Writer’s Night:
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Errors and Comedy
Writers’ Night: Errors and Comedy
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Don’t buy from friends, nor Uncle Claude
Although the car had been Aunt Gertie’s honey,
Such folly has cost many a family money
And ruined many friendships too. (I point. You nod.)
Nor from GOLDIE’S OLDIES car lot (though it rhymes).
His waxy cars and waxier personnel
Will size you up for their most polished sell,
Then learn your name, then speak it twenty times:
“Ann, I have one here, Ann,” Waxy croons,
“It has high mileage, Ann, I’m forced to say,
And Ann, it was a taxi, by the way—
But they drove it only Sunday afternoons.”
Steer just as clear of junkies pushing wheels
As intramural and consanguinous deals.

Be careful, son, and know what you’re about
Don’t buy on impulse, never buy too fast.
Just slow the process down and make it last
Until you’ve figured every angle out.
You can hem and haw a lot and kick the tires
Then check for oily coolant, watery oil
For hidden leaks you look behind each wheel
(Bad cars are easily sold to hasty buyers.)
Check every tire tread for uneven wear,
Drive through a puddle--turn and check the tracks,
Dog-walking means sprung frames--and that’s a fact.
(With used cars it’s the buyer must beware.)
Each flaw you find will undermine the value
So find the flaws. Don’t let that seller nail you.
“But cars are bought from lots, for heaven’s sake.”
“Not by me,” I snarl. “We’ll start our caper
With an Ole Roll and just the Sunday paper.
“They’re grouped in here by type and age and make,”
You notice right away, “like girls,” you say.
I change the subject quickly, pointing out
How some descriptions tend to raise some doubt.
But as we read, the images go your way.
Some cars are cream puff, mint, so sweet, and cherry,
And others labeled sexy, hot, and loaded-
Like things you’d double clutch but never marry.
I vow we’ll make our choice and our espousal
By ignoring all this rhetoric of arousal.

Trying not to be a prude—or sexist
Ignoring him I say we’re scratching these:
There’ll be no Caddy’s, Lincolns, Jags, Mercedes,
No Ferraris, Alphas, Acuras or Lexus.
Now before you start to dream of what to drive,
A word or two on finance when you buy.
When you are broke, shun impulse, don’t aim high
Or the bank will turn your three into their five.
For now just file your dream car under then,
And buy a trusty junker for the nonce.
(Don’t listen to your uppity friends’ response.)
You’ll have your car and have the last laugh when
Two years from now your dream comes off the shelf
Because you’ve made car payments to yourself.

We scan the list then: Chevy, Mazda, Ford
(Every car in town must be for sale)
A twelve-word ad will very often fail
To catch both essence and responsive chord.
We call some cheap ones and discover why:
They’re worn out, wrecked, or rusted to the soul
(Though on the phone the owners on the whole
Are devious, hedging—sometimes even lie.
“You call, they say, “It has a little rust.”
That means you see the highway through the floor,
And “extra miles” in thousands? Two-O-four.
(You see why close inspection is a must?)
“Minor body work” means a frame that pivots
And fenders made of putty and pop rivets.
At last we find an unpretentious ad:
“I have a car I’m selling for my son,
Call 663-4921.”
That doesn’t sound too bad.
I call, we talk. I raise the usual Q’s
The make? The model? Is the mileage high?
Who drove it? Where? Who’s selling it—and why?
I’m Sherlock, Hamlet, James Bond, hunting clues.
It’s a mother with a Kia, what dumb luck
She’ll tell the truth like mothers always do
And will probably take a good low offer too.
We’ll buy her little coupe for bottom buck.
I quickly get her name and her address
My experienced buying skills will do the rest.

The coupe is proudly parked out on the street
It seems fine, runs well, everything looks good.
She’s so honest I don’t even lift the hood
(Sometimes a buyer ought to be discreet.)
While Junior checks the dashboard on his toy
To see if there’s a space for his C-D,
This gracious mother whispers just to me:
“Come look at my son’s pride and joy.”
We walk to the garage and there I see
The car I could not own when I was young.
My stomach knots, my throat pulls back my tongue
It’s a hot and sexy, red MG-TD.
I stare--then my clogged throat relents a touch
Just when it shouldn’t—and I ask, “How much?”

I stand there staring, jittery as a mouse
Allowing that my life could use some spice
She says, “It’s not for sale”—then quotes a price.
(It’s twice what we once paid for our first house.)
Just then I hear my voice box suddenly say,
“I’ll take it—and we’ll take the other one too.”
She smiles a knowing smile, as if she knew
From the beginning things would go her way.
(How will I tell his grandma this dour truth?
She’ll laugh to tears—then wax conservative
And tell me only fools try to relive
The sins they felt deprived of in their youth.)
I write the check. It couldn’t have been slicker.
Then realize that for once I didn’t dicker.
We start our cars and tool away toward home.  
My MG shimmies, knocks, and burns some oil,  
And half way home his Kia starts to boil.  
(My principles, I admit, have suffered some.)  
But buying them was lots of fun—I guess—  
And working on them will be too. I’ll bet  
We’ll live to thank that shyster mother yet.  
(A flawless car destroys togetherness.)  
We’ll take apart the Kia right away  
And the MG later when I have some cash.  
I’m sure glad Grandma didn’t sell her Nash.  
But when we ask, I’m certain she will say,  
“Neither a borrower nor a lender be,”  
and, “Longevity is the whole of it, you see.”
The Reverend Peter Mumbert wore his collar like a collie. Sometimes, he even wished for the little metal tags, dangling. Dog tags would complete his identity, he thought. He had earned them.

People would know him then, as a soldier for Christ. And, it would solve the Bishop Morgan problem.

Mumbert’s hands always betrayed him with Bishop Morgan. Both men had the same mannerism, the Pious Frontal Power Clasp, left hand over right, leaning earnestly in, to listen. One cleric doing the Power Clasp was a serenely majestic event. Yes, and the Reverend Mumbert did it especially well. He had it from his father, the Right Reverend Paul Mumbert, in fact.

But, two clerics clasping, that was...punctilious. No, worse. Parallel Power Clasps were laughably unctuous.

Dear God! What a horrible memory. Last Ash Wednesday, there were snickers in the reception line after the service, until he realized his mistake. Hell was like this, Mumbert thought, recalling the struggle with his hands. Luckily, Bishop Morgan had not noticed.

Henceforth, he would come to attention, and lock into an eternal salute. Without dog tags, however, it was ridiculous. He was at war, that was certain.

The Reverend Mumbert picked up his ears. Over the high wall, came the brutish sounds of the city, only slightly muffled. The screech of brakes climbed the wall and rained down on the quiet garden.

The girls were at their corner. They had the power to stop traffic with their brazen costumes, or their willingness to step in front of cars. Mumbert had personally sent two to the emergency room

"Hey! Mister! Hand job, cheap!"

He heard the squeal of tires, then the slap of hands on a car hood.

"Motherfu...!"

He knew the scream, could imagine the screamer, lunging into the face of a startled driver. She was a slender red haired woman, with a very loud streak, no doubt flashing her middle finger. Mumbert wished for an instant she would be struck dumb, but caught himself, and was contrite.

"Sorry, Father..."

In fact, the Reverend Mumbert envied her gesture. It was superbly apt, completely expressive. He could only pray for such effective gesture, even after several short courses, post graduate, at the seminary.

Mumbert’s hands had always been a problem. And it worried him, immensely. Without the touch, he was not really a good shepherd. And his flock knew. In the reception line, he could feel them reproach him.

"Touch me, Father! Heal me!"

But, he could not. The laying on of hands was the Master’s gift, one more proof Mumbert had not been chosen. He was merely following orders.

"You are my Rock, Petey," Dad would say, while supervising the weeding, "and, by Jesus, you’re going to have my church."
He would wave then, around the peaceful parsonage garden, his voice dropping into a whisper.

"Yours for the taking, son. The best congregation in the state."

Blessed by God, frequented by the rich and the powerful, thirty years ago St. Stephen the Martyr was the showplace of the bishopric. The Reverend Peter Mumbert gazed up at the majestic spire towering over St. Stephen’s. As usual, his stomach turned to jello. The fleeting image of himself, clinging to the highest pinnacle, always melted his bowels.

"Don’t deny me now, Petey. Its God’s work we’re doing. Hop to it now, son. Drive a couple more spikes of Miracle Grow near the oleanders. That’s my boy."

The Reverend Peter Mumbert surveyed his garden (and God’s) in the lowering summer sunlight. It was good. Maintained, perhaps improved. In the garden, he had the touch. Diligently, Mumbert crawled in under the acacia to pluck a few errant weeds.

"Good boy, Petey." Dad’s voice echoed across the ages.

Mumbert made a mental note to have the south wall tuck-pointed. The outer face had become a favorite pissing spot for the twenty odd homeless men who drank wine in the alley.

"C’mon, Father!" The drunks always called to him. "Wanna get high?!"

Laughing, and then gagging, they spewed cheap wine on the south wall, mixing it with the piss, into a lethal weapon. Jericho!

As the sun set, the Reverend Peter Mumbert was fighting despair. The world was crumbling around him. Whores and drunks mimicked him in the streets. Petty criminals rifled the parked cars of his dwindling congregation. Sirens punctuated his sermons, and never at the appropriate moment.

Sadly, Peter Mumbert knelt in the damp grass, bowed his head, and tipped forward, until his brow kissed the ground. Grudgingly, the Reverend Mumbert pushed his legs skyward, finally inverted, toes wriggling in the evening breeze. He sighed as the blood rushed pleasantly to his head. Splendid for the sinuses, he thought.

Twenty minutes later, Mumbert was still topsy turvy. Twenty-seven minutes was his best time. This ritual, begun by accident, continued now as a delightful habit, like paring one’s nails with a penknife.

No one knew. As far as the Reverend was concerned, it was better that way. Some would think him strange, though that was not a great problem. Most people thought Mumbert strange. Standing on one’s head was something people could point to, however.

"Your honor, Mumbert stands on his head."

He saw the jurors, nodding sagely. From his point of view their jaws dropped upwards, like camels chewing their cud. Their frowns overturned into senile smiles. He had to laugh. And nearly lost his balance.

The worst possibility was heresy, however. Standing on one’s head had a vaguely oriental flavor, perhaps even a darkly cultish cast.

"Did you hear? Mumbert stands on his head."

Then, they would spell his name backwards, or discover the oddity about the sixes in his birth date. But, he shook it off. Every profession has its pitfalls. Besides, he clearly wasn’t messianic enough to warrant media attention.

What Mumbert did was practice his sermons while standing on his head. There was a clarity to the position that suited him. He assumed it was the blood swelling his brain.
But, every so often a peculiar sensation struck him, or rather, it slithered round the edges of his consciousness.

*What if...?*

He couldn’t quite place it. It occurred when his feet seemed to float, as if they were weightless, defying gravity. He was...his feet were...lighter than air. *What if...*

Gripped by a sudden terror, Mumbert tumbled onto the sweet green grass, hugging the ground, clutching the tender shoots.

*What if he fell up.*

He was certain, for a broken instant, that he hung on the threshold of space. One more micro moment, and he would have let go, would have fallen straight up into the sky.

Whew! His insides were turning tapioca.

Two minutes later, Peter Mumbert still had a firm grip on the lawn. He wasn’t positive he would ever stand again.

Ecstasy. That’s what it was. Pure ecstasy. And it was genuine, he knew. The fear and the trembling told him so. It was a revelation, for sure.

He was afraid he would forget, would lose this moment. Nothing need ever be the same again. Think, Mumbert. Think! His breath come in raw gasps. What a sermon this would make. Ascension Sunday. The timing was perfect. All he needed was a title.

*Will you defy God’s Gravity?*

Almost. It had the grandeur, and the mystery, and certainly the terror factor.

As a title, though, it fell a bit short. How about deny?

*Will you deny God’s Gravity?*

No. That wasn’t it. File that, he’d come back. His mind skipped directly to the gestures. The inspiration poured through him. He saw himself high in the pulpit, arms spreading toward his flock, beckoning them.

He recalled the blue pastel sky above Galilee in the frontispiece to his Communion Bible. The peace that passeth understanding, set deep in the eyes of the Christ, the joyful hungry souls reaching out to touch him...
If the enormity of it were clangorous,
And the window were open,
The concentration of night air might be disrupted.
Sleep and various nocturnal neighborly concentrations
Could be jiggled, annoyed, and even shocked at the
vibrancy.
However, the window is closed.
Vibrations shimmy
Down the walls to the ground forming
Whisker size cracks in the earth roundabout.
Energy from this minor quake rises
To the surface of the glossy,
Full, moon-lit snowy concealment.
Variations are spreading like fresh ink washes
On wet rag paper. Clearing on close examination
As if they be fossilizing ferns.
Clouds swiftly wrap the moon
Breaking apart and bit by bit descending
To focus perfectly on a silent, mostly white, epidermis
Without the memory of a Snore.
A crow sits watching me from the blue spruce
The sheen from his feathers reminds me of the
greased black hair of the toughs from my childhood

They were bigger, smoked cigarettes, wore white
t-shirts and blue jeans, and watched menacingly
waiting for a chance to frighten or intimidate

They hung around Lee’s Used Car Lot on the corner
a small brick building with a very small lot, a few cars
In the big office window Lee kept exotic primates

with big eyes they watched the children loitering
before school. The children of course looked back
until their greater interest in each other took over

A bushy haired brown skinned girl used to chase
the other children and play at being retarded so they
might tolerate her. When I didn’t run away she
glowered at me and told the big boys to beat me up
They pushed at me blew smoke but then left me alone
Curious, I followed her home up a steep hill she
turned and yelled at me to go away, but I kept following
She found a path in tall grass, her feet found old stone steps
covered over. In the shade of trees at the top of the hill

an old woman head wrapped in a kerchief sat by a fire
she looked at me in a stern and watchful way. A crow
flew down and waddled around her as she sat. “He wouldn’t

leave!” The girl said. The old woman lifted her head and
looked at me in a way that made my heart grow cold and my eyes
tear up. The girl stroked my golden hair and the old woman
slowly pulled the kerchief from her white head and said
“There is no one here, so what you are looking for
must be inside you.” I blinked and the kinkachoo blinked

Lee came out from the little building and said, “Don’t stand
too close to the glass he doesn’t like it if you get too close”
I stepped back and almost fell over the black crow
“On the word “three” all who were present broke out into one simultaneous peal of laughter . . . . . . . . a frightful peal of laughter of the other world that is scarcely to be borne by the ears of men.”

--Hermann Hesse, Steppenwolf

I have lately been filling my mind with such heaviness. The world seems filled with so much turmoil and unprovoked violence that I’ve become cynical and hardly ever laugh. I’ll tell a joke but it’s usually cerebral or sarcastic. There seems too much to worry about to laugh.

When I was much younger, 7 or 8, when something set me off I could not stop laughing. I would be irrepressibly gripped by tolderolloll and unable to stop until I began hiccuping. It did not take much to set me off. It seemed that just the right state of excitement could do it. Even the right tone of voice by a storyteller who knew he had me in the grip of his wit could dangle me, sweating and beyond helping myself, to do with as he wished. Oddly enough, I was otherwise quite a serious child, but then perhaps that was the problem. I had not learned how to swim in the waters of merriment.

When I was silly or foolish and deliberately put on an act imitating my favorite comedians my mother would laugh and say, “Oh David you’re just like Jerry Lewis!” and laugh approvingly. This, however, always had the affect of embarrassing me. It was as if somehow she were laughing at me and not at the fool I was playing. I could not tolerate being laughed at. I was too serious for that! I do not know if this is typical of midwestern men or men of Norwegian descent, but I do know that aside from an occasional dry witty remark men of my ilk are not silly, do not play the fool.

I have been enriched by those friends of mine who have encouraged me to spend some deliberate time in the realm of the fool. It also opened my eyes to the fact that without trying I spend a good deal of time there. Like the time in my college days, when women my age generally terrified me (something most men experience in Jr. and Sr. high school when they begin dating, but I was too serious for that) I had gone to the science center for the weekly showing of the college free film and a young woman came and sat next to me. She did not look at me but inclined her head in my direction and said, “I’ve seen you around campus recently and wondered where you’ve been. I’d like to get to know you.” I burst out into a loud peal of laughter and by the time I finally brought myself under control realized that she had inclined her head away from me. I was so dreadfully embarrassed I never said another word to her the rest of the night. I never saw her again either.

I have crippled myself many times by not wanting to be laughed at by trying desperately to keep myself serious and under control. I enjoy the humor of Woody Allen for just that reason as his humor seems to emerge from far too serious a world view. It perhaps touches on some of my own neuroses that surround love, death and panic.

I have learned from Woody Allen and brief moments of deliberately playing the fool that there is something magical in embracing the irrational, something powerful because
it can be liberating. I had discovered these ideas in fairy tales, “King Lear” and other Shakespeare plays; I had read about the important balance created by the King and his fool. One cultural study I read said that nothing can be done without the four symbolic types as they mirror the necessary institutions of our society:

**KING** (Government)

**SHAMAN**
(Religion)

**HUNTER**
(Commerce)

**FOOL**
(The Press)

I believe this and know that it is true. But I was really not able to make any use of this knowledge until I witnessed it in action. I had read Mark Twain and other social critics and recognized their shrewd playing of the fool to effect social change. But it was not until I spent a year and a half working daily in psychiatric hospitals that I began to understand the importance of the irrational in my life. It was not just witnessing the irrational behavior of the patients. But witnessing it, getting to know them, and then realizing that they were very similar to me. My own behavior, though not as extreme, was like theirs. I realized when one could step back from this irrational behavior it was funny. When one understood the reasons behind the behavior it was not different in kind from what we think of as rational behavior. It was the stepping back that was important.

This is what humorists do they step back, out of the present, out of time and slightly twist what they see, or step out of context. Then those things which seem deadly serious don’t seem so serious anymore. When you step back you get a glimpse of the mirror that seems to cast light on all human behavior. In viewing the object and its reflection you see that the rational and irrational are inseparable and in many ways indistinguishable. Thus the heaviness of the world seems much lighter. Fairy tales are always “Once upon a time”, which is no time. Children understand this to a degree when they want to talk about things that do not fit into the social context like saying the baked beans really look like dog poop. George Bush became our president largely because he stopped taking himself so seriously and learned a little self-deprecating humor, and of course learned that important lesson, that if you want to look like a king find a fool to travel with.

I can tell I’ve already gotten too serious for most of you. Old habits are hard to break.
Moving to new town means stepping into a history in which you have not yet taken part.

We moved to Northfield in 1965, to start a new chapter in our lives. My husband began a new teaching job, and was midstream in his dissertation. Our youngest son was about to start the new experience of kindergarten, and our eldest entered fourth grade.

After the series of apartments we had just left, even half of a real house, with an upstairs, a downstairs, and a lawn of our own seemed luxurious. We were part of a neighborhood of sidewalks and trees, with a school and park across the street and the public library just three blocks away. We were ready to belong here.

The boys and I began by taking walks on the Carleton campus, spending time in Central Park, and gradually finding friends. Boy Scouts, church vestry, the League of Women Voters, and classmate’s families gathered us in. We expanded in all directions, looking forward and outward. We forgot to notice that the library where I volunteered, the Central Park neighborhood, the schools and the town all had a history in which we had never shared.

As a family, we went on Sundays to the Episcopal Church, where we were all welcomed and given a role to play, on the vestry, the Altar Guild, or in the annual Christmas pageant. By the time of the Christmas bazaar, I was designing posters and stitching drawstring bags of calico to hold picnic plates and cups from Margaret Starks’ gift shop - one of the best selling items at the bazaar. Margaret and the many other experienced women of the church were ingenious in thinking of similar projects to draw a good crowd, and the best cooks came with Beef Bourgignon, soups and pastries famous from bazaars of years past.

As the year went on, I admired our minister’s wife, Barbara Field, for her ability to keep up with church activities and remain cheerful and attractive with two sons and a job as well. She did have one one weakness: she hated to cook. Her husband became an expert at their outdoor grill. I don’t know what he improvised during Minnesota’s cold spells. Of course Barbara wasn’t completely helpless in the kitchen; she just didn’t like being there.

When I noticed in a church bulletin that there was to be a celebration for Bishop Whipple in a few weeks, I decided I would rescue Barbara, who would undoubtedly be expected to put on a grand dinner for the bishop when he came. I imagined finding a suitable recipe, a challenge since cakes were not my greatest strength, and a pretty plate to put it on. I decided I could pretty easily carry it the block or so across the park to the Field’s house in plenty of time, and I knew Barbara would be pleased.

In my mind, it was as good as done. I hadn’t yet told anyone of my plan. As the date grew closer, and my life with two boys and a new puppy grew more crowded, I hadn’t found the perfect recipe, or the right time to tell the Fields. Then history caught up with me, in another church bulletin describing Bishop Whipple’s work with the Minnesota Indians, the high esteem in which he has always been held in the church since being consecrated Minnesota’s first Episcopal bishop in 1859, and his death in 1901.

No one else understood my blushes, but they were real. I was ashamed to be proved the new cook on the block; but more ashamed not to have known the history, and not to have actually done the baking. My imaginary parade across the park, my entrance
into the kitchen to help save the day would not have been the triumphs I imagined. But they might have provided some good laughs. And wouldn’t Barbara and the family have enjoyed Bishop Whipple’s cake!
It all happened naturally enough, as the most embarrassing moments of our lives tend to do. Ted Sorensen, 71 year old widower and farmer, got up early on November 23rd to let the dog out. He never liked dogs in the house, but Molly was his wife’s dog and he didn’t have the heart to turn her out. His wife had died four years earlier, and Ted kept expecting the dog to up and die from grief. It hadn’t. But then again, he hadn’t either. It wasn’t that he didn’t love her, it was just that they’d lived together so long, that by the time she was gone, he still had so much of her left inside of himself, that the grief wasn’t unbearable. They still talked a lot, with the sole exception that now it was him doing most of the talking. Her things still inhabited the old farmhouse. He kind of liked having her things still hanging in the closets, but it wasn’t a morbid hanging on to his grief. More than anything, he knew they’d have to go somewhere and where they were wasn’t gettin’ in anybody’s way.

When the dog came to the bed and laid her cold nose in Ted’s hand, he nearly jumped out of his skin. Then again, it wasn’t really his skin he about jumped out of, it was his long underwear. He had a habit sleeping in an ancient union suit that was nearly worn through in 4 or five indelicate places. Those places took the back seat, so to speak, to the gaping maw of the fly that opened and closed with every step he took so that it looked like a large mouth bass opening and closing. And there beyond the opening was the shrivelled and unused flesh of an ancient, miniature Jonah, swallowed by the bass and by time.

Pulling on some socks and fitting his feet into some worn slippers, Ted paddled to the front door and set to open it for the dog. Unfortunately, the door was stuck and it took 6 tries before he finally got it open. The dog went merrily out into the yard and Ted looked down at the lock. The circular thing-a-ma-bob had worked itself out about an 1/8 inch from the door. Taking off his slipper, Ted pounded it in vain, and made a mental note to fix it later.

Closing the door and replacing his slipper, Ted headed to the kitchen to make coffee. Coffee was one of the things his wife always did. When she died, he suffered from being caught in the middle of two insurmountable facts: he needed his coffee and he had no clue how to use anything in the kitchen save the can opener.

That first morning after she died, he stood staring at the coffee maker and the Folgers 2# can on the counter, wondering how in the heck it was transformed from coffee to coffee. It was just not something that he had ever considered. Like a good farmer, he decided to take apart the coffee maker in the hopes of figuring out how it ran. Luckily, before he got the screw driver, he discovered the bowl thing that slipped out and there he saw the coffee grounds in some paper.

“Hmmph”, he said, “that’s diff’rent”.

That was Ted’s usual praise when he encountered unexpected intelligence or creativity in this world. From there on he was on a quest to find more of those paper things. He decided to use the logic approach, according to Ted, and he started at the far cabinets and began looking through the cabinets, drawers and counter-top canisters to find those paper things. Finally he came upon them in the cabinet over the coffee-maker.

“Oh, fer dumb!”
Ted recognized when he met a higher logic. The package said Number 2 filters and so he took one of the paper things and put it in the bowl and stood staring at the can of coffee. “Well, I wonder how much goes in here?”

Again, his logic came to the rescue. If the filters were No. 2, then it was probably two of the little scoops. He did that, put the bowl back, flipped the switch and stood waiting for his coffee. It didn’t take him long to realize that he’d forgotten something and he started to take the thing apart again, when he noticed, written in the plastic on top of the coffee-maker, “Pour water in here”.

A smile came over Ted’s face and he knew he was going to be OK. He filled up the carafe with water and poured it all into that hole. Unfortunately, he’d never turned off the coffee-maker and the water came out immediately. With just a little mess to clean up, he finally got his pot of coffee. It was weak, barely the color of tea, but it was coffee.

Over time, he found this method of making coffee quite convenient. He even made a few improvements. Instead of pouring in the water out of the carafe, he learned to dump in 6 mug fulls of water. In this way, the coffee could flow right into the carafe. He smiled to himself in self-satisfaction every day for 5 months over figuring out that one. So now, every morning Ted made himself the weakest cup of coffee in the tri-state area. He was a little bit proud of the fact that as he got older caffeine apparently bothered him less and less. Besides all that, he found that it was economical, too.

Once Ted tried to experiment with the coffee. He’d heard some women talking about egg-coffee at church and he remembered his wife, Dottie, talking about the same thing. One morning he tried adding an egg to paper thing. It didn’t really produce any good results. The coffee tasted the same, though there were a lot of grounds in it for some reason. The egg did come out looking like an old banny hen had laid it, but surely that wasn’t the point.

On this morning, while standing, staring out the window, Ted drank his coffee looking out at the black of the November morning. He couldn’t see anything at all, because the light was still on in the kitchen. He stared that way out the window for one and a half cups of coffee and then he saw the lights of Bob Jenkin’s station wagon slow down in front of his drive as he put Ted’s paper in the mailbox. Since it was still dark out Ted decided just to make a quick dash out to get the paper. When he started heading to the door, he felt a draft and pulled some boxers out of the laundry basket and put them over his long underwear. They had an open fly, too, but Ted knew that there wasn’t much chance of both flies gaping open at the same moment in the same place. Besides, it was still dark out and he’d be back inside in no time.

Still clutching his coffee, he headed to the front door and found that the door didn’t stick. Maybe he had fixed it after all. He opened the front door and found that it was colder and lighter than he thought from looking out the kitchen window. Molly was wanting back in and so Ted opened the entry-hall closet to get a jacket and his hat while holding the door for her. He put his hat on his head while holding the door open and grabbed his coat and went outside. The door closed behind him and he found himself holding his coffee in one hand and Dottie’s long cape in the other. He’d never really cared for the cape before, and he certainly wasn’t interested in wearing it out to get the paper. He tried the door and found it stuck. No matter how he jigged it, it still wouldn’t open.

“Oh, fer dumb!”
He made a mental note to fix the lock and decided to just go get the paper. Who’d be up at this hour anyway?

He threw the cape over his shoulders, pulled the hat flaps of his cap over his ears, took a steadying swig of his weak coffee and headed out to the mailbox. The long driveway seemed longer every year and with the cold he walked faster and faster to get his paper. He noticed one car drive by and recognized Tom Thomson.

“Wonder what he’s doing out at this hour?”, Ted asked himself slowing up a bit to make sure Tom didn’t see him.

Soon another car came driving by and Ted just had time to duck behind a tree. He recognized Pete Nelson’s Buick, but all Pete saw was the flying cape which drew his attention, but he thought it was a deer and hit the brakes a little.

“What’s he doing driving around. What the blazes is going on?”

Ted decided to hurry on out to the mailbox. He was bending over the mailbox when he saw the glow from the headlights of Marv Erickson’s new Silverado. He straightened up quickly ready to run, but there was no where to run. He just held up his cup of coffee as if it would protect him. He didn’t even know it was weak. By this time it was obvious to the passing car that Ted was no deer, but he stood there in the headlights just the same. As luck would have it, the flies of Ted’s boxers and union suit did line up and looked like nothing so much as a large mouth bass ready to disgorge a miniature Jonah. Marv didn’t have time to slow down thankfully, but he and his passenger, Marty Lundgren, just kept staring as they passed Ted. Everything went to slow motion, just like in the movies. Why on earth, they wondered was Ted Sorensen standing out by the road drinking coffee in his long underwear? Why did he have on a cape? Why was he wearing boxers over his long underwear? And was that? No, it couldn’t’ve been...

To add insult to injury, the slow motion ended just as the cab of the Silverado passed Ted. Then the back wheels hit a puddle and splashed cold dirty water all over Ted. The next three cars that passed, all wondered about the strange vision of Ted Sorensen standing there like some Scandinavian super hero, wearing a cape, a cap and gaping underwear and boxers, toasting them with a cup of coffee.

When the last car had past, Ted just stood there for another minute or two. He took a sip of his coffee which was now quite cold and had a bit of grit in it from the puddle.

“Oh, fer the love of Pete,” he said to no one but himself.

The last car that passed was pastor Loren Swenson’s. It was then that Ted remembered the prayer breakfast this morning. He thought he might just stay at home this morning and take care of that front door.
Doug Green

School Choice

I pick my way
over the bodies of colleagues who won’t
answer their e-mail promptly, who refuse
to recognize that the end has come
and gone and that this is as god-awful
good as it gets

over now-limp administrators who had
quite another plan for my self-improvement,
higher productivity, all worked out
over lunch at a retreat in a luxe hotel in DC--
if I were in a car, I’d back up over them,
even the ones I like, because I’m tired

so tired of students who write
about weeding out the dead wood
as if post-tenure review were an academic
form of forestry or animal husbandry
as if they could come late to every class
never meet a deadline, expect that I
am waiting by the phone at 10 pm
just to field questions about how important
the Milton paper is in their grade
as a whole--and I’m thinking the only hole
is the one I want to blast between their ears

but I don’t work at the post office
I don’t even belong to the NRA
no, I’m just a humble intellectual
with too many ironies in the fire.
After a recent Sunday night dinner, I tossed leftovers in Tupperware, returned the container to its place in our cupboard, and left it there until … Wednesday. I do not have a revolutionary method of storing green beans and almonds. Sometimes I am simply an idiot.

And I might be contagious. The night before, my bride prepared a scrumptious meatloaf dinner, with sides of potatoes, salad and wheat rolls … she didn’t take out of the oven for two days.

My wife’s a good cook. She does not, however, have a secret recipe for rock-hard buns. Seriously, if you bake a batch, leave them sit for 48 hours, and then unknowingly bake them again while preheating the oven you have not discovered a way to prepare bread. You’ve created an instrument of dental reconstruction. Throw those suckers against the wall and we’d see daylight.

What is it about the hustle and bustle of life that drives us to do things that in other circumstances would earn us a free night’s stay in a place with padded rooms? Could the chill caused by a lack of sunlight during this rainy spring be freezing our brains? Could it be the stress of work? I am in the midst of my busiest time of the year. In my wife’s case, she’s tackling all of her usual tasks while pursuing a doctoral degree. Could the pressure be plugging our minds? Is it that damn Al Qaeda?

These are all plausible excuses. Yet I blame my mother.

I am blessed as the son of the most genuinely kind and compassionate woman alive. If I am the least bit generous, considerate or caring it is because of her influence. Mom is one of those rare people who finds good in just about everyone.

Unfortunately, mom also passed along the absent-minded gene. This condition only periodically shows itself, but when it does it’s transparent. Mom’s famous for slaving for hours to make the best meal in three counties — six courses, three desert options — only to open the refrigerator to put away the spoils and find the mixed-green salad she made but forgot to place on the table.

When I was a young brat who counted all of his presents I remember talking to her a week after Christmas about how my two brothers received watches for the holiday. She was incredulous. “Tommy, you got a watch, too,” she said. She could not believe she was hearing I had not also received a watch. To mom, inequality among her sons — particularly if distributed by her — was the work of an evildoer. Favoritism was akin to child abuse.

My watch was sitting, unwrapped, under her bed.

One of my favorite examples is the time I was 12 and I needed a new hockey stick for a big tournament (they’re all big when you’re 12). I had already left for the arena and mom was going to pick up the stick, trim off the end, and have it to me in time for the first game.

“Saw if off at the letter ‘A’ in Christian, please,” I instructed her (my memory likely ads a please where one previously was not).

God bless her, mom had the stick cut and delivered well in time for the opening face-off. Only she cut the stick at the label ‘A’ written on the wrong side of the shaft. I had a perfect hockey stick. Perfect if I had been two-feet tall.
So when my wife inquires “Who put the beans in the cupboard?” there is the technically correct answer — me. And there is the intellectually honest answer.
My mom.
David J. Maitland

from *Unfinished Business*. Postscript: An Eye Opener

I wrote this book with the hope that it might enable some older people to recognize that there could still be rewarding personal developments. In our ever more “ageist” society, this is not an easy sell. For reasons which I see largely as commercial, we urge people to believe that, despite time’s passage, nothing changes. “Continue to think young!” The economy simply needs people who continue to believe—despite the abundance in their closets, bureaus, attics and cellars—that there still might be purchases which would make all the difference in their lives!

Whatever else is misleading in this societal “instruction,” the fundamental assumption is simply wrong. Not only do some things change with time’s passage, *few things don’t change*. However able one still is to squeeze into clothes from one’s school years, it is no longer possible to see things at sixty as one did at sixteen. Too much happens with the passing years to enable one to sustain the earlier naiveté. This is not to say that everybody matures at the same rate or extent. Timetables vary. For a variety of reasons—e.g. distinctive experiences—people grow little or greatly at their particular rate. While we are all subject to the impact of large events like 9-11, we do not respond identically to them. This despite the media’s efforts to shape us uniformly. We all have somewhat distinctive sensibilities to bring forth in our efforts to make sense of events, personal and public. This is how I’ll present the underlying dynamics of our unfinished business: of the many, often unanticipated, things that happen, some cannot be ignored. They insist on having our attention. It is some combination of such external events plus internal resources which either contribute to or hinder one’s maturation. About these “resources,” I’ve come to see them as our initially limitless, God-given aptitudes which experience prompts us to draw on from birth to death. While progress is to be hoped for, only endless challenges are assured!

Little did I realize—even in the course of writing the book at age 80—that I would have important, potential maturations. I had little grasp of what my own unfinished business might be. Naively, I suspect that I anticipated only minor revisions in the self I’d become. Certainly I had no inkling of radical, often painful, needs for change which would emerge from my late-life experiences.

That was, partly because, as the child of a short-lived paternal family—grandfather dead at 55, father at 65—I wondered if I might exceed my dad by a decade. On reaching that three-quarter century birthday, I felt lucky that I was reasonably healthy, happily married, and had an adequate annuity. *That was before my dear wife of almost sixty years died unexpectedly!* Unlike the brief lives of my forebears, Betsy was the child of longer-lived forebears; and both of us assumed that it would be she who’d be “left.”

October 16, 2003, proved otherwise for us; and, 18 months after her death, I’m still struggling with unanticipated, unfinished business. I was simply wrong at 80. There were to be potential maturations, and it was only as a grieving widower that I gradually recognized them.

Emotionally immobilized for months, I chanced onto a book by Elaine Pagels, *Beyond Belief: The Secret Gospel of Thomas*. There I rediscovered words by which, years earlier, I’d been both fascinated and put off. Now, apparently in the dim light of my

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disspirited existence as a widower, they seemed to hold promise that I was previously unable to recognize in them. What I had dismissed—as Christian orthodoxy has done for centuries—I now recognized as the invitation/demand for maturations I couldn’t have imagined.

Never have I had an experience which so radically changed my response to a given text. I did a complete about-face. Words that earlier had been both intriguing and bothersome had an utterly unanticipated appeal. From long-scorned gnosticism, they functioned as an invitation to embrace my dramatically changed world or be destroyed by it. While the latter has some lingering appeal, I now want, if I can, to draw upon resources which live never before needed—or even realized I possessed.

From The Gospel According to Thomas (75), Jesus is reported to have said words that leapt out at me:

> If you bring forth what is within you, what you bring forth will save you. If you do not bring forth what is within you, what you do not bring forth will destroy you (Pagels 53).

Whether or not I make legitimate use of this non-canonical text, I do not know. What I now see through my grief is that the experience of traumatic loss is what it has taken for me to want to bring forth an unacknowledged aspect of what was within me. I had no prior grasp of the depths of my vulnerability. The empathy that I may have expressed to people suffering great losses I now see as superficial. I’d never before been “there.”

To move away—for the moment, at least—from my personal anguish, we must acknowledge that it is only through experience that we gradually mature. From life’s beginning there have been stimuli which enabled some people to bring forth aspects of their initially limitless God-given potential. For example, in the company of loving family who communicated partly by talking, we learned to speak. Gradually we acquired the vocabulary to hear and ourselves express even more complex things. Physical hunger morphed into emotional needs. We learned to listen and to talk—ever more accurately—about matters unimaginable earlier. In this society such maturations are usually acknowledged as far as mid-life or, possibly, to retirement. From this point, when work ceases to be the central reality of many lives, people are urged to coast to the end. This book is in sharpest contrast with such passivity.

I have attempted to identify developments—personal and societal—in which people may engage in their late years. Despite widespread and persistent denials, maturational possibilities persist. My experience as a widower has opened my eyes to latencies of which I was previously ignorant. In my case it took an utterly unanticipated death to enable me to begin to recognize and want to bring forth neglected aspects of myself. Had I had the option I probably would not have chosen to mature in this painful way. I had no choice. Failure to bring forth what was within me was destroying me. Grief will not be denied. Either we will learn from it or, as Thomas reports, “. . . what we fail to bring forth [will be fatal].”

For most people over the course of a lifetime what they manage to bring forth results from some combination of external and internal factors. It is not simply a matter of willpower. For the most part I suspect that, having made it to one of life’s challenging

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2 Translated by George Masra.
stages—e.g., adolescence or mid-life—there is often a strong temptation to stay put, to enjoy one’s achievement. Life, however, doesn’t ever simply stop like that. New maturations become necessary and possible.

For example, themselves products of family life, most people become family makers. Is anybody tempted to believe in the sole adequacy of adolescent achievements to the new parent? To have been a child held lovingly in a parent’s arms evokes infant growth which is significantly different from the developments needed by the child-holding parent. Potential growth may be common to both stages but the external stimuli are dramatically different. Both child and parent have undeveloped inner resources to call up but the challenges differ greatly.

While learning to speak is no small assignment, the work of becoming a nurturing parent is more demanding. Tasks may be multiple for both, but infancy has been much less shaped and misshaped by societal demands and instruction than has the post-adolescent parent. Having children is an invitation to bring forth resources less needed in one’s earlier years. It is by one’s unique combination of external situations and internal potential that one may bring forth whatever life requires. Nothing is assured. That is the instruction I’ve been trying to embrace over recent months.

Perhaps an illustration from my most recent experience will make my inner/outer generalization clearer. Tears are an outward manifestation of an inner condition. In my case they have been evoked by Betsy’s death. Actually, the last time that I cried prior to 10-16-03 was several years earlier, when we had a call from the veterinarian that our dog, Sally, had died. In response to that call, we held each other and wept. That we were able to do so was a comfort to me, for sure; and I suspect for us both. During those deeper-than-normal moments we embraced the death of a dear pet by embracing each other.

To cry alone or publicly is something else. For the past year and a half, both have caused embarrassment. After all, I am a grown man, maybe overgrown. I’ve wanted to acknowledge the loss I’ve suffered but without crying. This long proved impossible. I felt it to be a sign of weakness which I was loathe to acknowledge. I also sensed that it embarrassed others who didn’t know how to respond to my behaviour.

That was until an old friend spoke of my tears as liberating. Not only did he say this in the context of a small group of church friends but he took time to write a letter about his appreciation for my public vulnerability. “Over the years you’ve given us insights from your theological scholarship; but, by those tears, you’ve given us something more precious. You gave us permission to grieve.” By what was brought forth (or forced) out of me, I helped not only myself. What in denial was killing me proved, when brought, a public boon.

That I’ve been capable of such maturation in my advanced years has been a wonderful surprise. In addition to being what I suspect is fragile and no assured thing, it has opened some doors to the future. For example, I’ve begun to do some things that have been impossible since Betsy died. I’m able to write again. Nothing great, but an autobiographical addition to the manuscript I wrote hoping that some people might become open to the possibilities of significant personal growth. Little did I realize what experience might trigger for me. Having been myself visited by what I thought to offer to others, I hope that this P.S. proves to be the eyeopener to them that it surely has been to me.