioned or assisted travelers after dark, maintained vigilance. In case of a crime, all able-bodied men were expected to join in a "hue and cry." Anyone hearing it was obliged to join in the pursuit and to help detain the suspect. This was not vigilantism, it was self-protection. People were expected to care about what went on in their own community. So I don't mind a hue and a cry – not to mention a little detective work – on behalf of my neighbors.