Ten from Ten
Favorite articles from the past decade of The American Scholar
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Ten of Our Favorites

As we in the current administration of The American Scholar begin the last year of our first decade, we thought it would be interesting to look back at what we’ve been publishing and pick a favorite story from each of the past 10 years. The articles range from a celebration of nature’s unstoppable energy to a young man facing a fatal disease, from the joys and trials of summer houseguests to a person we mildly called on our cover “the world’s most evil man.” The tone in the stories ranges from comic to prayerful to inspirational to skeptical, but it must be admitted that many of the stories we liked best of the many more we’ve published are dark, having to do with war, torture, physical assault, violence and more violence. We wish it were not so, and several of these stories overtly plea that we mend our ways, just as every story about violence must or at least should implicitly argue for its discontinuation.

We take pride in the writers we publish in the Scholar, and the selection that follows shows why. Two of the pieces here were the first publications for their writers, Bethany Vaccaro and Pacifique Irankunda, who were barely out of college at the time of publication. One of the writers, James McConkey, was first published more than 50 years ago in The New Yorker; where another, Ann Beattie, has published 45 short stories and still counting. The superb essayists Brian Doyle and William Deresiewicz have been columnists for our website, as well as publishing remarkable longer works in the print magazine. Christian Wiman, Emily Bernard, and Pamela Haag are also essayists with whom we are eager to associate ourselves; all three have published other essays in the magazine that could also have been included among these 10. And finally there is our own colleague Bruce Falconer, whose narrative reporting has also appeared in The Atlantic and Mother Jones, and stands with the best writing of its kind being done today.

We hope you’ll share our enthusiasm for these writers and their work.

—ROBERT WILSON
Consider the hummingbird for a long moment. A hummingbird’s heart beats 10 times a second. A hummingbird’s heart is the size of a pencil eraser. A hummingbird’s heart is a lot of the hummingbird. *Joyas voladoras*, flying jewels, the first white explorers in the Americas called them, and the white men had never seen such creatures, for hummingbirds came into the world only in the Americas, nowhere else in the universe, more than 300 species of them whirring and zooming and nectaring in hummingbird time zones nine times removed from ours, their hearts hammering faster than we could clearly hear if we pressed our elephantine ears to their infinitesimal chests.

Each one visits a thousand flowers a day. They can dive at 60 miles an hour. They can fly backwards. They can fly more than 500 miles without pausing to rest. But when they rest they come close to death: on frigid nights, or when they are starving, they retreat into torpor, their metabolic rate slowing to a fifteenth of their normal sleep rate, their hearts sludging nearly to a halt, barely beating, and if they are not soon warmed, if they do not soon find that which is sweet, their hearts grow cold, and they cease to be. Consider for a moment those hummingbirds who did not open their eyes again today, this very day, in the Americas: bearded helmet-crests and booted racket-tails, violet-tailed sylphs and violet-capped woodnymphs, crimson topazes and purple-crowned fairies, red-tailed comets and amethyst woodstars, rainbow-bearded thornbills and glittering-bellied emeralds, velvet-purple coronets and golden-bellied star-frontlets, fiery-tailed awlbills and Andean hillstars, spatuletails and pufflegs, each the most

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amazing thing you have never seen, each thunderous wild heart the size of an infant’s fingernail, each mad heart silent, a brilliant music stilled.

HUMMINGBIRDS, LIKE ALL FLYING BIRDS but more so, have incredible enormous immense ferocious metabolisms. To drive those metabolisms they have race-car hearts that eat oxygen at an eye-popping rate. Their hearts are built of thinner, leaner fibers than ours. Their arteries are stiffer and more taut. They have more mitochondria in their heart muscles—anything to gulp more oxygen. Their hearts are stripped to the skin for the war against gravity and inertia, the mad search for food, the insane idea of flight. The price of their ambition is a life closer to death; they suffer more heart attacks and aneurysms and ruptures than any other living creature. It’s expensive to fly. You burn out. You fry the machine. You melt the engine. Every creature on earth has approximately two billion heartbeats to spend in a lifetime. You can spend them slowly, like a tortoise and live to be two hundred years old, or you can spend them fast, like a hummingbird, and live to be two years old.

The biggest heart in the world is inside the blue whale. It weighs more than seven tons. It’s as big as a room. It is a room, with four chambers. A child could walk around it, head high, bending only to step through the valves. The valves are as big as the swinging doors in a saloon. This house of a heart drives a creature a hundred feet long. When this creature is born it is 20 feet long and weighs four tons. It is waaaaay bigger than your car. It drinks a hundred gallons of milk from its mama every day and gains 200 pounds a day, and when it is seven or eight years old it endures an unimaginable puberty and then it essentially disappears from human ken, for next to nothing is known of the the mating habits, travel patterns, diet, social life, language, social structure, diseases, spirituality, wars, stories, despairs and arts of the blue whale. There are perhaps 10,000 blue whales in the world, living in every ocean on earth, and of the largest animal who ever lived we know nearly nothing. But we know this: the animals with the largest hearts in the world generally travel in pairs, and their penetrating moaning cries, their piercing yearning tongue, can be heard underwater for miles and miles.

MAMMALS AND BIRDS have hearts with four chambers. Reptiles and turtles have hearts with three chambers. Fish have hearts with two chambers. Insects and mollusks have hearts with one chamber. Worms have hearts with one chamber, although they may have as many as 11 single-chambered hearts. Unicellular bacteria have no hearts at all; but even they have fluid eternally in motion, washing from one side of
the cell to the other, swirling and whirling. No living being is without interior liquid motion. We all churn inside.

SO MUCH HELD in a heart in a lifetime. So much held in a heart in a day, an hour, a moment. We are utterly open with no one in the end—not mother and father, not wife or husband, not lover, not child, not friend. We open windows to each but we live alone in the house of the heart. Perhaps we must. Perhaps we could not bear to be so naked, for fear of a constantly harrowed heart. When young we think there will come one person who will savor and sustain us always; when we are older we know this is the dream of a child, that all hearts finally are bruised and scarred, scored and torn, repaired by time and will, patched by force of character, yet fragile and rickety forevermore, no matter how ferocious the defense and how many bricks you bring to the wall. You can brick up your heart as stout and tight and hard and cold and impregnable as you possibly can and down it comes in an instant, felled by a woman’s second glance, a child’s apple breath, the shatter of glass in the road, the words I have something to tell you, a cat with a broken spine dragging itself into the forest to die, the brush of your mother’s papery ancient hand in the thicket of your hair, the memory of your father’s voice early in the morning echoing from the kitchen where he is making pancakes for his children.
Summer Visitors

BUY A HOUSE IN MAINE AND THEY WILL COME ... AND COME

ANN BEATTIE

What did we expect would happen if we got a summer house? We’d seen *Fawlty Towers*. We knew that our friends were usually not happy to be introduced to each other. I was already oppressed, making the water run (which years ago replaced the wine run) every time we entertained: *gazeuse* for some, non-*gazeuse* for others; the talk of Perrier “having changed.” More often than not my husband, Lincoln, enjoys giving people a tour of his painting studio about as much as the exterminator enjoys putting on his special suit and crawling into the eaves in annual pursuit of wasps (“When did you last hear the humming?” “When did you paint all this?”). Still, we did it in 1988: we bought a house in Maine. Two people whose parents managed with one home, and who left that home only briefly for an annual family vacation that didn’t always happen annually.

We bought a summer house built around 1900, twice the size of the house we owned in Virginia, and started fixing it up, rolling Benjamin Moore Historic Colors on the walls, changing the light fixtures from wagon-wheel light bulb to Victorian incandescent, borrowing a truck to pick up the lovely bed at the antiques shop, adding a screened porch, throwing out the wall-to-wall carpeting and finding perfectly fine wood floors underneath—though we immediately bought an expensive, impractical, antic rug for the living room that could not be vacuumed because the weave was too delicate. A chimney was removed from the attic to make more studio space; dormers and skylights were put in. I took one of the second floor bedrooms as an office. It looks across a field where, last summer, we were threatened by the building of a 24-hour-lighted, cyclone-fenced storage facility; now we are apparently getting only a horse barn. I’ve found this out about summer houses: renovate and they will come. They will

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also not hesitate to come during the renovations. They will offer better alternatives than you thought of, but too late to implement; they will sit on the back porch and chat up the handsome builder they’ve developed a crush on, who is paid by the hour.

We started living in our house in Maine for a longer part of each year, not naming it (we don’t order funny license plates, either) but gratefully accepting a doormat with a picture of a moose and the words WELCOME TO THE CAMP. Our phobia about the cold abated so that we developed slightly different parameters (not necessary to leave at the end of August; very necessary to leave by the end of October), thereby avoiding the tourists for the last part of our stay but also extending the summer visitors for two more months that they, too, found especially low-key and pleasant.

Because, you know: a house in Maine. There were summer visitors.

Let me make a disclaimer right away. We most often have a great time with these visitors. They were and are our friends. Sometimes we even invited them. The first year, one brought a little tree in a gallon bucket that has now grown 15 feet high (I would say 20 feet, but Lincoln insists I exaggerate). I used to send an annual picture of myself to the friend who brought it, standing next to the tree, hand extended horizontally to show its height from the ground. For years, I’ve pointed at the sky, and my husband has had to back up farther to get the picture. Without the summer guests, FedEx packages would not get signed for; without them, we’d drink, and dislike, tap water. We appreciate the expensive magazines they leave behind; the deliberately stupefying gifts stupefy us (“A playhouse!”). They force us to get ourselves together, to buy groceries, batteries, more comfortable cars. They even have us drive them around to look at real estate, so they might be more than summer visitors, but when my husband could not please one guest after days of touring, it finally came out: the friend would not consider any house that had a foundation.

These same summer visitors arrived two months late, when another friend, from San Francisco, was sitting on the back porch. “What’s that?” he said, looking up at the road, which takes a frightening turn just at our corner. It was our Texas friends who we came to understand disparaged foundations, arriving at last, complete with a mobile home containing a merry menagerie of cats, dogs, and birds. A truck pulling a horse trailer brought up the rear, and they all proceeded to the field across from our house, where everything was reassembled as if Legos had been given to a person in a manic phase. It all soon had to be put elsewhere, however, because a hurricane hit. While other people had jars of homemade jam in the basement, I had cats in crates. There are those who think that fiction writers get their material from what transpires in front of their eyes. In my experience, this is almost never true; for example, the sinking of the mobile home into Ypres-like deep mud occurred during the night, during torrential rain, while I was asleep. I sleep and sleep in the summer.

There are those who think writers are indolent, neurotic, keep crazy hours. Go into
their kitchens, and there are bottles of Perrier everywhere on the floor, like a bowling alley gone out of business. What happened to the writer as alcoholic? Gone, those days—gone to non-gazeuse, and it’s probably good that the Café des Deux Magots crowd who made life one big, long summer vacation isn’t around to see what’s become of things.

Before they leave, summer visitors usually mention when they plan to come back. It’s a matter of etiquette, I’ve decided, their way of saying that they had a good time. You are to take it as a compliment. You are also to have next year’s calendar handy, even if you might otherwise wait until March to buy it half-price. If you don’t, you’ll get it as a bonus gift! Write in pencil. He doesn’t know whether he’ll keep his job; she isn’t sure if she’ll have lost enough pregnancy weight to even take the hike she couldn’t take this year.

They depart, and you become an archaeologist of your own past, as well as theirs. Where did they find that picture of you as a baby? (Do you look as homely as you think? Is that why they didn’t say anything?) The long-lost gas bill reappears as a bookmark in your cookbook, with the guest’s handwriting on the envelope, an improvised notepad to hastily scribble down the name of their teenage son’s … surprise! … wife. The missing juice glass of a set of six is found holding bobby pins that are not yours, hiding behind the superduper extra-large-sized Excedrin bottle guests love to shake and partake of, as if it’s a big medicinal maraca. One guest left his watch (Got it, Dr. Freud) and called to ask quite reasonably if I could send it back. I immediately began to wear it, in order to remember to do just that, and did so for weeks: weeks, with two watches on my wrist, passing the post office daily.

They’re a wake-up call, these summer visitors; they reveal to you just how bad off you are. You see yourself as they see you: the person with batteries dead
in the remote, dead in the flashlight, dead in the calculator. The person who gets too much mail with form letters misspelling your name (“Miss Bettie, if you could take just a moment to look at these galleys”), the person who screens calls and who must therefore always be home and deliberately not answering when they, themselves, call subsequently. You are the person who subscribes to tabloids (I’m too busy in the checkout line of the supermarket to flip through them quickly; I’m taking mental inventories about impending visitors, trying to remember who takes only 1 percent milk and who drinks Lactaid). Their simple requests—one is happy to tell them where the nearest cash machine is—are easy to deal with, and they don’t seem to pick up on the fact (maybe at first you don’t pick up on it) that you’re invoking some of Mr. Rogers’s vocabulary. But you see yourself strangely when asking to be reminded, yet again, if someone likes green pepper. To say nothing of how your self-esteem dissipates like a squirt of expensive room fragrance when a friend decides to go to church for the first time in 20 years (“Well, it’s sort of near the cash machine, but you’ll need to go around the rotary ...”), then asks to borrow a slip and you dig around every drawer only to admit defeat (“You don’t have any slip of any kind?”).

As host, you have to remember that they are on diets, have allergies, dislike clementines but like blood oranges. They are, of course, vegetarians. They are overworked and underfed. Their clothes need washing. One of the best clothes-washing stories—yes, I now have clothes-washing stories—involves the time two women friends didn’t quite compute that Lincoln’s kiln was on, and electricity use should be kept to a minimum. They kindly loaded and started up the dishwasher, then tossed their bras and panties in the washing machine, quickly blowing the fuse that fired the kiln ... so that months of Lincoln’s sculpture blew up. Crazed, he began a summer-long task of reassembling his now much tinier little figures, gluing any teeny surviving pieces together, revealing himself to be the sort of person who’d lick the rug if he’d sneezed on the line of coke. Summer visitors will make you see not only yourself, but your mate, in a new light. (Note from Lincoln: “Always the wet blanket, I must clarify what actually happened. The circuit breaker turned the kiln off prematurely, and I was unaware that I should have used a new kiln sitter cone. The sculptures cracked before I realized my mistake and turned it all off manually.”)

THE ANECDOTES COULD GO ON forever, but let me mention a more serious matter. Let me mention the perfect summer visitor. The visitor we keep in touch with throughout the year, though it is next to impossible to speak to him and we deliberately don’t ask after him on every call we make. This is a visitor so amusing, so kind, so indistinguishable from summer itself that you would think Sandy was a member of our family. He
Summer Visitors

is an aged golden retriever who likes Lincoln’s convertible so much that he will sit in the back seat when the car is parked in the garage, waiting. He prefers vanilla/peanut butter swirl ice cream. He lives in a suburb of Boston, but he vacations in Maine. When we point out that he isn’t our dog, friends think we’re kidding. Sandy’s owner once visited us in Key West. Quite aware of how much we talk about his dog, and how large a role the dog plays in our lives, he answered another friend’s polite question about how he happened to be visiting by saying, “I’m the owner of Sandy the dog.” But, alas, the questioner was the one friend who hadn’t met Sandy. With cautious politeness, he responded: “You have a dog?”

Well, as with so many things ... maybe you had to be there. And if you were Sandy, you always could be. Sometimes, when we’ve visited him during the winter, he’s jumped in our car and his owners have laughed and waved goodbye (“We got him!”). We’ve taken Sandy as the excuse to pull the occasional prank, such as the time we photographed him and wrote a little book from his perspective (“I peed in this garden”) and buried the book in his dry dog food, so that “My Summer Vacation” was not found until he’d been home a week. Another writer has mentioned him by name in a book that was on the best-seller list. If you want your Vichy water and your blood orange, you’d better admit that this is a special dog. The convertible seems more fun with his doggie ears flapping; people who would otherwise never speak to us at sidewalk cafés stop by to compliment him and pat his white muzzle. He gets us to the beach, when otherwise we’d forget it’s there. (You think Maine = beach? Do you think New York City = Empire State Building?)

But let’s talk seriously about summer visitors. Overnighters, I mean: not the ones who stop for lunch and continue, racing off like Paul Newman after a pit stop. They might have said they didn’t want to impose, but really: it was something else that made them not want to linger. The visitors who call hopefully on the spur of the moment on a weekend in July (well, the other visitor might have died)—the ones who plan to visit, who even, sometimes, do impose, offer something else. They provide a moment, or many moments, in which you may falter. No one is expected to be the perfect host. English muffins are necessary and can sustain people until they go out for a real breakfast. Ibuprofen should be stocked as a more moderate solution than Excedrin. But beyond a few basics (sheet thread count; beach towels that are big enough; a sailboat), it’s almost expected that you not be the perfect host or hostess. You can be that on a Saturday in January, when your fire is crackling and you’ve spent the day making tofu en daube. When you’ve put on under-eye cover cream and picked up the newspaper, and everyone is going to go home at 11 o’clock. In the summer, because you are inundated with guests (you know, the other guests, not the guest who is staying over), you are not expected to look happy, pulled-together, relaxed. You are not expected to be gracious, attentive, amusing. You—if you are acting as the seismic register for summer
happiness or the lack thereof—must show signs of imperfect sleep, you must express (badly) puzzlement about the meaning of life. The summer visitors know you’re not living your usual life. They count on it. If you’re out of context in a summer house, if summer itself is out of context in being a season of sun ’n’ fun, then they can make their own transformation more successfully: old rules don’t apply.

That’s why you whisper to your husband that so-and-so seems particularly wired; why he whispers to you to stop whispering and let him get some sleep and he thought you promised not to have nonstop guests this year. The summer guests show up with new hair colors, new self-destructive plans, with weight gain or frightening loss, with people they aren’t married to, but whom they might marry if everything, always, goes exactly right, all summer, all fall, all winter, spring, and into the next summer. You are there to see that it does not—even in the moment (“Let’s ask Ann if she regrets not having children”). Oh, they’ll accept it if you cook well and you’re witty. They’ll love Lincoln’s spontaneity, be scandalized at what a good mimic he is (“Does he have one of me?”), marvel at the obscure art book plopped on their lap, thank you for the anchovy-stuffed olive in their martini (“You must be so happy they’ve opened that gourmet store up on Route 1”). They’re happy to see you doing well—particularly under the circumstances: people are calling non-stop!—but what they really want are those midnight moments when you assure them your career is washed up, when they learn that you do not know how to sew a button on your own pajamas and if they hadn’t brought in their dry cleaning you wouldn’t even have the safety pin that is keeping the bottoms up. And that your whole soul is kept together with a safety pin. They are reassured that your big, colorful house, with its amusing tchotchkes set in positions to suggest simulated sex with other tchotchkes, might be imperiled by a glowing, barbed-wire nightmare spoiling the view across acres of field you couldn’t afford to buy. They shiver with schadenfreude at your property-tax increase, weep with you when it is discovered that silverfish have tatted a Conté crayon drawing into a tiny doily.

For anarchy is everywhere, even in summer houses. The center cannot hold—or, it can, but you have to get it pumped out every year. (“Lincoln, there’s seaweed coming through the drain in the bathtub.” “That isn’t seaweed.”) Your friends are there to console you, to try to make it better with little gifts you’ll have to hide if your parents visit, but remember to display if they, themselves, return; with baguettes; with spray bottles of “natural” mosquito repellent (“She’s going to the garden for parsley. Look at...
her run!”). O, host and hostess, even with all you have, even with your plenty (“Lemon curd! Thanks!”), even though blessed with (former) book advances and painting commissions that made all this possible, understand that nothing lasts, not your happiness, not your sanity, not your careers, certainly, though it’s fun to bang around a big house—under your skylights and with your desk pushed up against a window to take in your temporary bucolic view—pretending you’re still functional. And when you falter—for falter you must (“I’m so sorry! You should close the bathroom door ...”)—when you falter, there will be a summer houseguest to embrace you, to share with you her own tales of woe (“The HMO was willing to let me die”). There is only limited time, for the season is short, the phone may ring, and an outsider may intrude. Why, even Lincoln’s been known to come home with one! Huddle on the porch, under the glowing pig lights, where the earwigs skate across splattered gas-grill grease, and share your stories of winter and its miseries and depredations. No one will disagree. It was a struggle, though behind us now. Temporarily. Until the days shorten and it begins anew.

Your house, your very peculiar house, is nevertheless shelter, and shelter in a way the visitor’s house could not be. The houses—particularly the pseudohouses, the quirky, part-of-the-year houses of others—fascinate and then need to be demystified, as is true of their owners. Visit in summer, and see him trying to triumph over weeds and you’ll see where he gets that energy! Look at their rent-a-dog, and understand how really different from other families they are. I mean, why couldn’t they get a dog? Have you noticed they have fewer houseplants, year after year? If they bring in cacti, it’s a bad sign. But the garage got shored up, so no more worry about the floor caving in and the convertible falling into one of Dante’s rings. They finally realized they had to put a railing on the front steps after they saw so-and-so, trying to walk up them in the rain, shooting his arms around like John Travolta in Saturday Night Fever. Psst: They put all the aspirin products out in a basket, like it’s potpourri or something.

Humbling, even at times humiliating, we see how crazy it all is, how fragile everything remains, even when repaired professionally. In winter, pipes can burst, neighbors’ gutters get airborne like Frisbees; friends look in, but we’re not even there. This winter, someone called long-distance, having tracked us down through a mutual Maine friend, to see if we’d like him to take his chain saw to an enormous fallen tree. “Where did it fall?” Lincoln asked, plaintively. We have succeeded in having a source of constant worry, a century-plus-old Victorian that keeps us on our toes as much as any teenager, and whose maintenance costs might soon equal sending that teenager to college.

Our summer house is not our official portrait, but rather the snapshot: the outtake that convinces more than the posed original. When people visit, they see us rumpled, nervously watching everything, including the proliferating weeds in our peripheral vision. If we had a veneer, it would be as cracked as the plaster wall in the dining room, as obvious as the seam that opened in the kitchen ceiling when the upstairs tub leaked.
But come ahead, come in! See the flotsam and jetsam of so-called creativity (“Do you have that thorny fruit, or whatever that stuff is, in the bowl because Lincoln’s going to paint it?”), use the doorbell, which I discovered we had after about three years, when someone’s two-year-old stood on tiptoe to ring it. And ring it. Ignore that sarcastic “You never know how many friends you have until you have a cottage” sign hung in the hallway. Come see us as we actually are: ostensibly in charge, but not really.

Do you also remember old black-and-white movies—they fascinated me, in childhood—in which the young lady of the house receives a note inviting her to visit grandmamma, or perhaps her mother’s favorite cousin? She presses the message to her heart, knowing that it will mean a coach ride into the distance, transported by galloping horses that cannot move fast enough to take her to the family of the man she secretly adores and wishes to marry. Today’s version is to call ahead, or more often to e-mail (Under “subject” will be written, “Can you stand one more visitor?”), then to call along the way to report bad traffic, an unplanned stop for fried calamari. Disembarking, totally different in appearance than when last seen (the message was sent by Lara Flynn Boyle; Kirstie Alley alights), fatigued from detours and near accidents on the road, holding not the beeswax candle you suspect, but rather a pee jar, unwinding stiffly in the driveway like Gumby dipped in Superglue, the summer visitor extends her arms and you rush into them. This has nothing to do with romance, just as the engine power that brought her has nothing to do with real horses. But still, there is a frisson that comes less from romance than from a romantic conception of oneself: you are not a fixed entity, and neither is your visitor. Like you, your guest is ever changing, filled with inchoate longing, thinking: take me as I am, today, this day in summer, and I’ll take you. For at least three nights, or until you throw me out.●
Two Strangers, Three Stories

ALL THE LONELY PEOPLE AND WHERE THEY COME FROM

JAMES McCONKEY

OVERLOOKING THE SEA in Key West are the crumbling remains of a large fortification, the West Martello Tower, a small segment of which has been restored. On the seaward side, most of the foundation, including the cannon openings, has been demolished; the lower portion is simply a brick wall holding back the earth within the fort from the low-lying sand. Because that wall and the trees planted behind it offer some shade from the sun, a lone picnic table has been placed beneath them, at the far edge of Higgs Beach.

During a vacation in Key West last year, my wife and I were resting from a long walk at that table when a stranger approached us. “Would it scare you,” he asked, “if I joined you to roll a cigarette?”

Nothing about him was frightening. A middle-aged man with a kindly face, he asked his question in a gentle way. His body, though wiry, was no taller than mine. Clearly, he was no beggar: he was clean-shaven, and wore unsoiled clothes—work pants and a T-shirt that seemed to have been freshly laundered. As we could tell at once, the need to use the table to roll a cigarette was just a ruse to enable him to talk to us.

Many years ago—I was still a teacher then—a motorist slowly passing our old country house saw me on an overcast day looking disconsolately at a lawn that once again needed cutting. The only other stranger I’ve encountered who wanted to talk at length about his life, he stopped his car to ask me, in a voice as soft as that of the Key West stranger, if I thought something might be wrong with him, because he wanted

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to cry, and couldn’t. The reason for his low speed was his concern that he might hurt a child or a dog if his eyes were to become blurred up with tears. He earned his living as a roofer on a construction crew, but on this day had left the job early because he couldn’t bear any longer the jokes that others on the crew subjected him to. He guessed he was different from the others—he never used swear words, for example, and sometimes was clumsy. In fact, he had suffered ridicule because of his differences ever since grade school. Desiring to be liked, he always shared what he had—an apple or sandwich, for example—with others, but that only intensified the ridicule. And yes, he had always wanted to let others know how he was feeling, for how can people develop friendships without expressing their feelings? He’d thought that crying might get him over the emptiness he felt. Did I think it was a good thing or a bad thing that he found himself unable to cry?

When I told him I didn’t think crying was a bad thing, he said he had stopped to talk to me because I was obviously depressed myself, and yet I wasn’t crying. Empathy is said to be a generous response to one person by another; and yet empathy is really a mirror: the projection upon the other of what we believe is true of ourselves. If he had been full of self-pity instead of wonder, I wouldn’t have felt empathy for him. But I, too, wished to be liked by others; his questioning had made me realize that my depression had less to do with how fast grass grows in a rainy season than it did with a hostile student to whom I’d given a low grade—she had phoned me at my Cornell office to tell me I was the lousiest lecturer she’d ever known, for I’d never told her what she should put into papers or tests in order to get an A. It’s true enough that I’d never wanted students to give me back my own views, wishing they’d listen to, and perhaps question, my responses to a poem or a novel rather than copying them down; she wasn’t the first student to make that complaint. The young roofer and I talked for a long time, for his unusual frankness about himself enabled me to be more open about my own feelings than I usually am. Since he drove away at a less cautious speed than before, I assumed I had helped him get over his need for tears; and I discovered that my own depression was gone. In the following months, he passed my house several times while I was outside. I wished he would stop for a chat, but he never did—he simply waved and smiled, and gave a brief toot with his horn.

I don’t remember if the stranger who wanted to talk about himself to Jean and me in Key West ever rolled a cigarette; if he did, he never smoked it. What he wanted us to know was that he had been homeless for more than 30 years, and that the warmest place in winter for homeless people in Key West was near the picnic table where we were sitting. The wall behind it is five or six feet high, and above it are shaded paths winding among the trees, shrubs, flowers, pools, and fountains maintained by the
Key West Garden Club. Earlier in our vacation, we had paid a small sum to look at the paintings and flower arrangements inside the restored Martello structure before strolling along those pleasant paths. It hadn’t occurred to us then to think that the sturdy chainlink fence on top of the wall that protected visitors to the garden also served to keep the homeless from climbing up the stones to seek shelter by breaking into the structure or the garden club’s wooden sheds during the night. The homeless man felt no more self-pity than had the man unable to cry; if anything, he seemed proud of his resilience and lack of dependence upon charity. But even in semitropical Key West, winter nights can occasionally be chilly, and torrential rains can arrive in nearly all seasons. I asked him if sometimes he had needed to find shelter from a storm. He’d been offered a bed in the past, he told us, but usually rejected it—he had long ago learned that “when others offered him something, they wanted something in return.” Maybe it was an oblique explanation of what “they” wanted that made him say that he was different from all the other homeless people in Key West: unlike them, he wasn’t gay or alcoholic (he wouldn’t drink even a beer), nor did he take drugs, except the ones prescribed by his doctor. “I’m schizophrenic,” he said, with the frankness of—but more cheerfully than—the earlier stranger. His prescription drugs enabled him to work at odd jobs, providing all the money he needed for food and other necessities.

Had his differences from others made him so lonely that he had to seek out a couple like us to listen to him speak of his proud independence as a man without a home? Was it simply the prescription drugs that enabled his acceptance of a life intolerable to those of us with families, monthly incomes and friendships? He may not have given us much of a chance to speak, but he seemed to be alert to what either Jean or I might
be thinking, for at that moment he pointed to a figure sitting on a stone breakwater several hundred feet away, a bicycle next to her. “That’s my girlfriend,” he said. “She’s guarding my bike for me.”

As it soon became apparent, the girlfriend—the sun glittering on the water made it difficult to see her as much more than a stout shadow—was crucial to what he wanted to tell us, but for the moment it was the bicycle that held his attention. “That bike,” he said, “cost me 500 dollars, and it’s the best bicycle you can buy.” He emphasized that point, as if we hadn’t understood its value: “Nobody in the world has a better bike than mine.” He paused only long enough for us to reflect on those words before saying, “It pays to be crazy during hurricane season.”

The last sentence was the beginning of his explanation of how he’d managed to be owner of a bicycle like that. When a hurricane was imminent, the local authorities transported people like him by bus to the safety of refuge centers—sometimes as far away as Miami—where they were housed and fed until danger was past. Like anybody not suicidal, he was more than willing to compromise his independence on those occasions. He didn’t say whether or not the authorities typically made it a one-way trip, only that after a storm in the past hurricane season he had hitched his way back—and had the good luck to be picked up by a farmer who needed emergency help in his fields. For a week’s labor, the farmer had paid him exactly the amount he needed to buy the kind of bicycle he had always wanted. That marvelous bicycle, which permitted him to get quickly from one odd job to another, gave him, I imagined, the autonomy and pride that a new automobile can give those with a family and a home in a suburban development—or (like me) an old farmhouse at a rural crossroads.

But why should a stranger so happy with his condition feel the need to talk to someone else about his contentment? Decades earlier, that unhappy roofer had stopped his car to unburden himself to me because he had seen that I might be unhappy enough to understand his story; had this one chosen Jean and me because we were an elderly couple whose demeanor made him think we would understand him? It is true that we feel fortunate in having had each other’s companionship and trust for 60 years. The knowledge that good luck is bound to run out for the most fortunate of gamblers—will it happen tomorrow, next month, or next year?—imparts, consciously or unconsciously, a poignancy to the idle pleasures that a vacation provides us. I guess anybody who had seen us sitting before that picnic table and talking with each other, as always, about what is past, or passing, but never about what is to come, would have considered us a happy couple.

Soon after the homeless man had joined us, I sensed his proprietary interest in the picnic table we had chosen; in retrospect, I can see that we were his guests in surroundings so familiar to him that they were a kind of dwelling open to the sky. The table would have been the dining room where he—maybe with the homeless woman
who was his girlfriend—ate the food his odd jobs paid for; their bedroom, if she spent the night with him, would have been beneath the curving walls of the old fortification on whatever sandy spot offered the most protection from rain or wind. For a bathroom, they had the convenience of the Higgs Beach comfort station, as well as the open-air showers for bathers.

Only toward the end of the encounter did he speak in any detail about his girlfriend. She was a very smart woman whose curiosity had led her to far more places and experiences than he would ever know. Once (where or how many years ago he didn’t say) she had been introduced to Mick Jagger after one of his concerts, and was able to talk for some time with him. Before leaving, he told her, “I’ll never forget you.” I’ll never forget you—that a celebrity like Mick Jagger would hold her forever in memory should let us know what a special person she was! And now that she was living more or less permanently in Key West, his girlfriend was thinking of contacting Mick to see if he would give a concert on the island the next time he went on tour.

“What you dream about can come true,” he said, with an even greater earnestness than he had given to the attributes of his bicycle. “If there’s anything I believe about my country, and especially about Key West, it’s that anything’s possible.” Maybe to let that truth linger in our minds, he looked (as did we) toward the seemingly limitless sea, and to the variegated shapes above it—the sunlit towers and castles, the monkeys, elephants, and dragons of cumulus clouds outlined against the blue of the afternoon sky. And then, just as he was about to walk back to the woman still guarding his bicycle, he gave us the offering he must have had in mind ever since we had first demonstrated our interest in his life: “If Mick Jagger comes to Key West, I want to give both of you complimentary tickets.”

Though he had no way to contact us about those tickets—the three of us had not even exchanged our names—his was a sincere promise, offered by one who lived in a land where anything imaginable could be realized, and we accepted it as such, and as an unexpected gift Jean and I were grateful to receive.

Six months have elapsed since Jean and I met the homeless man. I wouldn’t have quoted his words if I hadn’t believed them an accurate transcription of phrases held in my memory from the moment he spoke them. I’m aware, though, that personal memory carries a subjective reality: in listening to him, I was influenced by more memories than I can ever put down, including those of the earlier stranger. Though 30 years have elapsed since my meeting with the roofer, my memory of it doesn’t need to be bolstered by the description I gave it in an autobiographical story I wrote a day or so later. He had leaned across the passenger seat of his little car to speak to me, his left hand grasping the bottom frame of the opened window, and I can still see as clearly
as ever his empurpled thumb, blood congealing at the edges of the nail.

In mentioning that encounter, I failed to include the event that caused the roofer to leave his job, maybe because my mind rebels against thinking of all the meanness we can inflict on others. For reasons so small they seem but a whim, young children sometimes exclude another—the chosen pariah—from their play. And what applies to our social groupings as children and adults also applies to nations and religions. “We must exclude someone from our gathering, or we shall be left with nothing” is the explanation the narrator gives us, in E. M. Forster’s *A Passage to India*, of the quandary of a young English missionary so advanced in his thinking he would admit many, but sadly not all, of God’s lesser creatures into his concept of Heaven.

The bruised thumb, though, came from the roofer’s own clumsiness—he’d hit it with his hammer while trying to drive a shingle nail through metal flashing. His fellow workers had laughed at his “golly darn,” and the single one who had seemed to be coming to his assistance had instead kicked his hammer off the roof. As he was wordlessly climbing down to retrieve it, one or more of the crew so jiggled the ladder that he fell off. What he remembered was lying on the ground, while those on the roof were joined in laughter. Is there anybody who has not, at least in childhood, awakened in terror from nightmares similar to that actual occurrence? I mean, the sense of being alone, our lives imperiled by vindictive others, maybe those red devils that our imaginations have conjured up from some forgotten Sunday school lesson? In the delirium that followed an operation on my viscera at a World War II field hospital in Germany, I saw Hitler as a devil, his pitchfork plunging again and again into my guts. Occasionally, I have dreams in which I’m trying to escape an unknown peril but my legs won’t move. The large dog that sleeps near the bed I share with Jean is—like nearly all the dogs that animal shelters don’t immediately place—of mixed breed. Though young and strong, he sometimes whimpers and cries from whatever fears that dogs dream about; in his case, his legs thrash about—it’s his body that can’t move. I have enough in common with that dog to put him in my Heaven. It’s possible that hallucinatory fears are lurking in our unconscious minds every moment of our lives. If so, are they a consequence of genetic memories we carry from our primitive ancestors who were endangered not only by the claws and teeth of the very animals they killed for clothing and nourishment, but also by the aggressions of people in other tribes? Whatever the cause, those fears could explain the security that exclusionary groups provide us, even in times that carry no stress.

Jean and I came to maturity during the long years of the Great Depression, a decade of deprivation for nearly all American families. Unable to support his family, my father, then a traveling salesman, never returned from one of his trips. We lived in a
new but already bankrupt development at the edge of Little Rock, Arkansas, miles from the nearest store. He must have known in advance he was deserting his wife and two sons, for he had taken the train instead of driving away in his old Packard, realizing we would need it in the days immediately ahead and perhaps for the escape that his own had made mandatory. I suppose my father didn’t forget his responsibility for us, since he occasionally sent small sums of money, though never enough for groceries or mortgage payments. The federal government under President Roosevelt had already begun to establish some of those social programs that currently are under attack or being dismantled, but no security net then existed. In the late afternoon of the day that my mother sold all the furniture and most of our other possessions, the three of us, accompanied by my large German shepherd—as a puppy, he’d been my birthday gift from my father—began our long journey northward, my brother old enough to drive the Packard, our hoped-for destination the home in a Cleveland suburb where my mother’s sister lived with her family. In the early morning hours of the third day of traveling, my mother called her sister from a roadside phone booth about a hundred miles from Cleveland: fearing that otherwise shelter might be denied us, she had waited until then to tell her we were coming. I was just entering adolescence, that self-conscious stage of development in which we are painfully aware of our smallest difference from others, and so remember only my private sense of humiliation and shame.

But it turned out that the three of us didn’t differ much from anybody else in those days. The stock-market collapse brought ruin to more than brokers and their clients; the ensuing closure of banks wiped out everybody’s savings. My uncle and aunt took us in, even though my uncle, having lost his position, was trying to sell new cars from a storefront so small that it had room for only one car. My mother joined her sister, who did laundry and ironing for others; my brother made hamburgers at a franchise stand in a downtown Cleveland dime store; and, each day after school, I delivered afternoon newspapers. Hope, though often illusory, sustained nearly all Americans in those days. When my brother was admitted to General Motors Institute in Flint, Michigan, a work-study engineering college that offered him free tuition and living expenses, my mother and I accompanied him, for he thought his monthly stipend—so much more generous than his hamburger stand salary—could support the three of us. Within months, we realized how false that dream had been. My mother left, to be a live-in maid in Cleveland; my uncle and aunt so welcomed me back that they became my surrogate parents, their two daughters my sisters.

But it would be sentimental to say that mutual insecurity and hardship made everybody as hospitable as that. When my brother worked at the hamburger stand, his employer displayed no generosity at all. In the two weeks before Christmas, my brother worked 10 or 12 hours six days of the week with no increase in pay, and he was docked a day’s wages by the closure of the dime store on Christmas itself.
Such ruthless policies—I could provide other examples—may have been instituted in boardrooms of corporations struggling to turn a profit, but families and neighborhood businesses were bonded together in a way that later generations might not be able to comprehend. Like others my age, I wore clothes that came from parents whose children had outgrown them. Often today as my wife and I wait in the checkout line of a supermarket, I remember Paul Marwitz, the neighborhood grocer whom my aunt depended upon for the food whose cost he added to an already sizable bill. In a supermarket owned by a chain, what would a checkout clerk do, if we had neither credit card nor cash? On one occasion more than 65 years ago, Paul Marwitz sent a desperate message to his customers, telling those who owed him a hundred dollars or more that if they didn’t pay something on their overdue accounts, his own creditors would force him out of business. That his store managed to survive I learned years later, when I returned to the neighborhood to thank him. The mutual dependence of grocer and customer helped both to weather a depression that conclusively ended only through the revitalization of American industry by the war that already had engulfed much of Europe.

That individually we are alone, and that our aloneness bonds us with others, may be the essential human condition, but my awareness of it chiefly has occurred in periods of national insecurity or fear—though such an awareness is undoubtedly abetted by the increasing sense that comes with age of the precious fragility not only of life, but of those institutions apparently built to last for centuries, if not forever: the ones erected by our Founding Fathers to support and defend us from others as well as from our own often predatory nature. For a brief period that began on 9/11, all Americans, joined by peoples in Europe and elsewhere, responded in a way that sharply reveals the extent of our shared existential condition.

Before the shock of the catastrophic terrorist acts in 2001, I had lived through both the Depression and the Cold War years. Few people today grew up in the Depression, but their middle-aged children must carry, however unconsciously, the memory of being instructed by their grade-school teachers to crouch beneath their desks, sheltering their heads as best they could—learning to protect themselves from a possible nuclear attack. The early 1960s were the years of the Cold War in which humanity seemed most likely to destroy itself. During the Berlin Crisis of 1961, President Kennedy, in a nationally televised broadcast on civil defense, advised Americans to build back-yard fallout shelters, stocking them with food and water and other necessities, in case of a Russian nuclear strike. Was it an example of Kennedy gamesmanship, as one magazine at the time suggested, intended to convince Russia that if it continued its aggressions we could use our nuclear weapons against it, while surviving a retralia-
tory attack, or was it simply an attempt to convince our citizens that if they took the proper precautions they would be much safer? Whatever his motive, the strategy created nothing but panic in America: shelters were hastily built throughout the country, and at first—according to well-publicized accounts—a few of their builders said that for the sake of their families they would shoot any who intruded on their underground sanctuaries.

Though such a primitive reaction may lie deep in the human psyche, the effect of these Cold War years produced a different response in most others. I was the father of three young sons. The threat of global nuclear annihilation made me aware of how deeply I loved my wife and children and of my connection to all other humans as well as to the endangered natural world from which all of us had come. Yet I was alone, and my family was alone; and I wanted to convey to others, through the words I wrote, my feelings toward even the most commonplace events of my past, for they had unexpectedly become of immeasurable value, a judgment I still retain. More so than during the Depression, and certainly unlike today, other individuals also wanted to share their feelings about life in general—not about their political animosities—with anybody who could hear them. I would listen to one or more of the talk shows on the radio late at night, sometimes from stations so distant that the voices would fade away. The callers simply wanted to express what at that moment mattered the most to them. Those radio programs have long since been replaced by the late-night television entertainers who interview celebrities. In the early 1960s, Americans became far more introspective than they were before or after.

HAVE I DIGRESSED from the stories I heard from two strangers, one long ago and the other more recent? I don’t think so, though digressions are acceptable in any story told by one my age. (I recently celebrated my 84th birthday with a dinner at a classy French restaurant in the nearby Finger Lakes wine district; the celebrant of such an occasion deserves to get a little tipsy, and a son was the designated driver who brought us safely home that night.) All along, this essay has been autobiographical, an exploration, through memory, of the reasons I respond to others—and to life—as I do. But why should I have come away with a sense of well-being from the stories these strangers needed to tell? Was it that both men made me aware of my good fortune in life? I wondered about that question after each of them had left, but such a comparison would never have made me happy. A more likely explanation is not quite so self-indulgent. While listening to these outcasts speak of their difference from others, I was hearing much that is essential to us all—the same kind of story I’ve wanted to tell others for many years, and still need to tell today.
Gazing Into the Abyss

THE SUDDEN APPEARANCE OF LOVE AND THE GALVANIZING PROSPECT OF DEATH LEAD A YOUNG POET BACK TO POETRY AND A “HOPE TOWARD GOD”

CHRISTIAN WIMAN

Though I was raised in a very religious household, until about a year ago I hadn’t been to church in any serious way in more than 20 years. It would be inaccurate to say that I have been indifferent to God in all that time. If I look back on the things I have written in the past two decades, it’s clear to me not only how thoroughly the forms and language of Christianity have shaped my imagination, but also how deep and persistent my existential anxiety has been. I don’t know whether this is all attributable to the century into which I was born, some genetic glitch, or a late reverberation of the Fall of Man. What I do know is that I have not been at ease in this world.

Poetry, for me, has always been bound up with this unease, fueled by contingency toward forms that will transcend it, as involved with silence as it is with sound. I don’t have much sympathy for the Arnoldian notion of poetry replacing religion. It seems not simply quaint but dangerous to make that assumption, even implicitly, perhaps especially implicitly. I do think, though, that poetry is how religious feeling has survived in me. Partly this is because I have at times experienced in the writing of a poem some access to a power that feels greater than I am, and it seems reductive, even somehow a deep betrayal, to attribute that power merely to the unconscious or to the dynamism of language itself. But also, if I look back on the poems I’ve written in the past two decades, it almost seems as if the one constant is God. Or, rather, His absence.

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There is a passage in the writings of Simone Weil that has long been important to me. In the passage, Weil describes two prisoners who are in solitary confinement next to each other. Between them is a stone wall. Over a period of time—and I think we have to imagine it as a very long time—they find a way to communicate using taps and scratches. The wall is what separates them, but it is also the only means they have of communicating. “It is the same with us and God,” she says. “Every separation is a link.”

It’s probably obvious why this metaphor would appeal to me. If you never quite feel at home in your life, if being conscious means primarily being conscious of your own separation from the world and from divinity (and perhaps any sentient person after modernism has to feel these things) then any idea or image that can translate that depletion into energy, those absences into presences, is going to be powerful. And then there are those taps and scratches: what are they but language, and if language is the way we communicate with the divine, well, what kind of language is more refined and transcendent than poetry? You could almost embrace this vision of life—if, that is, there were any actual life to embrace: Weil’s image for the human condition is a person in solitary confinement. There is real hope in the image, but still, in human terms, it is a bare and lonely hope.

It has taken three events, each shattering in its way, for me to recognize both the full beauty, and the final insufficiency, of Weil’s image. The events are radically different, but so closely linked in time, and so inextricable from one another in their consequences, that there is an uncanny feeling of unity to them. There is definitely some wisdom in learning to see our moments of necessity and glory and tragedy not as disparate experiences but as facets of the single experience that is a life. The pity, at least for some of us, is that we cannot truly have this knowledge of life, can only feel it as some sort of abstract “wisdom,” until we come very close to death.

First, necessity: four years ago, after making poetry the central purpose of my life for almost two decades, I stopped writing. Partly this was a conscious decision. I told myself that I had exhausted one way of writing, and I do think there was truth in that. The deeper truth, though, is that I myself was exhausted. To believe that being conscious means primarily being conscious of loss, to find life authentic only in the apprehension of death, is to pitch your tent at the edge of an abyss, “and when you gaze long into the abyss,” Nietzsche says, “the abyss also gazes into you.” I blinked.

On another level, though, the decision to stop writing wasn’t mine. Whatever connection I had long experienced between word and world, whatever charge in the former I had relied on to let me feel the latter, went dead. Did I give up poetry, or was it taken from me? I’m not sure, and in any event the effect was the same: I stumbled through the months, even thrived in some ways. Indeed—and there is something almost diabolical about this common phenomenon—it sometimes seemed like my career in poetry
began to flourish just as poetry died in me. I finally found a reliable publisher for my work (the work I’d written earlier, I mean), moved into a good teaching job, and then quickly left that for the editorship of Poetry. But there wasn’t a scrap of excitement in any of this for me. It felt like I was watching a movie of my life rather than living it, an old silent movie, no color, no sound, no one in the audience but me.

Then I fell in love. I say it suddenly, and there was certainly an element of radical intrusion and transformation to it, but the sense I have is of color slowly aching into things, the world coming brightly, abradingly alive. I remember tiny Albert’s Café on Elm Street in Chicago where we first met, a pastry case like a Pollock in the corner of my eye, sunlight suddenly more itself on an empty plate, a piece of silver. I think of walking together along Lake Michigan a couple of months later talking about a particular poem of Dickinson’s (“A loss of something ever felt I”), clouds finding and failing to keep one form after another, the lake booming its blue into everything; of lying in bed in my highrise apartment downtown watching the little blazes in the distance that were the planes at Midway, so numerous and endless that all those safe departures and homecomings seemed a kind of secular miracle. We usually think of falling in love as being possessed by another person, and like anyone else I was completely consumed and did some daffy things. But it also felt, for the first time in my life, like I was being fully possessed by being itself. “Joy is the overflowing consciousness of reality,” Weil writes, and that’s what I had, a joy that was at once so overflowing that it enlarged existence, and yet so rooted in actual things that, again for the first time, that’s what I began to feel: rootedness.

I don’t mean to suggest that all my old anxieties were gone. There were still no poems, and this ate at me constantly. There was still no God, and the closer I came to reality, the more I longed for divinity—or, more accurately perhaps, the more divinity seemed so obviously a part of reality. I wasn’t alone in this: we began to say a kind of prayer before our evening meals—jokingly at first, awkwardly, but then with intensifying seriousness and deliberation, trying to name each thing that we were thankful for, and in so doing, praise the thing we could not name. On most Sundays we would even briefly entertain—again, half-jokingly—the idea of going to church. The very morning after we got engaged, in fact, we paused for a long time outside a church on Michigan Avenue. The service was just about to start, organ music pouring out of the wide open doors into the late May sun, and we stood there holding each other and debating whether or not to walk inside. In the end it was I who resisted.

I wish I could slow down at this point, could linger a bit in those months after our marriage. I wish I could feel again that blissful sense of immediacy and expansiveness at once, when every moment implied another, and the future suddenly seemed to offer
some counterbalance to the solitary fever I had lived in for so long. I think most writers live at some strange adjacency to experience, that they feel life most intensely in their recreation of it. For once, for me, this wasn’t the case. I could not possibly have been paying closer attention to those days. Which is why I was caught so off-guard.

I got the news that I was sick on the afternoon of my 39th birthday. It took a bit of time, travel, and a series of wretched tests to get the specific diagnosis, but by then the main blow had been delivered, and that main blow is what matters. I have an incurable cancer in my blood. The disease is as rare as it is mysterious, killing some people quickly and sparing others for decades, afflicting some with all manner of miseries and disabilities and leaving others relatively healthy until the end. Of all the doctors I have seen, not one has been willing to venture even a vague prognosis.

Conventional wisdom says that tragedy will cause either extreme closeness or estrangement in a couple. We’d been married less than a year when we got the news of the cancer. It stands to reason we should have been especially vulnerable to such a blow, and in some ways love did make things much worse. If I had gotten the diagnosis some years earlier—and it seems weirdly providential that I didn’t, since I had symptoms and went to several doctors about them—I’m not sure I would have reacted very strongly. It would have seemed a fatalistic confirmation of everything I had always thought about existence, and my response, I think, would have been equally fatalistic. It would have been the bearable oblivion of despair, not the unbearable, and therefore galvanizing, pain of particular grief. In those early days after the diagnosis, when we mostly just sat on the couch and cried, I alone was dying, but we were mourning very much together. And what we were mourning was not my death, exactly, but the death of the life we had imagined with each other.

Then one morning we found ourselves going to church. Found ourselves. That’s exactly what it felt like, in both senses of the phrase, as if some impulse in each of us had finally been catalyzed into action, so that we were casting aside the Sunday paper and moving toward the door with barely a word between us; and as if, once inside the church, we were discovering exactly where and who we were meant to be. That first service was excruciating, in that it seemed to tear all wounds wide open, and it was profoundly comforting, in that it seemed to offer the only possible balm. What I remember of that Sunday, though, and of the Sundays that immediately followed, is less the services themselves than the walks we took afterwards, and less the specifics of the conversations we had about God, always about God, than the moments of silent, and what felt like sacred, attentiveness those conversations led to: an iron sky and the lake so calm it seemed thickened; the El blasting past with its rain of sparks and brief, lost faces; the broad leaves and white blooms of a catalpa on our street, Grace Street, and under the tree a seethe of something that was just barely still a bird, quick with life beyond its own.
I was brought up with the poisonous notion that you had to renounce love of the earth in order to receive the love of God. My experience has been just the opposite: a love of the earth and existence so overflowing that it implied, or included, or even absolutely demanded, God. Love did not deliver me from the earth, but into it. And by some miracle I do not find that this experience is crushed or even lessened by the knowledge that, in all likelihood, I will be leaving the earth sooner than I had thought. Quite the contrary, I find life thriving in me, and not in an aestheticizing Death-is-the-mother-of-beauty sort of way either, for what extreme grief has given me is the very thing it seemed at first to obliterate: a sense of life beyond the moment, a sense of hope. This is not simply hope for my own life, though I do have that. It is not a hope for heaven or any sort of explainable afterlife, unless by those things one means simply the ghost of wholeness that our inborn sense of brokenness creates and sustains, some ultimate love that our truest temporal ones goad us toward. This I do believe in, and by this I live, in what the apostle Paul called “hope toward God.”

“It is necessary to have had a revelation of reality through joy,” Weil writes, “in order to find reality through suffering.” This is certainly true to my own experience. I was not wrong all those years to believe that suffering is at the very center of our existence, and that there can be no untranquilized life that does not fully confront this fact. The mistake lay in thinking grief the means of confrontation, rather than love. To come to this realization is not to be suddenly “at ease in the world.” I don’t really think it’s possible for humans to be at the same time conscious and comfortable. Though we may be moved by nature to thoughts of grace, though art can tease our minds toward eternity and love’s abundance make us dream a love that does not end, these intuitions come only through the earth, and the earth we know only in passing, and only by passing. I would qualify Weil’s statement somewhat, then, by saying that reality, be it of this world or another, is not something one finds and then retains for good. It must be newly discovered daily, and newly lost.

So now I bow my head and try to pray in the mornings, not because I don’t doubt the reality of what I have experienced, but because I do, and with an intensity that, because to once feel the presence of God is to feel His absence all the more acutely, is actually more anguishing and difficult than any “existential anxiety” I have ever known. I go to church on Sundays, not to dispel this doubt but to expend its energy, because faith is not a state of mind but an action in the world, a movement toward the world. How charged this one hour of the week is for me, and how I cherish it, though not one whit more than the hours I have with my wife, with friends, or in solitude, trying to learn how to inhabit time so completely that there might be no distinction between life and belief, attention and devotion. And out of all these efforts at faith and love, out of my own inevitable failures at both, I have begun to write poems again. But the language I have now to call on God is not only language, and the wall on which I make my taps
and scratches is no longer a cell but this whole prodigal and all too perishable world in which I find myself, very much alive, and not at all alone. As I approach the first anniversary of my diagnosis, as I approach whatever pain is ahead of me, I am trying to get as close to this wall as possible. And I am listening with all I am.
The Torture Colony

IN A REMOTE PART OF CHILE, AN EVIL GERMAN EVANGELIST BUILT A UTOPIA WHOSE MEMBERS HELPED THE PINOCHET REGIME PERFORM ITS FOULEST DEEDS

BRUCE FALCONER

Deep in the Andean foothills of Chile’s central valley lives a group of German expatriates, the members of a utopian experiment called Colonia Dignidad. They have resided there for decades, separate from the community around them, but widely known and admired, and respected for their cleanliness, their wealth, and their work ethic. Their land stretches across 70 square miles, rising gently from irrigated farmland to low, forested hills, against a backdrop of snowcapped mountains. Today Colonia Dignidad is partially integrated with the rest of Chile. For decades, however, its isolation was nearly complete. Its sole connection to the outside world was a long dirt road that wound through tree farms and fields of wheat, corn, and soybeans, passed through a guarded gate, and led to the center of the property, where the Germans lived in an orderly Bavarian-style village of flower gardens, water fountains, and cream-colored buildings with orange tile roofs. The village had modern apartment complexes, two schools, a chapel, several meetinghouses, and a bakery that produced fresh cakes, breads, and cheeses. There were numerous animal stables, two landing strips, at least one airplane, a hydroelectric power station, and mills and factories of various kinds, including a highly profitable gravel mill that supplied raw materials for numerous road-building projects throughout Chile. On the north side of the village

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was a hospital, where the Germans provided free care to thousands of patients in one of the country’s poorest areas.

All this was made possible by one man, a charismatic, Evangelical preacher named Paul Schaefer, who founded the community and who, until several years ago, remained very much in charge. Tall, lean, and of strong build, with thin gray hair and a glass eye, Schaefer lived most of his adult life in Chile but possessed only a rudimentary knowledge of Spanish; like his followers, he spoke primarily in German. Although the colonos of Colonia Dignidad dressed in traditional German peasant clothes—the men in wool pants and suspenders, the women in homemade dresses and headscarves—Schaefer wore newer, more modern clothes that denoted his stature. His manner was serious; he seldom smiled. The effect only deepened the sense of mystery that surrounded him.

Few outsiders ever gained access to the Colonia while its reclusive leader remained in power. An old Chilean newsreel, however, filmed at Schaefer’s invitation in 1981, provides a rare picture of life inside the community, a utopia in full and happy bloom. The footage shows a bucolic paradise of sunshine and verdant fields set among clean, fast-flowing rivers and snowy peaks. Its German inhabitants improve the land and work their trades. A carpenter assembles a new chair for the Colonia’s school. A woman in a white apron bakes German-style torts and pastries in the kitchen. Teenaged boys clear a new field for planting. Children laugh and splash in a lake. Schaefer himself, wearing a white suit and brown aviator sunglasses, takes the camera crew on a tour. Standing next to the Colonia’s flour mill, he extols the quality of German machinery. “We bought this mill in Europe,” he says in broken Spanish. “It is 60 years old, but we have not had
to do any repairs on it.” Even today, this remains one of the only known recordings of his voice. It is crisp and baritone. Back outside, Schaefer leads the television crew to a petting zoo, where the reporter feeds chunks of bread to baby deer and plays with the colonos’ collection of pet owls. The newsreel concludes with a performance by a 15-piece chamber orchestra composed of young, female colonos in flowing white skirts and colorful blouses. The music is beautiful and expertly played.

These images were a reflection of Colonia Dignidad as Schaefer wanted it to be seen. Today, a quarter century later, with Schaefer gone and his utopia open to visitors for the first time, it looks much the same. On a recent trip to Chile, I made the four-hour drive south from Santiago. The village remains an oasis of German tidiness, with blooming flower gardens and perfectly tended copses of willows and pines. As I walked through it, there were very few people on the streets, and those I encountered smiled politely, then quickly retreated indoors. They did not invite conversation. I was reminded of what a Chilean friend, a journalist, had told me as I prepared for my visit. “You will get the uneasy feeling of crossing into some sort of twilight zone,” he had said. “You will see the way they dress, their haircuts. It’s like going back in time to Germany in the 1940s. Even though it is easier to talk to the colonos than it was a few years ago, things are still a long way from being ‘normal.’ Most of them are still quite afraid of speaking openly.”

The truth, so unlikely in this setting, is that Colonia Dignidad was founded on fear, and it is fear that still binds it together. Investigations by Amnesty International and the governments of Chile, Germany, and France, as well as the testimony of former colonos who, over the years, managed to escape the colony, have revealed evidence of terrible crimes: child molestation, forced labor, weapons trafficking, money laundering, kidnapping, torture, and murder. Orchestrated by Paul Schaefer and his inner circle of trusted lieutenants, much of the abuse was initially directed inward as a means of conditioning the colonos to obey Schaefer’s commands. Later, after General Augusto Pinochet’s military junta seized power in Chile, the violence spilled onto the national stage. Schaefer, through an informal alliance with the Pinochet regime, allowed Colonia Dignidad to serve as a torture and execution center for the disposal of enemies of the state. The investigations continue. In the months preceding my visit, police found two large caches of military-grade weapons buried inside the compound. Parts of cars had also been unearthed, their vehicle identification numbers traced back to missing political dissidents. Even as I stood in Schaefer’s house drinking apple juice, elsewhere on the property a police forensics unit was excavating a mass grave thought to contain the decomposed remains of dozens of political prisoners.

Colonia Dignidad perpetuated itself through a complex system of social controls. The pilgrims thought of themselves as an extended family based not on blood, but
on absolute devotion to Schaefer. They called him “The Permanent Uncle.” Schaefer himself had selected the title and drilled into his disciples a definition of family he found in the Bible. “Who are my mother and father?” he liked to say. “Those that do the work of God.”

Schaefer offered his flock the possibility of a pure existence in the service of God. All that was required was the regular confession of sin. His followers proved eager to unload their guilt, and confession—personally received by Schaefer in a practice he called “Seelesorge,” or “care of the soul”—became the vehicle for their salvation. The pilgrims confessed to him in a variety of forums. Schaefer would summon them in small groups each day to discuss their sins; public confessions were heard at lunch and dinner; and, on Sundays, the entire community assembled for prayer and confession in a meeting hall adjacent to Schaefer’s house.

Within that family, people were divided into groups by age and gender, each with its own flag and insignia. A boy born inside the Colonia would spend the first years of life not with his parents (who themselves lived apart from each other) but with nurses in the hospital as one of “The Babies.” At six, he would graduate to a group called “The Wedges” and from there, at 15, to “The Army of Salvation.” By his mid-30s he would become one of “The Elder Servants,” a status he would retain until, at 50, he was ready to join “The Comalos,” a term that has no obvious meaning. Girls progressed through a similar series of groups, including “The Dragons,” “The Field Mice,” “The Women’s Group,” and “The Grannies.”

Group members lived together, six or more to a room, in dormitory-type buildings. They had few individual possessions: pajamas, a set of work clothes, a set of leisure clothes, and a week’s supply of underwear. Everything else, including their shoes, was kept locked away in a closet. Each morning, the colonos would assemble with their respective groups in the cafeteria for a breakfast of milk and bread with jelly. Then it was off to work, the men to the plants, mills, and craft shops, the women to less skilled jobs in the henhouse, the stables, and the kitchen. Some women were also assigned as nurses in the hospital. Both men and women labored together in the fields.

The days were productive. Schaefer exhorted his colonos to righteous sacrifice, frequently reciting the words “Arbeit ist Gottesdienst” (“Work is divine service”). Large signs attached to garden trellises and decorative iron latticework inside the Colonia reinforced the message with pious declarations like “Supreme Judge, We Await Thee” and “We Withstand the Pain for the Sake of Dignity.” The pilgrims worked 12 hours a day, often longer, with a short break for lunch. It was taken as a point of pride that they expected no payment for their labor, but gave it willingly for the good of the community. Their success with industry and agriculture provided the financial means necessary to fuel their philanthropic mission.

Given such high ideals, it is hardly surprising that the centerpiece of Schaefer’s
utopia was a charity hospital. A gray, two-story building with unadorned windows and a tapered tile roof, the hospital stood on the far side of the village from the entry gate, with 65 beds, a maternity ward, and sterile operating rooms. Funded in part by state subsidies, its quality of care was excellent—the hospital was always busy and over the years provided full and recurring treatment for 26,000 people. The colonos sent buses or hired the few locals with cars to collect patients from their isolated villages. Sometimes entire families would arrive at once. The maternity ward was especially popular, as the hospital continued to supply local women with four and half pounds of powdered milk every month for the first six years of a child’s life. To this day, pictures of some of the thousands of Chilean babies born there remain posted on the wall of the reception area.

Paul Schaefer was born in 1921 in the quiet town of Troisdorf, near the Dutch border of Germany. He was a poor student, so clumsy that one day, while using a fork to untie a stubborn shoelace, he accidentally gouged out his right eye. It is said that Schaefer tried to join the elite Nazi SS corps a few years later, but was rejected because of this infirmity. Although he spent the war as a nurse in a German field hospital in occupied France, later in life he claimed that his glass eye was the result of a war wound.

After Germany’s surrender, Schaefer worked for a short time in the Evangelical Free Church as a youth leader, but he was fired when suspicion arose that he had somehow mistreated the boys in his care. He struck out on his own as a solo preacher, roaming the German countryside dressed in lederhosen, strumming an acoustic guitar, and encouraging all who would listen to confess their sins. Schaefer was a gifted speaker with a powerful charisma that, according to one colono who first met him at a prayer meeting in 1952, radiated from his body like beams of light. Within a few years, Schaefer had attracted several hundred followers and founded an orphanage outside of Troisdorf for war widows and their children, many of whom were impoverished refugees from East Prussia who had fled the Soviet occupation. Schaefer told them they were God’s chosen and that their destiny had been predetermined, offering them the sense of security they craved as they struggled to mend their lives. Those who joined the congregation agreed to pay 10 percent of their income to Schaefer and to confess daily.

Schaefer’s first experiment in community building did not end well. The mothers of two young boys living in the orphanage charged that he had molested their children, an accusation taken seriously enough for local judicial authorities to issue a warrant for his arrest. Schaefer fled to the Middle East, where, with two trusted lieutenants, he searched for a place to relocate his congregation. Soon after, he came into contact with the Chilean ambassador to Germany, who, unaware of Schaefer’s legal troubles, invited him to Chile.
A faded black-and-white photograph shows Schaefer stepping off the plane in Santiago in January 1961 in a long black winter coat and matching fedora, smiling faintly. Within a year, using funds collected from his congregation back in Germany, Schaefer bought an abandoned 4,400-acre ranch several hundred miles south of Santiago, which he and some 10 original settlers from Germany began to rebuild. By the end of 1963, an initial group of approximately 230 Germans—the bulk of Schaefer’s congregation—had emigrated from Europe to the newly named Colonia Dignidad ("dignity colony"). Two more waves of German pilgrims followed, in 1966 and 1973, most belonging to the 15 families that formed the core of Schaefer’s following. Over the years, the community expanded further through the adoption of Chilean children from impoverished local families. These Chilean colonos learned to speak German and became full members of the community.

In Germany, Schaefer’s congregation had been a loose gathering of devotees who lived on their own in scattered towns and villages. In Chile, that distance was closed, and Schaefer rapidly consolidated control. First, there could be no secrets. Private conversations were forbidden. “If two are gathered,” he often said, “they are under the Devil. If three are gathered, they are under Jesus.” Second, everything had to be confessed: whether the sin was in thought or in deed, he had to be informed. Third, no one could leave the property without Schaefer’s permission. Any violation, or perceived violation, of these rules would be punished.

All of this begged the question: why would so many people have chosen to subordinate themselves to Schaefer’s will? How did he achieve such power over them? In Santiago in early 2006, I spoke with Dr. Neils Biedermann, a Chilean psychiatrist, who, in association with the German Embassy, had been making monthly trips to Colonia Dignidad to study the psychology of its inhabitants. He offered observations from his work. “Everything was done to further the religion,” he explained. “Like in any sect, the colonos had a spiritual leader in Paul Schaefer, to whom they formed a strong attachment. There was a complex network of emotional connections in the Colonia. It was not a concentration camp system in which prisoners tend to think of themselves as individuals. It was a community, and the children suffered most of all.” The pilgrims may have come to Chile for their religion, but once there they became prey to a brutal and relentless cult of personality. “The older colonos punished the younger ones under orders from Schaefer,” Biedermann continued. “They were also the ones who were supposed to educate them. This involved keeping them away from their families, keeping them active all day, and principally keeping them obedient and disciplined. They did whatever they needed to do, including psychopharmacology and electroshock.” Over time, physical coercion became less necessary as the social system became rooted in the psyche of the individual.

Schaefer reinforced his power through an elaborate system of mutual betrayal.
Members of the community were encouraged to confess not only to him, but to one another. A *colono* who heard the sinful confession could expect to be rewarded—typically with a reprieve of his own sins—if he informed Schaefer of the offense.

Every day at lunch and dinner, members of the community were expected to write the names of sinners on a blackboard near the entrance to the cafeteria. After everyone was seated, Schaefer would take his place at a small table facing the group, and, while his minions ate, he’d read through a microphone the names listed on the board. Each sinner was required to stand up and confess. To deny wrongdoing was a great offense, and the prudent among them became adept at inventing sins on the spot.

According to Schaefer’s teachings, women were temptresses whose sexuality, if uncontrolled, would drive men wild with desire and lead them to stray from God. Schaefer considered sexual intercourse a tool of the Devil. To protect men from corruption, he created in the Colonia an environment of minimal temptation. Women lived and worked separately from men. They wore ugly homemade dresses, so baggy that almost no trace of the female form remained visible. They rolled their long hair into tight, passion-proof buns, and the endless days spent toiling in the workshops or in the fields further depressed their frustrated libido.

But even then, men and women found ways of getting together. They still felt lust. Nature would not be denied so completely. When romantic relationships did develop, Schaefer decided their course. Sometimes he permitted couples to marry and, occasionally, to have children. More often he did not. When a man asked Schaefer for permission to marry, he entered into a game of sexual roulette. Schaefer might grant the request but then require that he be the one to select the bride. This seldom worked in the man’s favor, for the women Schaefer chose were almost always well beyond childbearing years. If, despite these elaborate precautions, a woman somehow managed to get pregnant, Schaefer would isolate her from the community until she gave birth. Afterwards she returned to work, while nurses in the hospital cared for her child. By Schaefer’s design, pregnancy was uncommon. To this day, no one knows why he discouraged couples from having children. What seems clear is that he did not care if the community endured after he was gone. Only about 60 children were born in the Colonia in the 30-odd years he spent at its helm; between 1975 and 1989, there were no births at all.

For Schaefer and his pilgrims, evil manifested itself most tangibly in the scourge of international communism. It should be remembered that they were Germans, many of whom had suffered terrible losses as the Russians swept through eastern Germany on their way to Berlin. Fear of a Soviet attack on Western Europe was, for many, the deciding factor in their choice to follow Schaefer to Chile. Their fearful worldview was heightened by their isolation: their only source of information about the outside world was faked television news spliced together from old footage, depicting a world...
overcome by war, famine, and death.

To assure the defense of his utopia, Schaefer organized a paramilitary unit of several dozen men, trained in military tactics and martial arts. On some Saturday nights, a shrill alarm would summon them to a meeting. As one former unit member later testified to German government investigators, once the troops were assembled, Schaefer would enter the room and say, without apparent irony, “Good evening, Comrades,” to which those present were required to respond, “Good evening, General.” If the reply came late or lacked sufficient enthusiasm, Schaefer grew upset. Each man was required by regulation to carry a sidearm. Schaefer checked the weapons carefully to make sure that they were loaded and had their safeties on. Any man who failed the inspection lost his right to carry a gun. With any urgent business related to Soviet world domination resolved, the men dispersed into the night, searching the darkness for communists.

The outer perimeter of Colonia Dignidad was marked by eight-foot fences topped with barbed wire, which armed groups of men patrolled day and night with German shepherd and doberman attack dogs. Guards in observation posts equipped with short-wave radios, telephones, binoculars, night vision equipment, and telephoto cameras scanned the landscape for intruders. These were, of course, imaginary. But if invaders were to succeed in getting through the perimeter, they would come upon a second tier of inner defenses: strands of copper wire hidden around the village, which, if stepped on, triggered a silent alarm. Doors and windows in most buildings were equipped with armored shades that could be drawn shut in the event of an invasion. Dormitories were outfitted with alarms and surveillance cameras, and the entire village sat atop an extensive network of tunnels and underground bunkers. When the alarm sounded, as it frequently did during practice drills, men belonging to the security force grabbed their rifles and waited on their doorsteps for instructions.

With no genuine external enemies to fight, Schaefer and his most trusted lieutenants turned their energies inward. The practice of confession provided them with plenty of people to punish. The guilty were starved, threatened with dogs, or beaten—sometimes by Schaefer himself, more often by others acting on his orders. The harshest treatment was reserved for those who, for one reason or another, Schaefer simply did not like. He called them “the rebels.” They could be identified by their clothing: the men wore red shirts and white trousers, the women potato sacks over their long dresses. The other colonos despised them, usually without knowing why.

One such rebel was a Chilean colono named Franz Baar, adopted by the Germans at 10. By the time he was a teenager, Schaefer singled him out as a troublemaker. As Baar now remembers it, a group of men approached him one day while he was working in the carpentry shop and accused him of stealing the keys to one of the dormitories. When Baar denied it, he was beaten unconscious with electrical cables—his skull broken—and loaded into an ambulance. He awoke some time later in the Colonia's
hospital, where he would remain as a prisoner for the next 31 years.

Baar was kept in an upstairs section of the hospital never seen by the local Chileans who sought treatment there. As he later described to me, his days began with a series of intravenous injections, after which the nurses brought him bread and a plate with 12 to 15 different pills. Once satisfied that he was properly medicated, nurses delivered his clothes and shoes, hidden from him to reduce the likelihood of escape. After he dressed, a security detail escorted him to his job at the carpentry shop. Baar worked on heavy machines in a cramped space. The injections and pills slowed his movements and made him clumsy. Today, scar tissue on his forearms maps the places where the electric saws bit into his flesh. Baar was forced to work late into the night, sometimes until 3 A.M. He was not permitted to eat with the rest of the community. Instead, his meals were delivered to him at the carpentry shop, where he devoured them in isolation.

A still worse punishment awaited in rooms nine and 14 of the hospital, where Baar and other colonos unfortunate enough to draw the full measure of Schaefer’s fury were subjected to shock treatments. A female physician worked the machines, her manner detached and clinical. Patients were strapped down and fitted with crowns attached by wires to a voltage machine. Baar told me how the doctor seemed to enjoy watching him suffer. “She kept asking me questions,” he said. “I heard what she was saying and wanted to respond, but I couldn’t. She was playing with the machine and asking, ‘What do you feel? Are you feeling something?’ She wanted to know what was happening to me as she adjusted the voltage.”

Escape was difficult, even for those not held in the hospital. A rebel named Wolfgang Mueller tried to escape on three separate occasions. Twice—once in 1962, and again in 1964—he fled to the home of a Chilean family in a nearby town, and twice members of the Colonia’s security force found him there and brought him back. Both times, Mueller was beaten and forcibly sedated. On his third and final escape attempt in 1966, he made it as far as Santiago, where he received police protection and sought refuge in a German Embassy safe house. On orders from Schaefer, 15 colonos stormed the house in an attempt to recapture him. After a fistfight with police, they fled. Soon after, Mueller left Chile and found safety in Germany, where, despite his repeated accusations against Schaefer, government officials took no action. Mueller remains there today and operates a small nonprofit organization to combat the abuse of children by religious sects.

At the opposite end of the social spectrum from the rebels was a group of boys Schaefer affectionately called his “sprinters.” If Schaefer wanted to speak with someone working in a remote corner of the property, he sent a sprinter off to summon him. Schaefer trained his sprinters to assist in even the most mundane of personal tasks, like helping him to put his shoes on or holding the phone to his ear as he spoke. No job was too small. For the boys lucky enough to be chosen, the position brought pride and power.
But this special status was also a source of trouble for them. It was an open secret that Schaefer was a pedophile, just as the authorities had accused him of being long before in Germany. He enjoyed taking sprinters along during his daily tour of the Colonia. Because zippers were inconvenient, their uniforms included loose-fitting athletic shorts with an elastic waistband. He allowed his favorite sprinters to stay overnight in his room in a child-size bed set up alongside his own, sometimes sleeping with two or more sprinters at once. His routine, it later emerged, included feeding them sedatives, washing them with a sponge, and sexual manipulation.

All challengers to Schaefer’s authority—real or imagined—were rooted out and destroyed. No one inspired greater love and admiration among the children of the Colonia than Santa Claus. It is said that in the days shortly before Christmas one year in the mid-1970s, Schaefer gathered the Colonia’s children, loaded them onto a bus, and drove them out to a nearby river, where, he told them, Santa was coming to visit. The boys and girls stood excitedly along the riverbank, while an older colono in a fake beard and a red and white suit floated towards them on a raft. Schaefer pulled a pistol from his belt and fired, seeming to wound Santa, who tumbled into the water, where he thrashed about before disappearing below the surface. It was a charade, but Schaefer turned to the children assembled before him and said that Santa was dead. From that day forward, Schaefer’s birthday was the only holiday celebrated inside Colonia Dignidad.

The Colonia was, in effect, a state within a state, and Schaefer aggressively expanded the reach of his territory. Its original 4,400 acres ultimately grew to some 32,000. The expansion was not always peaceful. In a particularly brutal case, Schaefer seized control over a small chapel and several acres of church lands that lay adjacent to the Colonia’s entrance. The nuns who lived there were determined to stay, but the colonos stole their animals, cut off their water supply, flooded their latrines, fired off guns, and shined bright lights into their windows at night. They beat young children on their way to catechism, surrounded the chapel in barbed wire, and circulated fake videos of the nuns participating in orgies with priests. Finally they set fire to the nuns’ house and watched while it burned to the ground. Schaefer then claimed the church’s land as his own.

He had a favorite saying: “Every man has his price.” And, in an impoverished country like Chile, that price was well within Schaefer’s means. He selected his friends for their strategic value and lavished the most important of them with gourmet cakes and cheeses, money, cars, and free vacations. He seldom failed to get what he wanted.

On September 11, 1973, the right-wing military junta of Augusto Pinochet seized power in Chile, toppling the socialist government of Salvador Allende in a bloody coup.
that left the former president dead of a self-inflicted gunshot wound to the head. In the chaotic days that followed, scattered groups of Allende's supporters fought isolated street battles against Pinochet's soldiers, but the resistance was short-lived. Within a week, the entire country was under military control. The new regime declared a state of emergency, suspended the constitution, disbanded congress, banned political parties, and imposed strict censorship on the press—all in the name of turning back Allende's socialist experiment and rescuing the country from international communism.

Despite his early success, Pinochet was convinced that underground networks of leftist plotters remained. In the months following the coup, at least 45,000 people were rounded up and hauled off to makeshift detention centers for interrogation. There are no reliable statistics for how many thousands were tortured, but, by year's end, more than 1,500 people had been killed. In June 1974, Pinochet created the National Intelligence Directorate (DINA)—a secret police force, separate from the rest of Chile's intelligence establishment and loyal only to him, designed to hunt down and eliminate his political enemies. DINA agents routinely kidnapped regime opponents and delivered them to secret torture and execution centers located throughout Chile—including Colonia Dignidad.

Germany and Chile enjoyed a long history of military cooperation, reaching back to the late 19th century, when Prussian officers from the renowned Kreigsakademie in Berlin oversaw the modernization of the Chilean army. A mutual respect developed and persisted through World War II, during which the young Lieutenant Pinochet, fresh out of military school, openly sympathized with the Nazis and became “enchanted by Rommel,” as he later admitted. Drawing as it did on this history, the connection between the colonos and the Pinochet regime was classically symbiotic. Paul Schaefer needed political allies and protection for his eccentric community; Pinochet's agents needed discreet services and a secure base of operations.

Colonia Dignidad, according to a former DINA agent assigned there in the mid-1970s, maintained powerful radio equipment, facilitating communication between DINA commanders in Chile and their agent saboteurs and assassins stationed abroad. In 2005, Michael Townley, an American expatriate and former DINA officer implicated in several high-profile assassinations and bombings, testified to a Chilean judge that the Colonia had also housed a secret laboratory, where government scientists developed chemical weapons. Schaefer's primary contribution to Pinochet's operations, however, came in the instruction of DINA agents in the science of torture. Soon after the coup, arrested political dissidents began to disappear into Colonia Dignidad.

One who survived is Luis Peebles, a 60-year-old psychiatrist at a public hospital in a working-class neighborhood of Santiago. In early 2006, we sat down together in an empty office in the hospital, where he described the week he spent as a political
prisoner in Colonia Dignidad in February 1975. Peebles had been the commander of a clandestine anti-Pinochet militia until his capture by government soldiers. Initially jailed at a naval base in the coastal city of Concepción, he remembers how, early one Sunday morning, several plainclothes agents arrived at the base, bound his hands and feet, blindfolded him, and stuffed wet cotton into his ears. They forced him into the back of a truck and drove for several hours. Along the way, Peebles tried to piece together his location. He felt the truck turn off the highway and slow onto a dirt road. There was the strong odor of cow manure. Peebles thought he heard the muffled sounds of birds and flowing water. When the truck finally stopped, he took a deep breath. The air was clean.

He was taken to an underground cellar that smelled of linoleum and wood polish, stripped to his underwear and fastened down with leather straps to an iron bed frame. His blindfold was replaced with a leather cap that came down over his eyes. It had a chinstrap that held his jaw firmly in place and earflaps equipped with metal wires. More wires were taped to his ankles, thighs, chest, throat, anus, and genitals, all hooked into a voltage machine. The first session lasted six hours. As Peebles was being shocked, his torturers sometimes beat him with a rubber cattle prod that emitted still more electric currents. They stabbed him with needles that caused his skin to itch. They put out their cigarettes on his body and applied a sticky substance to his eyes and mouth; sometimes, if he screamed, they shoved it down his throat.

His interrogator wanted to know the identities of regime opponents and the locations of weapons caches, but for long periods there were no questions at all. An older man, directing the others, spoke with a strange accent that Peebles first understood to be Brazilian or Portuguese, but later recognized as German. “He was teaching them how to do their job,” Peebles told me. “He was saying, ‘You have to do it slowly. You have to push here.’ Once or twice he punched me very hard below the belt. He realized that they weren’t doing anything to me down there, so he said, ‘You should also do it here,’ and he started beating me.” As he was being shocked, Peebles thrashed around violently. His muscles tensed and his struggling caused the bed frame to buckle almost in two. Sometimes his blinders slipped out of place, allowing him brief glimpses of his surroundings. There were egg cartons and potato sacks on the walls, presumably to absorb the sound of his screams. At one point, he caught a glimpse of the older man who was directing his torture. He had tan skin, sunken eyes, and thin lips. “He gave the impression of being a hard man,” Peebles remembered.

In the following days, as his torture continued, Peebles lost all sense of time. He fell in and out of consciousness. At times, he believed he was going mad. He thought he was going to die. When he asked for a blanket, his torturers doused him with warm water, quickly followed by cold water. When not being tortured, Peebles was kept in a cell about 20 paces down a corridor, blindfolded and strapped to a metal grate. He
received no food or water for what must have been several days. When he was finally fed, it was what his torturers called “pig food”—a dense mass served in a rusty can. The smell turned his stomach. He ate it anyway. At night, he tried to sleep, but his guards kept him awake. He heard the steady hum of an electric generator. Above the noise, he could hear footsteps upstairs. He came to believe that he was being held in a basement of some kind, maybe underneath a cafeteria or a restaurant.

Eventually the torture stopped. Peebles’ clothes were returned—laundered and neatly folded—and his captors drove him back to the naval base in Concepción. Several months later, he was released and he fled to Europe. Over the next few years, as rumors of Colonia Dignidad’s alliance with the Pinochet government emerged, he came to suspect that he had been tortured there. He told his story to the German chapter of Amnesty International, which, in 1977, used his testimony, together with that of other torture survivors, to produce a 60-page report called “Colonia Dignidad: A German Community in Chile—A Torture Camp for the dina.” Schaefer’s lawyers immediately filed libel charges in a German court, initiating a legal battle that would prevent distribution of the Amnesty report until late 1997. Meanwhile, Peebles settled in Brussels, where he continued to speak out on his own. In 1980, he was visited by a German reporter named Gero Gemballa, who was preparing a television documentary about the Colonia. He showed Peebles several reels of videotape he had obtained. They appeared to be home movies shot by the colonos themselves. The footage went on for hours, but one of the images, as soon as he saw it, focused Peebles’s attention. It was a fleeting shot of Schaefer, the “hard man” who had supervised his torture. Years later, after Pinochet left power, Peebles drew a map of the bunker where he had been tortured and gave it to a Chilean judge who was investigating Colonia Dignidad’s human rights abuses. The judge reported back that Peebles description closely matched a bunker uncovered inside the Colonia, even down to the paneling on the walls. Over the years, more survivors stepped forward, claiming that they too had been tortured in Colonia Dignidad. In 1991, having studied the allegations, Chile’s National Commission on Truth and Reconciliation concluded “that a certain number of people apprehended by the DINA were really taken to Colonia Dignidad, held prisoner there for some time, and that some of them were subjected to torture, and that besides DINA agents, some of the residents there were involved in these actions.”

Contract torturing was not the worst of Schaefer’s collusion with the Pinochet regime: executions, perhaps of entire groups of prisoners, were sometimes carried out. No bodies have ever been found, but some remorseful DINA agents have talked. One, testifying in a German court on behalf of Amnesty International, said that he visited the Colonia to deliver a prisoner to a man known as “the Professor,” one of Schaefer’s pseudonyms. While the agent sat down to a formal dinner, the prisoner was led away
by the Professor and several other Germans. After a while, the Professor returned, accompanied by a black German shepherd. “On entering,” the agent said, “he made a gesture using both arms, which, according to my way of thinking, meant the prisoner was dead.”

In truth, no one knows how many people were killed inside Colonia Dignidad. One former colono recently told Chilean government investigators that, on Schaefer’s orders, he once drove a busload of 35 political prisoners up into the Colonia’s wooded hills and left them in an isolated spot by the side of a dirt road. As he drove back down alone, he heard machine gun fire echoing through the forest. No bodies were ever recovered. According to at least one former high-ranking colono, the bodies of executed prisoners were exhumed in 1978, burned to ash, and dumped in the river. Others claim that the dead were buried in individual graves scattered about the hills and valleys. All that seems certain is that many of the prisoners who went into Colonia Dignidad were never seen again.

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Over the years, there have been numerous attempts to investigate Colonia Dignidad, most compromised from the start by Schaefer’s network of protectors within the Chilean political and judicial establishment. In 1968, the Chilean government sent a parliamentary delegation to investigate Wolfgang Mueller’s accusation that he had been tortured there. Schaefer entertained the politicians with children’s choirs and gourmet food, and the delegation ultimately determined, after minimal deliberation, that Mueller’s allegations were unfounded. Later, in 1982, the German government, following evidence collected by Amnesty International, issued a request to the Pinochet government for cooperation in a joint investigation of Schaefer’s community. The request was denied, as were two others in 1985 and 1988. Only after Pinochet left power in 1990 did Schaefer’s support system begin to collapse. The new government, headed by Patricio Aylwin, a former senator and longtime opponent of Paul Schaefer, revoked the Colonia’s status as a nonprofit, charitable organization, cut off state funding for the hospital, and initiated a financial audit of the colony’s businesses. The colonos fought back with protest rallies and hunger strikes.

Despite the growing public controversy, little changed inside Colonia Dignidad. Schaefer carried on without interruption. He launched a new educational initiative called the “Intensive Boarding School,” a kind of immersion program, in which select local Chilean students were invited to live, work, and study in the Colonia until they reached the age of 18. Local families proved eager to participate. The program seemed like a good thing—at least to the parents—until, in the winter of 1996, a 12-year-old student named Cristobal Parada smuggled a secret note to his mother. He wrote, “Take me out of here. He raped me.” She managed to rescue him at considerable risk
to Cristobal and herself and drove him to a nearby medical clinic, where a physician verified that the boy had been raped. Cristobal's mother feared that the local police would be of no use, or, worse, that they would return her son to the Germans. She fled with Cristobal to the anonymity of the capital, where she sought out the chief of Chile’s national detective force, a man named Luis Henriquez.

A proud and seasoned professional, Henriquez had, in his 25 years on the force, been exposed to the darker aspects of human nature. In the early 1970s, he had served as one of Allende’s bodyguards and was there, inside the presidential palace, when Allende had committed suicide. In a country rife with conspiracies, Henriquez held a rigid belief in facts. “The truth has only one version,” he liked to say. “There are no different truths.” His was an unsophisticated view of the world, but, notably, one uncorrupted by Schaefer’s influence.

In mid-August 1996, a judge in Santiago issued a warrant for Schaefer’s arrest on charges of child abuse, asking Henriquez to execute it. Inside the Colonia that summer, life went on as before. The investigation taking form in far-off Santiago remained invisible to Schaefer and his followers. Local children continued to visit on weekends and holidays, the Intensive Boarding School remained in session, and, by all accounts, Schaefer continued to enjoy the sexual pleasures of his sprinters. The pattern was interrupted only when word of the arrest warrant reached Schaefer and his lieutenants. A meeting was called on August 20, 1996, to discuss what should be done. Schaefer seemed badly shaken. As the colonos discussed how to proceed, he kept his head down and never spoke a word. Shortly thereafter, he disappeared into the Colonia’s network of subterranean bunkers and tunnels. It is widely believed that he was there, underground, when, on November 30, 1996, Henriquez muscled his way into Schaefer’s utopia for the first time.

Henriquez had hoped to capture Schaefer by surprise. He went in with 30 armed policemen in a caravan, but as his team made its way up the long dirt road, it was spotted by the Colonia’s lookouts, who gave warning. The caravan busted through a sequence of gates and only slowed as it approached the village itself. Henriquez had given orders to his men, should they come under fire, not to retreat, but to move deeper into the village for cover. To his surprise, resistance was minimal.

“The colonos were like zombies, or maybe like robots,” Henriquez would later recall, “They were machines: on/off, on/off, on/off. They didn’t change moods like normal people.” Though Schaefer’s followers were generally subdued, at times they became aggressive, and, in a few cases, they physically assaulted the police. Henriquez assumed these outbursts signaled that they were getting close to Schaefer, but in the end, Henriquez and his police went home empty-handed.

Over the years, Henriquez conducted more than 30 raids on the Colonia, always with the same goal in mind: to capture Schaefer. Theories abounded as to where he
might be. The *colonos* insisted he was dead. Others claimed he was hiding in the underground tunnels. Still others were convinced he had fled the country. Henriquez came to believe that Schaefer remained in the Colonia for some time after that initial raid. “I have no doubt,” he told me, “that sometimes we were just seconds from catching him.”

No one knows when Schaefer actually left Colonia Dignidad. Some say it was 1997, others later than that. What is clear is that at some point in the late 1990s, he fled the area, never to return. The curious thing is that very little changed afterward. The *colonos* continued to live life as they had under Schaefer’s rule, redirecting their allegiance to one of his senior lieutenants. In time, they attempted a democratic experiment, electing a council of leaders to manage their affairs. But under pressure from the older pilgrims, those most loyal to Schaefer, the council soon disintegrated, and the colony was left without a formal hierarchy, under the de facto leadership of a small group of *colonos* who managed the community’s businesses. Meanwhile, Henriquez continued to conduct his raids, even after he knew Schaefer had fled. “We couldn’t just say openly that he had left, that he was no longer there, because we needed a reason to remain there looking for all the other parts of the investigation,” Henriquez explained. “There was a lot more that we needed to find out.”

As time passed, some *colonos* eventually cooperated with the investigators, showing them where the files on Pinochet’s political enemies were kept, leading them to underground bunkers and tunnels, and giving the locations of weapons caches and mass graves. Although the graves had been emptied, investigators did find several car engines and side panels from vehicles that belonged to political dissidents who had disappeared.

In July 2005, police unearthed Schaefer’s collection of military weaponry. The stockpiles, buried in at least three different locations, included some 92 machine guns, 104 semi-automatic rifles, 18 antipersonnel mines, 18 cluster grenades, 1,893 hand grenades, 67 mortar rounds, 176 kilograms of tnt, and an unspecified number of rocket launchers, surface-to-air missiles, and telescopic sights. Also found were German-language instruction manuals and large quantities of ammunition. According to investigators, many of the weapons were of World War II vintage. Others, such as the grenades and the machine guns, appeared to have been produced in the Colonia’s own facilities.

Acting on a tip from one of the *colonos*, investigators moved Schaefer’s bed and lifted up an area rug to access a trap door hidden among the floorboards. Underneath, in a small chamber, was an assortment of what one of the police officers described to me as Schaefer’s “fantasy weapons”—three pencils that could shoot .22 caliber rounds, two equipped to fire darts, a dart-shooting camera, and several shootable walking canes. Schaefer was getting to be an old man by the time he fled. Among the other weapons, police found a walker capable of delivering an electric shock of 1,200 volts.
I met Luis Henriquez in January of 2006 at a hotel bar in Santiago as I was preparing for my first trip to Colonia Dignidad. He is an old man now, with gray hair and thick glasses, and retired from the police force in 2003. “All of these people have been mutilated in more ways than one,” he warned me. “They have no individual will. They have no individual power. They have no sense of sexuality. The younger ones may be able to change the way they think, but not the older ones. They’re sending their kids to school, and they’re trying to be normal, but it’s just another performance for them. They think only in terms of friends and enemies. In many ways, they will think of you as an enemy who is coming to stick his nose where he should not.” In the persona of a colono, he said, “‘We’re clever at performing. We shall give him cake and apple juice. We shall be nice to him although we know he is our enemy.’ That’s the way they will probably relate to you.”

Traffic passes freely through what used to be the Colonia’s outermost gate—its imposing white metal trellis left to rust against a collection of boulders by the side of the road. Farther on stands a reception house, where an elderly German woman dutifully records visitors’ names before waving them through. A dirt road winds through a field of soybeans and arrives at Schaefer’s former residence. It is now a guesthouse, used to entertain visitors. A group of young colonos invite me into the living room for sugar cookies, and, as Henriquez had predicted, glasses of homemade apple juice. Organic, no preservatives, they tell me, with insistent, uncomfortable grins. The conversation revolves around new plans for improvements to the Colonia—a micro-power generation plant, a methane gas plant, and a home for the elderly. Another initiative, already under way, is to develop tourism. For a price, outsiders could now hunt for rabbits in Paul Schaefer’s woods or fish for salmon in the river where Santa Claus went under. I set off for the village restaurant to meet the tourism director, a Chilean named Victor Briones, said to have been one of Schaefer’s sprinters.

A fair-skinned man in his late 20s with a round face, Briones offers me coffee as we sit down together, just upstairs from the bunker where Luis Peebles had been tortured years before. He tells me that the Colonia had already welcomed vacationers from Chile, Brazil, Argentina, and the United States. The volume remains modest, but he is optimistic. Traffic is expected to increase, he says, with the opening of a new, nationally funded hiking trail that will pass through Colonia Dignidad. He appears to have mixed feelings about this. “We want security,” he says, “security in every aspect.” I ask him how he intends to control the story of the colony’s history, how members would respond to questions about hidden weapons, Pinochet, pedophilia, torture, and mass graves. He tells me flatly that he is training a group of colonos to serve as tour guides. Did he mean they would gloss over the truth? He says, no, they would tell the truth, and would emphasize that the young people in
the Colonia were innocent of any wrongdoing.

Briones’s insistence on the innocence of youth was a tacit condemnation of the old. In Santiago, I had been told about a controversial letter written by a group of newly married colonos and addressed to the older generation. The letter, read aloud at a community meeting the previous spring, described the darker aspects of life under Paul Schaefer—the sexual abuse, the torture, the perversion of religion into a control mechanism. It represented the colonos’ first real attempt at an open conversation about their past and the question of responsibility: “Our parents have got to understand that they fall into the web of blame, because as individuals they did not have the strength or the nerve to oppose the dictatorship of Paul Schaefer. Regrettably, they became accustomed to obeying orders and instructions like it was natural, and they left aside consideration, peaceful meditation, reason, and conscience. They contributed to the undermining of their own human dignity.” The letter was not well received. The older colonos did not appreciate being singled out, and a rift was opened between young and old that has yet to mend.

I am invited to a monthly community meeting, a formal, ritualized affair still held in the room where Schaefer took confessions. Programs, distributed at the door, list the topics to be discussed. Inside, I find the chairs neatly arranged into five long rows before a wooden podium with a microphone. There is to be a celebration later in the evening in honor of a group of young colonos who have just graduated from college—the first generation to do so. Several dozen champagne bottles are arranged on a makeshift bar in the back of the room. I take a seat in the last row and watch the colonos file in. Most are elderly Germans, who come in using canes, walkers, and wheelchairs. The younger generation is a mix of Germans and Chileans, whose young children play hide-and-seek through the crowd. Several shake my hand as they squeeze past on the way to their seats. The sun is sinking below the mountains outside, but the room is sweltering, so the doors and windows are opened wide. By the time things get under way, promptly at 8:15 P.M., swarms of mosquitoes have moved in to feed.

The business portion of the meeting is dispatched with German efficiency. One of the new leaders takes the podium and suggests that the time has come to return the small church seized from the nuns to its rightful owners. “It’s important to understand that we will be giving it back, not giving it up,” he says, fixing his gaze on the older colonos in the room. An uncomfortable silence erupts. Several people shift in their chairs, but there are no objections. It is as close as anyone came that night to mentioning Paul Schaefer.

There is a short break, after which recent college graduates—newly minted nurses, accountants, and engineers—take turns thanking the community for its generosity. The Colonia had paid their tuitions in the hope that some might choose to live and work there after graduation. With so many of the initial pilgrims old and weak, the
The return of the younger generation has become a matter of survival.

A party follows the speeches. A young man tells me that he and several friends were out until 4 A.M. the night before singing karaoke in a local bar. There is talk of purchasing a karaoke machine for the Colonia. I wander over to the dessert table, stocked with cookies and German cakes. A young woman is handing out frozen coffees topped with whipped cream. I take one and find a perch near an old piano in the corner. Someone taps me on the shoulder. It is a grandfatherly German man, short and overweight but powerfully built, with a leathery face and sparse white hair. He gives his name as Heinrich Hempel. He seems like a kindly man. Later, I learn that he had been one of Schaefer’s enforcers. In return for his loyalty, Schaefer had allowed him to marry, and his son is among the group of college graduates being honored that night. Hempel confides that during World War II, as the Soviets were pushing through Eastern Europe, his family had been forced out of East Prussia and thrown into a Soviet labor camp in Poland. They spent five years there, under terrible conditions. His brother and sister froze to death in the snow. He describes the high fences that had surrounded the camp in Poland and draws them in my notebook with coils of razor wire at their base. He tells me that after his release, he had gone to Germany and joined Schaefer’s congregation. I ask him why he had moved to Chile. He thinks for a moment, smiles, and says, “I came here to do five years of charity work. But then I forgot how to leave.”

FOUR YEARS AGO, Carola Fuentes, a Chilean television journalist, visited Franz Baar, the man who had been held for 31 years, and his wife, Ingrid, in Chiloé, a remote island off of Chile’s southern coast, accessible only by ferry, where the newlywed couple had settled after escaping the Colonia the previous year. Fuentes was in the early stages of an investigation of Colonia Dignidad, and a lawyer in Santiago representing Cristobal Parada and other abused boys in a class action suit against Schaefer had recommended that she speak with the Baars. The couple told Fuentes that high-ranking colonos had been making frequent trips to Argentina, and that Schaefer was almost certainly there, perhaps near Buenos Aires. They also noted that when Schaefer went underground, several of his favorite nurses and bodyguards went with him. If any of those people could be located, there was a good chance he would be found.

Fuentes spent the next 13 months tracking down leads. Chilean authorities had information suggesting that Schaefer was in Buenos Aires, but, due to tense relations with their counterparts in Argentina, they could not be sure. As a journalist, Fuentes required no official permission to work in Argentina. Guided by frustrated Chilean officials, she followed the trail of evidence until it led her to a townhouse in an expensive gated community near Buenos Aires. She believed that Schaefer was inside, and
notified the police. A 24-member SWAT team surrounded the townhouse on the morning of March 10, 2005, but was forced to wait most of the day for an Argentine judge to issue a warrant for Schaefer’s arrest. When the warrant finally arrived around 3 P.M., the SWAT team burst through the front door with Fuentes and her camera crew in tow. Inside they found three German men and two women—the bodyguards and nurses that the Baars had predicted would be with Schaefer. The police put them to the floor and asked if Schaefer was in the house. They said he was and pointed to the bedroom. Fuentes followed the policemen across the hallway with her camera. She later described the scene: “I saw this old guy, very lost in space, lying on the bed. He was absolutely not dangerous. I remembered what the Baars had told me. He didn’t match the image of this bad, evil guy.” Schaefer did not resist arrest. As he was being hauled away in handcuffs, Schaefer only groaned and quietly mumbled a question over and over: “Why? Why?”

Paul Schaefer was extradited to Chile aboard a military transport plane several days after his arrest and placed in a maximum-security prison in Santiago. In May 2006, he was convicted of child molestation and sentenced to 20 years in prison. He received an additional seven-year sentence in August 2006 for weapons violations, and three for torture. Further prosecution is being considered on charges of forced labor, tax evasion, kidnapping, torture, and possibly murder. Schaefer is 86 and confined to a wheelchair. His health is poor and he is attended full-time by a nurse, but his mental condition seems to have improved: “He was cold and arrogant,” said one of the judges who interrogated him for several hours in Santiago. “Every so often he would call in the nurse to check his blood pressure. When I asked him questions, he pretended not to hear.”

At one of Schaefer’s first interrogations, an orderly wheeled Schaefer into the room and pushed him to an empty spot beside Luis Peebles. Their arms touched. The judge asked Schaefer if he remembered the man sitting next to him. Schaefer turned and, with his one good eye, looked Peebles up and down. After a pause, he said, yes, he did remember him: Wasn’t he a lawyer who had once worked for the Colonia? “No,” Peebles responded. “I was once a guest in your home. You were very unkind. I never did anything to you or the Colonia, so why were you so cruel to me?” Schaefer went silent. Suddenly he began to have trouble understanding Spanish.
Shock Waves

A BLAST IN BAGHDAD TESTS THE ENDURANCE OF A SOLDIER AND HIS FAMILY

BETHANY VACCARO

Going to war brings with it the very real possibility of dying. When my brother Robert left for Iraq in September 2006, our family feared that his commitment might demand what is often called the highest price. Before he left, I imagined what it might be like as the sister of a dead soldier to tell everyone that he had laid down his life in such a contentious struggle. I pictured the flag-draped coffin, the article in our local newspaper, the murmuring friends and neighbors filing through to praise the dead hero. Always a realist, I prepared myself for his death as the worst possible outcome. I failed to conceive of any scenario that could rival the bitter finality of his dying.

I soon discovered that giving one’s life can come in more than one form. For my brother, his life as he knew it was taken on January 14, 2007, in Baghdad, when an EFP—an explosively formed projectile device—detonated outside his Army Humvee, sending a shock wave through his brain, severely injuring him without leaving a mark on his body. Robert escaped death, but has paid a price almost as high. Today, he is back from war, 25 years old, brain-injured, and disabled. My brother accepted this risk when he signed his military contract in 2002 through the ROTC program at the University of Rhode Island. Although my family didn’t sign an agreement or contract, we have discovered that we are as bound to his commitment as he is himself. Before my brother’s injury, the phrase traumatic brain injury, or TBI, meant very little to my family. Now it defines our daily existence. The ongoing process of rehabilitation since his injury has tenaciously enmeshed each one of us, altering our plans, our family structure and interactions, our ideas about life and sacrifice, and most resolutely our belief that if he would only make it back home, everything would be okay.

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My brother's injury occurred in the early hours of the morning in Baghdad, as his platoon was finishing a 10-hour shift of route clearing. He was a mechanical engineer and a second lieutenant, in charge of 25 men. Their assignment was to find and dismantle or detonate IEDs (improvised explosive devices) and other explosives that litter the roadways in Iraq. His convoy was nearing an Iraqi checkpoint when his vehicle, the third in line, was targeted by an EFP. The explosion catapulted the vehicle into the side of a building. The force of it blew a hole in the side of the armored Humvee, sending a chunk of metal into the driver's head, killing him almost instantly. My brother was in the passenger seat, and it was the force of the explosion rather than metal that penetrated his head.

After he was wounded, Robert's brain began to swell and the pressure inside his skull skyrocketed. He was taken into surgery as quickly as possible, where a large part of the skull on the right side of his head was removed to allow his brain to expand unencumbered. The pressure continued to rise, and a second surgery to remove even more of the skull was necessary before he left Iraq. It was almost a week before he was stable enough to be moved to the Landstuhl Regional Medical Center in Germany. During this time, my family did little besides sit together and pace around the house, waiting for the phone to ring with an update on his condition. We didn’t fully grasp the severity of his injury. We weren’t told at the time that he was awarded his Purple Heart in the middle of the night after he was wounded, because doctors feared he wouldn’t live until the next day.
Once Robert was in Germany, the Army flew my father out to be with him. It was only then that we understood the gravity of the situation. As his body began to awaken, my brother was kept in an induced coma, allowing his brain to rest. When they finally tried to bring him out of it, he would not wake up.

I AM ONE OF FIVE CHILDREN spanning 14 years. Robert, the eldest, and I were lumped together for much of our childhood, being the closest in age to each other. Although he is 18 months older, I have always acted like the eldest. My mother says he didn’t talk until I did. I distinctly remember explaining to him how to pronounce “Hallelujah.” Because we were homeschooled, much of our schoolwork was done together. We did our English and history lessons as a pair, as well as all of our science projects—I dictated the steps of the scientific method while he scribbled ferociously into a notebook that would later prove indecipherable. We didn’t stay particularly close. He moved into his own sphere when he joined ROTC in college, while I studied philosophy and kept to myself. I could tell he relished being in the traditionally masculine world of the military, where he could perform and deliver, unlike at our university, where he struggled to get through his required courses. Occasionally, he would let me go out with him and his ROTC buddies. I would sit back with my pint of beer and listen to their rapid banter, chuckling where I thought it was appropriate, as they fired movie quotes at each other. I liked watching him laugh and gesticulate. Like our father, Robert would laugh until his eyes watered—with an exuberance that seemed a long time coming after the hesitations of his childhood.

My parents have organized their lives around their children, creating a force field that continually draws us home even as we have grown up. The night we learned of Robert’s injury, the rest of us were at our house in Kingston, Rhode Island, where we had spent most of our lives. We were sitting on the floor of the kitchen tie-dyeing T-shirts when the phone rang. A crackly voice told us he had been in an explosion and was going into surgery for head trauma. They would call again in two hours to let us know how it had gone. We gathered in our living room, stunned and unsure of what to do with ourselves. My father stood in the center of the room, slowly rocking back and forth on his feet. When he moved, the imprint of his shoes was chiseled into the carpet as clearly as if he had been standing on clay. He finally sat down, dragging an armchair tight into the circle of chairs and couches. It was not a time for sitting on the other side of the room. I knew my parents were praying, clinging to their lifelong faith, but I only waited for events to unfold and eventually sat at the kitchen table coloring fairies and dragons with my siblings to pass the hours. Every instant seemed like it could be the magical moment—surely now he is gone, or now all is well.

The phrase head trauma meant very little to me that night. I wondered to myself if my brother had perhaps lost an ear or an eye. The possibility of cognitive changes
never crossed my mind. I was only vaguely aware of traumatic brain injury as the so-called “signature” wound of the Iraq war, something that is largely due to the increasing sophistication of the explosive devices used by the insurgency. I learned later that the Defense and Veterans Brain Injury Center, which operates out of Walter Reed Army Medical Center, had treated 1,803 cases of TBI stemming from the Afghanistan and Iraq conflicts as of November 2008, while cumulatively their sites had recorded 9,100 cases of this injury. I was completely unaware of the large advocacy and support networks, such as the Wounded Warrior Project, that exist to rally for the treatment of severely injured service men and women, the influx of whom our government has proven sadly unequipped to handle. I didn’t know that it is still an uphill battle for many families to receive the kind of care that this incredibly complex injury needs in order to maximize recovery. This was the world we were about to enter that night, although we couldn’t have been more ignorant of its existence.

As soon as my brother was moved to Bethesda Naval Hospital in Maryland, my parents began the arduous task of attending to him. I never saw a hint of hesitation in them, even through the long months of care, as everything else in their lives took a distant second place. They were unflinchingly proud of Robert, as they had been when he joined the Army, decided to volunteer for deployment, and ultimately left for Iraq. My parents saw his wartime role in crisp black and white. They were not angry, like I was. Any political context for his actions and what had happened to him collapsed into the overarching fact that he is their son and was in need.

The day my mother prepared to leave for Bethesda, she told us she might stay the whole week. She was sure we could mind each other (two of my brothers were still being homeschooled), the house, and our grandmother for that amount of time. It would be hardest on my nine-year-old brother, who had never been separated from both his parents at once. But we were all eager to rally and pitch in, snapping into an automatic mode that propelled us through our daily routines. My mother was gone for the better part of four months, my father for six months. They would rotate, depending on my father’s university work schedule, and were often not home for more than three days at a time. But even when they were home, my parents were present in Rhode Island only in body. Their minds and all their energies were concentrated on a single hospital bed hundreds of miles away.

I’m not sure when I realized that the shock wave that penetrated my brother’s brain continued across continents and seas, engulfing my parents, my siblings, and me. Our lives were transformed rapidly, and it was months before I explicitly acknowledged the extent of the change. I had graduated from college three weeks before my brother’s injury and was working at a restaurant while I plotted my next move. But without my parents at home, the bulk of the housework, cooking, homeschooling, and
grandmother care fell on my shoulders, giving me the unusual opportunity at the age of 22 to experience the life of a middle-aged married woman with children. My head became filled with grocery lists, grade school lessons, the appointment calendar, a barrage of daily details that had nothing to do with my own life plans or preparations. I quit my job, and life narrowed to my siblings, my family’s needs, and trying to keep everyone afloat. On a rare night out with one of my friends, I explained that my siblings had asked me to be home by 10. I wasn’t sure which was more bizarre—the fact that I had readily assented to this curfew or the fact that I thought it was a fair compromise for being “allowed” to go out. Even as I told myself that I was on the moral high ground, resentment began to fester within me as the sacrifices, the hurt feelings, and the hardships began to pile up.

As my family’s reality continued to revolve around my brother, I began to realize that every family member of someone with TBI becomes enslaved by the condition of their loved one. But while the tedium of this sometimes threatened to overwhelm me with self-pity, the tautness of the real tragedy was continually re-framed and re-focused. Despite all of the changes to my life, my attention went again and again to my brother, who languished at the upheaval’s epicenter, suffering at a level that could not be compared to ours.

The first time I saw Robert, three weeks after his injury, he was still being kept in an induced coma. I flew down to Washington, D.C., with my sister Anna for the weekend. We were giddy and giggly in a bleary haze of extreme nervousness. When we asked what to expect, our father said that nothing could prepare us to see the devastation that was our brother. Outside of his room in the intensive care unit, we donned yellow gowns, masks, and gloves. We could see the end of his bed from the door. His feet were clad in gray socks and listing outward in extreme lassitude. We could already hear all the hospital noises, the beeps and whirs, the heavy whoosh of his ventilator. I wasn’t brave enough to walk right in and confront my brother, so I peeked around the corner with one eye. Recoiling, I whispered to my sister that I wasn’t sure if I could do this.

Robert was swollen and bloated; his skin was puffy and enamel white. He looked worse than dead and somehow a bit reptilian, more cadaver than creature. The violent rise and fall of his chest with each pull of the ventilator looked painful, as if the machine were assaulting him. His eyes were fluttering a bit. When they were open, his pupils sometimes rolled around, not entirely in synch with one another. The right side of his head where the skull had been removed had a cavernous dent, the skin sinking in because there was nothing to hold it up. Mucus had built up around his nostrils, his lips looked extraordinarily thick, and his face was damp. He looked strained, far from peace, and barely human.
Anna and I crept to each side of Robert’s bed. It took a tremendous effort to grasp his hand in mine, and even more to begin speaking. As we each held one of his cold, bloated hands and began talking to him in shaky voices, I found it hard to regulate the volume of my speech; it came out dreadfully squeaky. “It’s us,” we said over and over again. It was worse than talking to a corpse. I felt there was no way to reach him and that my words would only emphasize this chasm between where he was and where I was. “We never thought we would have a reason to come to Maryland,” my sister whispered. She seemed unsure of who to look at, me or our brother.

It was awkward, but as the wildness of the initial shock wore off, we gradually remembered some of the things we had decided to say on this first visit. A nurse lowered the level of his sedation, hoping that he would become more aware of us, and we chattered about how much we had wanted to come. Our sentences tumbled out rapidly, blurring together at their edges. “You did everything right, your men are safe,” we said repeatedly, like a mantra. “We’re so proud of you.” We told him to come home soon, because our other brother was already driving his car and had taken his leather jacket. His eyes wandered. In my distress, I wanted to lean down and shake him. He hovered below the surface of some great torpor, and I felt that if only I could break through its glassy layers, I could pull him out to be with us. It was all I could do to keep from yelling, “Robert, this way!” Yet despite my desperation, he remained remote, as if he were hearing the echoes of my voice in the wind but could not tell which direction to turn. His mouth began twitching, its corners turning down. A teardrop slowly came out of one eye. “He’s crying,” my mother croaked.

Today, two years into his injury, Robert lives in an apartment next door to our family home. My parents care for him and help him with daily tasks, managing his affairs, cooking his meals, cleaning his apartment, doing his laundry, cutting his fingernails, cajoling him to do what he needs to do, and cheering him up when it all gets to be too much. He has become their child all over again and their full-time job. His neurological signals remain “markedly abnormal,” and he goes to occupational and physical therapy three times a week to work on his limitations. He is still unable to use his left hand and arm very much, and it curls against his side like a fractured wing, the white, cold fingers curved into a lifeless ball. He sometimes stretches it out, displaying his hard-won ability to part the fingers and lift the arm above his head. But then it pulls back into its bent, wounded position and languishes there with an extraneous air, flopping about as he walks with his uneven and heavy gait.

The oddities of traumatic brain injury become more apparent to us every day. It is a cruel fate that allowed him to come so close to being normal, and yet miss it altogether. Outsiders are sometimes amazed by how well he functions. But we who live
with him and care for him would find it exceedingly difficult to characterize him as anything resembling a typical 25-year-old man. Robert was certainly not a saint before his injury, as few men his age are. He could be angry, violent, indignant, ungrateful, and rude. Now that he is living with TBI, we have noticed that many of his less-desirable character traits, noticeable yet controlled before his injury, have been amplified or twisted into a puerile caricature of adult emotion. Even my parents acknowledge that their son has become an uncomfortable mix of a child and a man. He “lives on his own,” yet once pitched a temper tantrum because he needed to make a phone call and my father would not do it for him. He is often petulant and capricious, self-centered and unreasonable. One night he loves chicken Parmesan, the next night he insists he has hated it his whole life. If he is physically uncomfortable, he is crabby and will snap at whoever is near him. Sometimes when he is exhausted and overwhelmed after his day of therapy, he will sink into a teary sulk, rubbing his red eyes and sharply demanding food or something else that he needs. Even his voice enhances his juvenility, being a little squeakier and more slurred than it used to be.

My brother’s childlikeness can bring a degree of awkwardness into our interactions with him. His new demeanor is more often characterized by excessive giggliness than by anger. He will frequently prattle away with a wide-eyed seriousness and then collapse into silly laughter that is sweet and uninhibited but also a bit sad coming from a 25-year-old man. He finds it especially funny when he baffles us with some strange observation like “So you want to put on those pants and walk down that path?” When the response is a perplexed stare, Robert will gleefully chortle away at his wittiness. Although he fully knows who we are, my brother calls my sister “Albert Hanesworth” and addresses me as “Edward Hackinson.” He will laugh outrageously at our protests and never seems to tire of the joke, if indeed that’s what it is.

Sometimes Robert’s contributions to our conversations don’t quite make sense, yet often they are witty or even insightful. When Anna was discussing a poem she had talked about in class at the University of Rhode Island, she read it aloud and inquired what we thought it meant. My previously liberal-arts-phobic brother immediately responded, “The anonymity of strangers,” which upon a second reading, seemed to be the very thing the poem was talking about. In defiance of his previous distaste for research, our brother sometimes tells us of his “unquenchable thirst for the elixir of knowledge,” which often leaves him unable to sleep in the middle of the night until he has powered up his computer and researched some burning question, such as who Adonis was or why we sometimes get “brain freeze” when biting into something cold.

In a way, Robert is more endearing than before. Yet there are barriers that inhibit his desire and ability to interact with people outside his family who might sincerely enjoy his company. My brother’s language is sometimes slightly garbled, due to the diffuse nature of his brain injury. He once was trying to say, “Typical, typical,” but
instead said, “Pitacal, pitacal,” and continued on without noticing his error. He often recounts stories from his therapy sessions or explains how he is feeling with an undeniable element of theatricality, brandishing his arms and using archaic or overblown language. He uses words like “whither,” “thus,” and “thence,” and consistently says “nay” instead of “no.” He also takes delight in the kind of pranks a 10-year-old might pull, such as bopping someone on the head as they come around a corner. He can be extremely rude when out in public, completely ignoring an old friend or a formerly familiar passerby who is asking about his health.

It can be difficult to console my brother during the times he explicitly or tacitly laments his lost abilities. He can no longer play baseball or basketball with his friends, and this makes it hard for him to participate in the sports nights they used to enjoy together. He cannot go shooting with them or play paintball. He cannot play the bass for hours at a time anymore. Because of his medications and the risk of seizure associated with the crainoplasty that restored the missing part of his skull, he cannot drink alcohol. An ardent sports fan, who spent countless nights watching football and drinking beer with his friends, he now rarely goes out with them to a bar or sports parties. Robert has neglected these relationships and, in turn, has been neglected by many of his friends. It is difficult for them to know how to respond to the way he is now. My brother does have one friend who takes the bus down from Providence on Thursday nights to play video games with him. They sit on the couch in his apartment, eating Skittles and laughing hysterically at their memories of the old days. My brother looks forward to these evenings with unabashed joy. We are extraordinarily grateful for the dedication that compels this friend to return again and again.

As my brother recovered in Bethesda and later in Tampa, he knew he was in rehab with the specific purpose of getting stronger and becoming well; he was a recuperating soldier. When he returned home, many people assumed it meant that he had been patched up and put back together again. They often greeted him with a pat on the back, saying, “So do you feel like yourself again?” My brother would nod with the wide-eyed and complaisant face he sometimes assumes when talking to people outside the family and mumble something like, “Yeah, yeah.” At such moments I would try to remind him that he had never stopped being himself. The last thing I want him to think is that his injury has taken away whatever made him himself, especially since most of its effects will not go away for as long as he lives.

But there is more kindness than logic in what I tell him. The parts of his personality and his life that he has lost have been carved out with a heavy hand. It is not hard to think that the Robert we knew is gone. My brother is a paradox. We insist that he has survived, that his essential self has been retained. We have not mourned the loss
of someone we love. I cannot compare what he or my family has been through to the anguish caused by death in war. We are unquestioningly happy that he is indeed still here, but something—some part of him—clearly came to an end that morning in Baghdad.

Robert still loves to throw out snatches of movie lines. He loves guns and dogs and watching sports just like he used to. But he is no longer the person who, for 23 years, I thought of as “my brother.” His quirky mind, his narrow focus, his slurred speech, and his physical difficulties all suggest another person to me. My brother is alive, but transformed to such a degree that I separate who he is now from the person I once knew as if they were entirely different individuals. This is subconsciously reflected in the way we address him. Before his injury, he went by “Rob.” My family now often calls him “Bob,” as if he is someone other than the “Rob” we knew for so many years.

It may be possible that receiving life instead of death can become its own kind of torment. Robert must negotiate his “new” life in the face of bitter and permanent alteration. It is incredibly sad when I catch an occasional glimpse of his frustration and bewilderment at his new dependency. His moments of seeming oblivion are interlaced with times of an acute sense of loss and extreme self-consciousness—about his appearance, his disabilities, his difficulties in following rapid conversations. It is hard to know how to respond when he refuses to eat out at a restaurant with us, because it is too embarrassing to be seen having someone help him with his food and implements.

My brother was not characterized by timidity or reluctance during his brief military career. Robert volunteered to go to Iraq and was placed with a new unit that was just deploying. His work there of removing roadside bombs and IEDs probably saved hundreds of lives in a country that has seen too much sadness already. His men said he was like a father to them, though many of them were older than he. They said he did everything right. They said he was the only person they wanted to trust with their lives. For Robert, an identity defined by disability must seem a poor trade, especially as he had so recently found his way to flourish.

Robert still occasionally insists that all he wants to do is re-join the military and be an engineer. He took a vocational test as part of his rehabilitative therapy and scored highest in these two areas, a cruel jab at his inability to now follow his “calling.” His physical and cognitive limitations have trapped him in a sphere of himself that doesn’t contain the parts that he always liked the most about himself. What do you do with yourself when all you ever wanted to do is resolutely out of your reach? Since my brother’s injury, I have often struggled with the despair that this line of thinking brings. In weariness, I succumb to believing that this harsh fate will rival any death stroke. My brother may always remain a hero for what he has been through. But a hero who is unable to open a jar or spread the cream cheese on his own bagel may grow weary and contemptuous of life very quickly.

Every time I see my brother’s curved, flaccid fingers or run my own able fingers along the baby skin of the huge scars that cross his head, I wish fervently that this
had never happened. To serve his country, my brother sacrificed a promising future as a leader in the military. I fear that all he is becoming instead is a guy scratching at himself as he sits on the sofa with his computer watching Internet porn, living on his military disability pay and Social Security.

But this is not the possibility that my family must choose to dwell on as we vacillate each day between despair and hope. Not every disabled person becomes tired of life. There is always dignity, pleasure, and meaning to be found in existing. Science and medical research continually hold the promise of alleviating Robert’s symptoms. With the therapies that he is undergoing, he has a fighting chance to regain a little more function. We must never forget how much we have already received. My brother has been given back to us multiple times: from death, from a vegetative state, and from an enfeebled condition. Surely this can be seen as an encouraging trend.

Robert escaped death by two feet, living while the driver sitting next to him, a young man from Washington named James, died. Before each mission, the two of them would clasp arms and tell each other, “No fear on earth.” I understand that what these two soldiers were saying to each other was that acting as if you are unafraid is how to function in a volatile and perilous world. It is this grim determination that repels the terror and discouragement that unfairness and absurdity can engender.

I no longer have the illusion that soon my family will be able to clap my brother on the back and say, “Phew, that’s over. We made it through.” Robert is never going to be cured. But the possibility of our continual enslavement—my brother’s to his injury, my parents’ to their son, and mine to my family—is something I do not want for us. This tragedy may not disappear or even lessen much in severity, but the virtue of being alive and not dead is that we can respond actively and creatively to even this situation. So while my brother treks across our parents’ yard every morning, following the dusty path that his feet have worn in the grass, to sit in the kitchen and wait for someone to make his oatmeal and coffee before resuming his position on the sloping, brown couch in his apartment, I have booked a plane ticket to New Zealand and am preparing to fulfill my post-graduation plans, which will be two years overdue by the time I embark.

The persistence that it takes to adapt to change is a daily concatenation of choices. Although I choose to be hopeful for both myself and my brother, hope can never assuage the heartbreak for what he and my family have gone through. But I am resolved to believe that just as my brother set in motion the conditions for enslavement, I can set in motion those for freedom. Maybe now he will follow my voice, as he was unable to do as I stood over his bloated and tremulous body many months ago in the ICU. It is telling him that enduring change means bearing sadness, anger, regret, and pain. But if I can find a way to spite the despair, so can he.
Solitude and Leadership

IF YOU WANT OTHERS TO FOLLOW, LEARN TO BE ALONE WITH YOUR THOUGHTS

WILLIAM DERESIEWICZ

My title must seem like a contradiction. What can solitude have to do with leadership? Solitude means being alone, and leadership necessitates the presence of others—the people you’re leading. When we think about leadership in American history we are likely to think of Washington, at the head of an army, or Lincoln, at the head of a nation, or King, at the head of a movement—people with multitudes behind them, looking to them for direction. And when we think of solitude, we are apt to think of Thoreau, a man alone in the woods, keeping a journal and communing with nature in silence.

Leadership is what you are here to learn—the qualities of character and mind that will make you fit to command a platoon, and beyond that, perhaps, a company, a battalion, or, if you leave the military, a corporation, a foundation, a department of government. Solitude is what you have the least of here, especially as plebes. You don’t even have privacy, the opportunity simply to be physically alone, never mind solitude, the ability to be alone with your thoughts. And yet I submit to you that solitude is one of the most important necessities of true leadership. This lecture will be an attempt to explain why.

William Deresiewicz is an essayist and critic. His forthcoming book Excellent Sheep: Thinking for Yourself, Inventing Your Life, and Other Things the Ivy League Won’t Teach You, is based in part on this essay—originally a lecture delivered to the plebe class at the United States Military Academy at West Point in October 2009—and “The Disadvantages of an Elite Education,” also published in The Scholar.
We need to begin by talking about what leadership really means. I just spent 10 years teaching at another institution that, like West Point, liked to talk a lot about leadership, Yale University. A school that some of you might have gone to had you not come here, that some of your friends might be going to. And if not Yale, then Harvard, Stanford, MIT, and so forth. These institutions, like West Point, also see their role as the training of leaders, constantly encourage their students, like West Point, to regard themselves as leaders among their peers and future leaders of society. Indeed, when we look around at the American elite, the people in charge of government, business, academia, and all our other major institutions—senators, judges, CEOs, college presidents, and so forth—we find that they come overwhelmingly either from the Ivy League and its peer institutions or from the service academies, especially West Point.

So I began to wonder, as I taught at Yale, what leadership really consists of. My students, like you, were energetic, accomplished, smart, and often ferociously ambitious, but was that enough to make them leaders? Most of them, as much as I liked and even admired them, certainly didn’t seem to me like leaders. Does being a leader, I wondered, just mean being accomplished, being successful? Does getting straight As make you a leader? I didn’t think so. Great heart surgeons or great novelists or great shortstops may be terrific at what they do, but that doesn’t mean they’re leaders. Leadership and aptitude, leadership and achievement, leadership and even excellence have to be different things, otherwise the concept of leadership has no meaning. And it seemed to me that
that had to be especially true of the kind of excellence I saw in the students around me.

See, things have changed since I went to college in the ’80s. Everything has gotten much more intense. You have to do much more now to get into a top school like Yale or West Point, and you have to start a lot earlier. We didn’t begin thinking about college until we were juniors, and maybe we each did a couple of extracurriculars. But I know what it’s like for you guys now. It’s an endless series of hoops that you have to jump through, starting from way back, maybe as early as junior high school. Classes, standardized tests, extracurriculars in school, extracurriculars outside of school. Test prep courses, admissions coaches, private tutors. I sat on the Yale College admissions committee a couple of years ago. The first thing the admissions officer would do when presenting a case to the rest of the committee was read what they call the “brag” in admissions lingo, the list of the student’s extracurriculars. Well, it turned out that a student who had six or seven extracurriculars was already in trouble. Because the students who got in—in addition to perfect grades and top scores—usually had 10 or 12.

So what I saw around me were great kids who had been trained to be world-class hoop jumpers. Any goal you set them, they could achieve. Any test you gave them, they could pass with flying colors. They were, as one of them put it herself, “excellent sheep.” I had no doubt that they would continue to jump through hoops and ace tests and go on to Harvard Business School, or Michigan Law School, or Johns Hopkins Medical School, or Goldman Sachs, or McKinsey consulting, or whatever. And this approach would indeed take them far in life. They would come back for their 25th reunion as a partner at White & Case, or an attending physician at Mass General, or an assistant secretary in the Department of State.

That is exactly what places like Yale mean when they talk about training leaders. Educating people who make a big name for themselves in the world, people with impressive titles, people the university can brag about. People who make it to the top. People who can climb the greasy pole of whatever hierarchy they decide to attach themselves to.

But I think there’s something desperately wrong, and even dangerous, about that idea. To explain why, I want to spend a few minutes talking about a novel that many of you may have read, *Heart of Darkness*. If you haven’t read it, you’ve probably seen *Apocalypse Now*, which is based on it. Marlow in the novel becomes Captain Willard, played by Martin Sheen. Kurtz in the novel becomes Colonel Kurtz, played by Marlon Brando. But the novel isn’t about Vietnam; it’s about colonialism in the Belgian Congo three generations before Vietnam. Marlow, not a military officer but a merchant marine, a civilian ship’s captain, is sent by the company that’s running the country under charter from the Belgian crown to sail deep upriver, up the Congo River, to retrieve a manager who’s en-
sconced himself in the jungle and gone rogue, just like Colonel Kurtz does in the movie.

Now everyone knows that the novel is about imperialism and colonialism and race relations and the darkness that lies in the human heart, but it became clear to me at a certain point, as I taught the novel, that it is also about bureaucracy—what I called, a minute ago, hierarchy. The Company, after all, is just that: a company, with rules and procedures and ranks and people in power and people scrambling for power, just like any other bureaucracy. Just like a big law firm or a governmental department or, for that matter, a university. Just like—and here’s why I’m telling you all this—just like the bureaucracy you are about to join. The word bureaucracy tends to have negative connotations, but I say this in no way as a criticism, merely a description, that the U.S. Army is a bureaucracy and one of the largest and most famously bureaucratic bureaucracies in the world. After all, it was the Army that gave us, among other things, the indispensable bureaucratic acronym “snafu”: “situation normal: all fucked up”—or “all fouled up” in the cleaned-up version. That comes from the U.S. Army in World War II.

You need to know that when you get your commission, you’ll be joining a bureaucracy, and however long you stay in the Army, you’ll be operating within a bureaucracy. As different as the armed forces are in so many ways from every other institution in society, in that respect they are the same. And so you need to know how bureaucracies operate, what kind of behavior—what kind of character—they reward, and what kind they punish.

So, back to the novel. Marlow proceeds upriver by stages, just like Captain Willard does in the movie. First he gets to the Outer Station. Kurtz is at the Inner Station. In between is the Central Station, where Marlow spends the most time, and where we get our best look at bureaucracy in action and the kind of people who succeed in it. This is Marlow’s description of the manager of the Central Station, the big boss:

He was commonplace in complexion, in features, in manners, and in voice. He was of middle size and of ordinary build. His eyes, of the usual blue, were perhaps remarkably cold. ... Otherwise there was only an indefinable, faint expression of his lips, something stealthy—a smile—not a smile—I remember it, but I can’t explain. ... He was a common trader, from his youth up employed in these parts—nothing more. He was obeyed, yet he inspired neither love nor fear, nor even respect. He inspired uneasiness. That was it! Uneasiness. Not a definite mistrust—just uneasiness—nothing more. You have no idea how effective such a ... a ...faculty can be. He had no genius for organizing, for initiative, or for order even. ... He had no learning, and no intelligence. His position had come to him—why? ... He originated nothing, he could keep the routine going—that’s all. But he was great. He was great by this little thing that it was impossible to tell what could control such a man. He never gave that secret away. Perhaps there was nothing within him. Such a suspicion made one pause.
Note the adjectives: commonplace, ordinary, usual, common. There is nothing distinguished about this person. About the 10th time I read that passage, I realized it was a perfect description of the kind of person who tends to prosper in the bureaucratic environment. And the only reason I did is because it suddenly struck me that it was a perfect description of the head of the bureaucracy that I was part of, the chairman of my academic department—who had that exact same smile, like a shark, and that exact same ability to make you uneasy, like you were doing something wrong, only she wasn’t ever going to tell you what. Like the manager—and I’m sorry to say this, but like so many people you will meet as you negotiate the bureaucracy of the Army or for that matter of whatever institution you end up giving your talents to after the Army, whether it’s Microsoft or the World Bank or whatever—the head of my department had no genius for organizing or initiative or even order, no particular learning or intelligence, no distinguishing characteristics at all. Just the ability to keep the routine going, and beyond that, as Marlow says, her position had come to her—why?

That’s really the great mystery about bureaucracies. Why is it so often that the best people are stuck in the middle and the people who are running things—the leaders—are the mediocrities? Because excellence isn’t usually what gets you up the greasy pole. What gets you up is a talent for maneuvering. Kissing up to the people above you, kicking down to the people below you. Pleasing your teachers, pleasing your superiors, picking a powerful mentor and riding his coattails until it’s time to stab him in the back. Jumping through hoops. Getting along by going along. Being whatever other people want you to be, so that it finally comes to seem that, like the manager of the Central Station, you have nothing inside you at all. Not taking stupid risks like trying to change how things are done or question why they’re done. Just keeping the routine going.

I TELL YOU THIS to forewarn you, because I promise you that you will meet these people and you will find yourself in environments where what is rewarded above all is conformity. I tell you so you can decide to be a different kind of leader. And I tell you for one other reason. As I thought about these things and put all these pieces together—the kind of students I had, the kind of leadership they were being trained for, the kind of leaders I saw in my own institution—I realized that this is a national problem. We have a crisis of leadership in this country, in every institution. Not just in government. Look at what happened to American corporations in recent decades, as all the old dinosaurs like General Motors or TWA or U.S. Steel fell apart. Look at what happened to Wall Street in just the last couple of years.

Finally—and I know I’m on sensitive ground here—look at what happened during the first four years of the Iraq War. We were stuck. It wasn’t the fault of the enlisted ranks or the noncoms or the junior officers. It was the fault of the senior leadership, whether mili-
We weren’t just not winning, we weren’t even changing direction.

We have a crisis of leadership in America because our overwhelming power and wealth, earned under earlier generations of leaders, made us complacent, and for too long we have been training leaders who only know how to keep the routine going. Who can answer questions, but don’t know how to ask them. Who can fulfill goals, but don’t know how to set them. Who think about how to get things done, but not whether they’re worth doing in the first place. What we have now are the greatest technocrats the world has ever seen, people who have been trained to be incredibly good at one specific thing, but who have no interest in anything beyond their area of expertise. What we don’t have are leaders.

What we don’t have, in other words, are thinkers. People who can think for themselves. People who can formulate a new direction: for the country, for a corporation or a college, for the Army—a new way of doing things, a new way of looking at things. People, in other words, with vision.

Now some people would say, great. Tell this to the kids at Yale, but why bother telling it to the ones at West Point? Most people, when they think of this institution, assume that it’s the last place anyone would want to talk about thinking creatively or cultivating independence of mind. It’s the Army, after all. It’s no accident that the word regiment is the root of the word regimentation. Surely you who have come here must be the ultimate conformists. Must be people who have bought in to the way things are and have no interest in changing it. Are not the kind of young people who think about the world, who ponder the big issues, who question authority. If you were, you would have gone to Amherst or Pomona. You’re at West Point to be told what to do and how to think.

But you know that’s not true. I know it, too; otherwise I would never have been invited to talk to you, and I’m even more convinced of it now that I’ve spent a few days on campus. To quote Colonel Scott Krawczyk, your course director, in a lecture he gave last year to English 102:

From the very earliest days of this country, the model for our officers, which was built on the model of the citizenry and reflective of democratic ideals, was to be different. They were to be possessed of a democratic spirit marked by independent judgment, the freedom to measure action and to express disagreement, and the crucial responsibility never to tolerate tyranny.

All the more so now. Anyone who’s been paying attention for the last few years understands that the changing nature of warfare means that officers, including junior officers, are required more than ever to be able to think independently, creatively, flexibly. To deploy a whole range of skills in a fluid and complex situation. Lieutenant colonels...
who are essentially functioning as provincial governors in Iraq, or captains who find themselves in charge of a remote town somewhere in Afghanistan. People who know how to do more than follow orders and execute routines.

Look at the most successful, most acclaimed, and perhaps the finest soldier of his generation, General David Petraeus. He’s one of those rare people who rises through a bureaucracy for the right reasons. He is a thinker. He is an intellectual. In fact, Prospect magazine named him Public Intellectual of the Year in 2008—that’s in the world. He has a Ph.D. from Princeton, but what makes him a thinker is not that he has a Ph.D. or that he went to Princeton or even that he taught at West Point. I can assure you from personal experience that there are a lot of highly educated people who don’t know how to think at all.

No, what makes him a thinker—and a leader—is precisely that he is able to think things through for himself. And because he can, he has the confidence, the courage, to argue for his ideas even when they aren’t popular. Even when they don’t please his superiors. Courage: there is physical courage, which you all possess in abundance, and then there is another kind of courage, moral courage, the courage to stand up for what you believe.

It wasn’t always easy for him. His path to where he is now was not a straight one. When he was running Mosul in 2003 as commander of the 101st Airborne and developing the strategy he would later formulate in the Counterinsurgency Field Manual and then ultimately apply throughout Iraq, he pissed a lot of people off. He was way ahead of the leadership in Baghdad and Washington, and bureaucracies don’t like that sort of thing. Here he was, just another two-star, and he was saying, implicitly but loudly, that the leadership was wrong about the way it was running the war. Indeed, he was not rewarded at first. He was put in charge of training the Iraqi army, which was considered a blow to his career, a dead-end job. But he stuck to his guns, and ultimately he was vindicated. Ironically, one of the central elements of his counterinsurgency strategy is precisely the idea that officers need to think flexibly, creatively, and independently.

That’s the first half of the lecture: the idea that true leadership means being able to think for yourself and act on your convictions. But how do you learn to do that? How do you learn to think? Let’s start with how you don’t learn to think. A study by a team of researchers at Stanford came out a couple of months ago. The investigators wanted to figure out how today’s college students were able to multitask so much more effectively than adults. How do they manage to do it, the researchers asked? The answer, they discovered—and this is by no means what they expected—is that they don’t. The enhanced cognitive abilities the investigators expected to find, the mental faculties that enable people to multitask effectively, were simply not there. In other words, people
do not multitask effectively. And here’s the really surprising finding: the more people multitask, the worse they are, not just at other mental abilities, but at multitasking itself.

One thing that made the study different from others is that the researchers didn’t test people’s cognitive functions while they were multitasking. They separated the subject group into high multitaskers and low multitaskers and used a different set of tests to measure the kinds of cognitive abilities involved in multitasking. They found that in every case the high multitaskers scored worse. They were worse at distinguishing between relevant and irrelevant information and ignoring the latter. In other words, they were more distractible. They were worse at what you might call “mental filing”: keeping information in the right conceptual boxes and being able to retrieve it quickly. In other words, their minds were more disorganized. And they were even worse at the very thing that defines multitasking itself: switching between tasks.

Multitasking, in short, is not only not thinking, it impairs your ability to think. Thinking means concentrating on one thing long enough to develop an idea about it. Not learning other people’s ideas, or memorizing a body of information, however much those may sometimes be useful. Developing your own ideas. In short, thinking for yourself. You simply cannot do that in bursts of 20 seconds at a time, constantly interrupted by Facebook messages or Twitter tweets, or fiddling with your iPod, or watching something on YouTube.

I find for myself that my first thought is never my best thought. My first thought is always someone else’s; it’s always what I’ve already heard about the subject, always the conventional wisdom. It’s only by concentrating, sticking to the question, being patient, letting all the parts of my mind come into play, that I arrive at an original idea. By giving my brain a chance to make associations, draw connections, take me by surprise. And often even that idea doesn’t turn out to be very good. I need time to think about it, too, to make mistakes and recognize them, to make false starts and correct them, to outlast my impulses, to defeat my desire to declare the job done and move on to the next thing.

I used to have students who bragged to me about how fast they wrote their papers. I would tell them that the great German novelist Thomas Mann said that a writer is someone for whom writing is more difficult than it is for other people. The best writers write much more slowly than everyone else, and the better they are, the slower they write. James Joyce wrote *Ulysses*, the greatest novel of the 20th century, at the rate of about a hundred words a day—half the length of the selection I read you earlier from *Heart of Darkness*—for seven years. T. S. Eliot, one of the greatest poets our country has ever produced, wrote about 150 pages of poetry over the course of his entire 25-year career. That’s half a page a month. So it is with any other form of thought. You do your best thinking by slowing down and concentrating.
Now that’s the third time I’ve used that word, *concentrating*. Concentrating, focusing. You can just as easily consider this lecture to be about concentration as about solitude. Think about what the word means. It means gathering yourself together into a single point rather than letting yourself be dispersed everywhere into a cloud of electronic and social input. It seems to me that Facebook and Twitter and YouTube—and just so you don’t think this is a generational thing, TV and radio and magazines and even newspapers, too—are all ultimately just an elaborate excuse to run away from yourself. To avoid the difficult and troubling questions that being human throws in your way. Am I doing the right thing with my life? Do I believe the things I was taught as a child? What do the words I live by—words like *duty*, *honor*, and *country*—really mean? Am I happy?

You and the members of the other service academies are in a unique position among college students, especially today. Not only do you know that you’re going to have a job when you graduate, you even know who your employer is going to be. But what happens after you fulfill your commitment to the Army? Unless you know who you are, how will you figure out what you want to do with the rest of your life? Unless you’re able to listen to yourself, to that quiet voice inside that tells you what you really care about, what you really believe in—indeed, how those things might be evolving under the pressure of your experiences. Students everywhere else agonize over these questions, and while you may not be doing so now, you are only postponing them for a few years.

Maybe some of you *are* agonizing over them now. Not everyone who starts here decides to finish here. It’s no wonder and no cause for shame. You are being put through the most demanding training anyone can ask of people your age, and you are committing yourself to work of awesome responsibility and mortal danger. The very rigor and regimentation to which you are quite properly subject here naturally has a tendency to make you lose touch with the passion that brought you here in the first place. I saw exactly the same kind of thing at Yale. It’s not that my students were robots. Quite the reverse. They were intensely idealistic, but the overwhelming weight of their practical responsibilities, all of those hoops they had to jump through, often made them lose sight of what those ideals were. Why they were doing it all in the first place.

So it’s perfectly natural to have doubts, or questions, or even just difficulties. The question is, what do you do with them? Do you suppress them, do you distract yourself from them, do you pretend they don’t exist? Or do you confront them directly, honestly, courageously? If you decide to do so, you will find that the answers to these dilemmas are not to be found on Twitter or Comedy Central or even in *The New York Times*. They can only be found within—without distractions, without peer pressure, in solitude.

But let me be clear that solitude doesn’t always have to mean introspection. Let’s
go back to *Heart of Darkness*. It’s the solitude of concentration that saves Marlow amidst the madness of the Central Station. When he gets there he finds out that the steamboat he’s supposed to sail upriver has a giant hole in it, and no one is going to help him fix it. “I let him run on,” he says, “this papier-mâché Mephistopheles”—he’s talking not about the manager but his assistant, who’s even worse, since he’s still trying to kiss his way up the hierarchy, and who’s been raving away at him. You can think of him as the Internet, the ever-present social buzz, chattering away at you 24/7:

I let him run on, this papier-mâché Mephistopheles and it seemed to me that if I tried I could poke my forefinger through him, and would find nothing inside but a little loose dirt ...

It was a great comfort to turn from that chap to … the battered, twisted, ruined, tin-pot steamboat. … I had expended enough hard work on her to make me love her. No influential friend would have served me better. She had given me a chance to come out a bit—to find out what I could do. No, I don’t like work. I had rather laze about and think of all the fine things that can be done. I don’t like work—no man does—but I like what is in the work,—the chance to find yourself. Your own reality—for yourself, not for others—what no other man can ever know.

“The chance to find yourself.” Now that phrase, “finding yourself,” has acquired a bad reputation. It suggests an aimless liberal-arts college graduate—an English major, no doubt, someone who went to a place like Amherst or Pomona—who’s too spoiled to get a job and spends his time staring off into space. But here’s Marlow, a mariner, a ship’s captain. A more practical, hardheaded person you could not find. And I should say that Marlow’s creator, Conrad, spent 19 years as a merchant marine, eight of them as a ship’s captain, before he became a writer, so this wasn’t just some artist’s idea of a sailor. Marlow believes in the need to find yourself just as much as anyone does, and the way to do it, he says, is work, solitary work. Concentration. Climbing on that steamboat and spending a few uninterrupted hours hammering it into shape. Or building a house, or cooking a meal, or even writing a college paper, if you really put yourself into it.

“You own reality—for yourself, not for others.” Thinking for yourself means finding yourself, finding your own reality. Here’s the other problem with Facebook and Twitter and even *The New York Times*. When you expose yourself to those things, especially in the constant way that people do now—older people as well as younger people—you are continuously bombarding yourself with a stream of other people’s thoughts. You are marinating yourself in the conventional wisdom. In other people’s reality: for others, not for yourself. You are creating a cacophony in which it is impossible to hear your own voice, whether it’s yourself you’re thinking about or anything else. That’s what Emerson meant when he said that “he who should inspire and lead his race must be
defended from travelling with the souls of other men, from living, breathing, reading, and writing in the daily, time-worn yoke of their opinions.” Notice that he uses the word lead. Leadership means finding a new direction, not simply putting yourself at the front of the herd that’s heading toward the cliff.

So why is reading books any better than reading tweets or wall posts? Well, sometimes it isn’t. Sometimes, you need to put down your book, if only to think about what you’re reading, what you think about what you’re reading. But a book has two advantages over a tweet. First, the person who wrote it thought about it a lot more carefully. The book is the result of his solitude, his attempt to think for himself.

Second, most books are old. This is not a disadvantage: this is precisely what makes them valuable. They stand against the conventional wisdom of today simply because they’re not from today. Even if they merely reflect the conventional wisdom of their own day, they say something different from what you hear all the time. But the great books, the ones you find on a syllabus, the ones people have continued to read, don’t reflect the conventional wisdom of their day. They say things that have the permanent power to disrupt our habits of thought. They were revolutionary in their own time, and they are still revolutionary today. And when I say “revolutionary,” I am deliberately evoking the American Revolution, because it was a result of precisely this kind of independent thinking. Without solitude—the solitude of Adams and Jefferson and Hamilton and Madison and Thomas Paine—there would be no America.

So solitude can mean introspection, it can mean the concentration of focused work, and it can mean sustained reading. All of these help you to know yourself better. But there’s one more thing I’m going to include as a form of solitude, and it will seem counterintuitive: friendship. Of course friendship is the opposite of solitude; it means being with other people. But I’m talking about one kind of friendship in particular, the deep friendship of intimate conversation. Long, uninterrupted talk with one other person. Not Skyping with three people and texting with two others at the same time while you hang out in a friend’s room listening to music and studying. That’s what Emerson meant when he said that “the soul environs itself with friends, that it may enter into a grander self-acquaintance or solitude.”

Introspection means talking to yourself, and one of the best ways of talking to yourself is by talking to another person. One other person you can trust, one other person to whom you can unfold your soul. One other person you feel safe enough with to allow you to acknowledge things—to acknowledge things to yourself—that you otherwise can’t. Doubts you aren’t supposed to have, questions you aren’t supposed to ask. Feelings or opinions that would get you laughed at by the group or reprimanded by the authorities.

This is what we call thinking out loud, discovering what you believe in the course
of articulating it. But it takes just as much time and just as much patience as solitude in
the strict sense. And our new electronic world has disrupted it just as violently. Instead
of having one or two true friends that we can sit and talk to for three hours at a time,
we have 968 “friends” that we never actually talk to; instead we just bounce one-line
messages off them a hundred times a day. This is not friendship, this is distraction.

I know that none of this is easy for you. Even if you threw away your cell phones and
unplugged your computers, the rigors of your training here keep you too busy to make soli-
tude, in any of these forms, anything less than very difficult to find. But the highest reason
you need to try is precisely because of what the job you are training for will demand of you.

You’ve probably heard about the hazing scandal at the U.S. naval base in Bahrain
that was all over the news recently. Terrible, abusive stuff that involved an entire unit
and was orchestrated, allegedly, by the head of the unit, a senior noncommissioned
officer. What are you going to do if you’re confronted with a situation like that going
on in your unit? Will you have the courage to do what’s right? Will you even know what
the right thing is? It’s easy to read a code of conduct, not so easy to put it into practice,
especially if you risk losing the loyalty of the people serving under you, or the trust
of your peer officers, or the approval of your superiors. What if you’re not the com-
manding officer, but you see your superiors condoning something you think is wrong?

How will you find the strength and wisdom to challenge an unwise order or ques-
tion a wrongheaded policy? What will you do the first time you have to write a letter
to the mother of a slain soldier? How will you find words of comfort that are more
than just empty formulas?

These are truly formidable dilemmas, more so than most other people will ever
have to face in their lives, let alone when they’re 23. The time to start preparing your-
self for them is now. And the way to do it is by thinking through these issues for your-
self—morality, mortality, honor—so you will have the strength to deal with them when
they arise. Waiting until you have to confront them in practice would be like waiting
for your first firefight to learn how to shoot your weapon. Once the situation is upon
you, it’s too late. You have to be prepared in advance. You need to know, already, who
you are and what you believe: not what the Army believes, not what your peers believe
(that may be exactly the problem), but what you believe.

How can you know that unless you’ve taken counsel with yourself in solitude? I
started by noting that solitude and leadership would seem to be contradictory things.
But it seems to me that solitude is the very essence of leadership. The position of the
leader is ultimately an intensely solitary, even intensely lonely one. However many
people you may consult, you are the one who has to make the hard decisions. And at
such moments, all you really have is yourself.
Scar Tissue

WHEN I WAS STABBED 17 YEARS AGO IN A NEW HAVEN COFFEE SHOP, THE WOUNDS DID NOT ONLY COME FROM THE KNIFE

EMILY BERNARD

I HAVE BEEN TELLING this story for years, but telling is a different animal from writing. In the telling and retelling, I have shaped a version of it, one that fits neatly in my hand, something to pull out of my pocket at will, to display, and to tuck away when I’m ready, like a shell or a stone or a molded piece of clay. The story that I have honed over the years is as neat as my scar; it is smooth, and tender, and conceals more than it reveals.

Here is how the newspaper tells the story:

STABBING SPREE SENDS 7 TO HOSPITALS

Seven people were wounded, two with life-threatening injuries, when a man pulled a knife at an Audubon Street coffeehouse late Sunday and began stabbing people.

The attack, occurring about 10 p.m., caused pandemonium and a virtual blood bath at Koffee? at 104 Audubon St. …

There was no apparent provocation, police said.

The two victims most seriously hurt were covered with blood, and it was difficult to tell how many times they were stabbed, police said.

“There was a lot of blood,” said Detective Sgt. Robert Lawlor. “There were some very serious injuries.” …

Bloody handprints were visible on a window, where one of the victims apparently climbed out. Numerous trails of blood led from the coffeehouse, which is in the city’s arts district, near the Creative Arts Workshop and Neighborhood Music School.

“We have no idea what provoked him,” Lawlor said. There were about 10 people in the coffeehouse at the time, he said. —New Haven Register, Monday, August 8, 1994

The first time I read this article I laughed when I got to “blood bath.” Blood bath? It sounded like a trailer for a slasher movie. But it wasn’t a movie, and there was

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evidently, although I don’t remember that part. I remember it differently.

On the night of August 7, 1994, I walked into a coffee shop called Koffee? on Audubon Street in New Haven, Connecticut. I was a graduate student in the American Studies Program at Yale University, and I was there to work. I had James Weldon Johnson with me, specifically his 1912 novel, *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, about which I was writing a paper. I was having a hard time concentrating that night so I went out to the shop, which was not far from where I lived, and was one of the many places in New Haven where students went to read and write and talk. It was a typical coffee shop in a typical college town.

I was frustrated with my work, so frustrated with my inability to concentrate that I was giving the evening only one last chance. It was late, nearly nine o’clock. Maybe too late, maybe just call it a night. I debated with myself, walking slowly the three yards from my car to the door of the shop. I was probably talking to myself, as I do all the time, muttering about everything I had to do. A man on a bicycle arrived at the door at the same time I did. Beside him stood an average-size, average-looking brown dog on a leash. The man was listing on the bike, rocking back and forth, as if he himself had not made the commitment to go inside (*maybe, maybe not*). Our eyes met. He looked like Gallagher, the 1970s comedian—the same long hair and bald pate, the same thick mustache. Or at least that’s what I remember. To this day, when I think of Daniel Silva, I think of Gallagher, whom I
rarely—if ever—thought about before that night.

I don’t remember who went in first, but I remember making the decision not to let the oddness of this stranger bother me. Because he was odd. It was the way he was listing on his bicycle; it was the strange way he looked at me. His look was familiar, or too aware—not the passing glance of a stranger. Even now, I have a hard time describing it. He was odd; it was instinct. I knew something was wrong with him. Or maybe this is just the cliché of hindsight speaking. After all, we’re talking about a university town, and a coffee shop full of nerds off in their own odd little worlds, people who routinely talk to themselves out loud, as I had been doing.

Here I have lingered longer than I lingered in the moment, which passed as quickly as the proverbial blink of an eye. I looked at the man, made the unconscious association with the comic, went in to get my coffee, and planted myself at a table. I put my keys on the table. I pulled out my book and notepad. I took off my glasses and my watch. No distractions, just me and the page, as naked as I allow myself to get in public.

At some point, I looked up and noticed that the strange man had settled into a chair not far from me. I was aware of him as he watched a table full of young girls next to me, presumably undergraduates. They were talking about sex, a sexual encounter one of them had had recently. The girls were loud, sexy, and full of swagger. I had been feeling annoyed by them and their devil-may-care bluster, but now I looked up and saw that the man was staring at them, obviously and (I assumed) salaciously. I felt intimidated by his frank stare, but the girls didn’t seem to care, which made me proud of them, and emboldened for myself. Go ahead, talk about sex, I thought. Don’t let this freak scare you. Eventually the girls left.

When they did, the man seemed to turn his attention to a young woman I assumed to be a medical student or a law student, judging by the size of her very official-looking textbooks. She tried to engage him in conversation, said something like, Hi. I didn’t hear his response, but I do know that not long after this exchange, the woman gathered up her books and left.

What happened next? Here’s what I told Detective C. Willoughby at 1:30 a.m. on August 8, 1994 (for whatever reason, Detective Willoughby recorded this in all-caps):

THIS DETECTIVE THEN SPOKE WITH ______ WHO STATED THAT SHE WAS SITTING INSIDE THE RESTAURANT WHEN A WHITE MALE CAME IN WHO HAD A DOG. SHE THEN STATED THAT HE WALKED THE DOG OUTSIDE AND HE THEN RETURNED, HE THEN PULLED OUT A KNIFE AND STARTED STABBING PEOPLE IN THE RESTAURANT. SHE STATED THAT HE STAB HER ONCE IN THE STOMACH AND SHE THEN FLED THE RESTAURANT. SHE THEN STATED THAT SHE HAD NEVER SEEN THE WHITE MALE SUBJECT BEFORE AND SHE DOES NOT KNOW HIM.

What I remember about the moments before it happened is stillness, the hum of low voices and the lights, bright yet soothing, like the talk surrounding me. People talking and laughing quietly. Students, professors, writers; I was the only black person present
at that time, but these were people just like me, people who looked like me. So many moments like these over the years in coffee shops in so many cities; all forgettable, ordinary, uneventful. But these particular moments on this particular evening stay with me more palpably than any other moments from that long night. The stillness, the quiet, the hum of low pleasant talk. The sensation of being inside those moments—it is the only real memory I retain from that night. Yet, just beyond the border of that quiet, pleasant memory, I can still hear the rhythmic, continuous sound of a dog barking outside, like a warning.

Suddenly, chaos. Pandemonium. Bedlam. Topsy-turvy. Madhouse. A holy mess. All hell broke loose. The room turned upside down, on its back, inside out, went crazy, flipped out. Other words, other clichés. Fear erupted like a seismic shift in the earth’s surface, and then charged and pierced and saturated the room like smoke. Fear—a good friend to me that night—chased me toward the back door. But even in the midst of this utter confusion, I paused and listened for gunshots—this was America, after all. I paused not only to listen for the gunshots but to brace myself—literally to tense my shoulders and grit my teeth, searching inside somewhere for the pain, for the tearing impact of a bullet. When I completed that brief inventory, and discovered no bullet, I was overcome with a feeling of relief. Hope, luck. A chance. And a door right behind me—and I ran.

And then I was outside in back of the coffeehouse. There were no lights; it was as dark as the bottom of a pocket. Others rushed by me—I don’t remember if they were speaking, shouting, screaming, or crying. What I remember was silence, which seemed inexplicable to me even then. I would find out later that what felt like silence was the adrenaline pounding in my ears and deafening me.

I don’t know how long I watched the others rush past me before I walked back toward the coffee shop. I don’t remember how long I stood there, trying to understand, before everything in me rejected what I saw and I charged back into the shop, to retrieve my watch, my keys and glasses, so that I could drive home. Why would I have done this? Nothing about it makes any sense. But however I try to explain it to myself—my stubborn West Indian heritage, a Freudian state of denial—the same thing happened next.

I found myself face to face with the odd man, and he had a knife in his hand. At this point the knife would have had a substantial amount of blood on it. I don’t remember the blood. I do remember asking him not to kill me. I meant it, of course, but it also just seemed like the thing to say. I felt that I was playing a role; I felt that the die was cast. I had turned and met my fate. But I was watching as much as I was experiencing. My witnessing was involuntary. In The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man, the narrator
recalls being “fixed to the spot” when he watches a white mob lynch a black man. Like that narrator, I was fixed to the spot.

Why? I did not move because I did not want to excite this man. I did not move because I had to see what was going to happen next. I did not move because I was afraid. I did not move because I was free from fear, as many report feeling in the moments before death. I did not move because I knew that he would hurt me if I did. I did not move because I knew he would not kill me. I did not move because I did not believe he had the knife I saw in front of me. I did not move because I did not know what to do.

I saw the knife before it entered me. But I have no specific memory of it, the instrument that has determined much of the course of the past 17 years of my life. It went in and out swiftly. What was the sensation upon impact? I don’t remember. But I do remember that when he pulled it out of my gut, I fell to the ground. What did it feel like? Strange. Weird. Unusual. Lying on the ground, I beseeched God for help. When I neither felt nor heard a thundering reply, I started to laugh. I knew that I needed a hospital, not God. But I call this my “God moment” anyway, because when I laughed, my wound gaped open, and I looked down and saw and then felt the thick, warm blood rush over my fingers. It is time to get to a hospital, God was saying. I got up, and ran again.

I was more afraid of being in the dark without my glasses than I was of running into the man with the knife a second time. I had never been out on a city street alone without my glasses. I have been wearing eyeglasses since I was eight years old. The last time I had gone without glasses in public, I was not allowed to walk down a street without holding on to the hand of an adult. I was on the eve of my 27th birthday when I was stabbed. The last time I had been out in public without my glasses, I was not permitted to be awake at just before 10:24, which is the time it has become at this point in the story.

A figure ran toward me, a man; I was afraid. I stopped, and he must have seen my fear, this man, because he waved his hands in the air and shouted, “I’m a good Samaritan! A good Samaritan!” I trusted his words, his biblical reference. I let him lead me to some steps across the street.

From Officer Pitoniak’s Incident Report, 10:44, on August 7, 1994:

This investigating officer did find one white male subject and one Black female subject on the stairs of a apartment complex located across the street from 24 Whitney Avenue. Both subjects had stab wounds to the stomach areas and Bleeding Profusely. Due to extent of injuries and calling for medical assistance this officer was not able to obtain any identification of victims.

What’s your name? What’s your social security number? I fired these questions at the white male subject shortly before Officer Pitoniak arrived. The young white man, whom I had never seen before, was sitting on the steps a few feet away from me. He was going into shock, and I was trying to keep him from doing so. I kept up my round of questioning, and he mumbled some answers. “I’m going out, I’m going out,” he said, and fainted.
was only then that I really looked at him. He’s white as a sheet, I thought. Literally, white as a sheet. This is what it looks like, I thought. He had pale skin, light blond hair, and wore a white oxford shirt. The contrast between the blood and his skin, hair, and shirt must have been dramatic, but I don’t remember the blood. I watched him. The more he faded away, the less I was able to ignore what was happening just under my hand. An EMT came close to me and asked about the young man, and I answered him. I talked and talked, told my story, posed as a witness, even as I was seeing sparks and hearing static and the man’s badge started to blur. The EMT, trained to recognize the signs of shock, cradled my head and took my hand away from my side. His gloved hand, like my bare hand, became wet with my blood. He said something to his partner—who was tending to the white male subject—and suddenly there was a commotion around me. He laid me down carefully on the steps. He held my bloody hand as his team moved me onto the gurney. At some point, we met eyes and we laughed. The more I laughed, the more I came to. The more I laughed, the more my wound gaped open, which made us laugh even harder. It was all so absurd.

Emily Bernard, 26, is listed in serious condition at Yale-New Haven Hospital. Her birthday is Thursday. —from “The Victims,” New Haven Register, Tuesday, August 9, 1994

On my birthday, a middle-aged white couple brought chocolates to my hospital room. “It just seemed so sad that you had to spend your birthday in the hospital,” said the woman, while her husband looked on sympathetically. I began to cry, not only because of the purity of their kindness, but also because of the morphine. The morphine was there to shield me from the pain, a consequence of healing, my body reassembling itself. A word about the pain: it didn’t hurt, the knife. That and the surprising fact that no one died are the two things I always make sure to say in my version of the story.

I did experience terrible pain on the night of August 7. The person responsible for it was the surgeon on call that night. I lay on a gurney, feeling helpless and afraid. A surgeon walked over and without saying a word to me, or even looking in my direction, plunged his fingers into my gaping wound. I gasped and instinctively grabbed his hand. It was only then that the man looked at me, and said icily, “Don’t. Touch. My. Hand.” His eyes were Aryan blue and as cold as his voice. I asked questions about what was happening, and he refused to respond. Only the attending nurses treated me with any kindness or respect. Whenever I tell the story of the night I got stabbed, I always say that the person who did the most injury to me, who left the deepest wounds, was not Daniel Silva, but the surgeon.

If my story is about pain, it’s also about rage. Rage is a physical condition, I’ve learned from this experience. I feel it now, when I recount the story of the surgeon and recall his face, his voice, his hands.

It also happens unconsciously when I am out in the world. A few months ago, I was walking in downtown New Haven when a young man—presumably a Yale student—suddenly broke into a run. This happens all the time. People run because they’re in a hurry.
to get somewhere; they run to cross the street before the light changes; they run to greet someone they are happy to see. Which was the case on this day.

This happens every day. But every time it happens to me, alarms go off, blood rushes to my ears. Adrenaline spills through my bloodstream like lighter fluid. My heart pounds, my pulse races, my temple throbs. Fight or flight—I’m ready to fight; the machine inside switches into gear. It doesn’t make any sense: I’m watching a young brown-skinned man in an argyle sweater and clunky glasses hug a young white woman in a flouncy white skirt. Such a sight would normally fill me with happiness, but my body is bursting with rage. He hugs her tightly and lifts her off the ground. She wiggles her feet, and they laugh. I smile and come down.

But it takes a while for the machine to grind down and my body to feel normal again. This reaction always throws me. More than my scar, it reminds me of how much of this story I carry inside me.

“You never get angry about it,” a therapist once said to me during a conversation about the stabbing. “In all these years, you’ve never expressed any anger over it.” I explained to her, as I have explained to many people over the years, that I did not look into the eyes of someone who was really there, that—and I know this sounds odd—it wasn’t personal.

JOHN, MY HUSBAND, knew the story of the stabbing before he knew me, having read an essay about the incident by Bruce Shapiro, who was also stabbed that night. “One Violent Crime” was first published in The Nation and then reprinted in Best American Essays. I don’t know when this came up in the course of our dating, but I remember feeling both a little weirded-out and also reassured: weirded-out because it always feels strange to have people know something intimate about you before they know you, reassured because it’s one less thing about yourself, about your past, that you will have to explain.

Even though John was already acquainted with this chapter of my history by the time we met, he has had to sit through numerous renditions of it over the years. Once, not long after we got engaged, we were in New York. I had just given a talk to promote my first book, and after the talk, we met up with a couple of people from my publishing house in the bar of the hotel where we were staying. I had recently begged out of another event because of abdominal pain due to adhesions. Twice before, in the years since the stabbing, adhesions had sent me back to the hospital. Each time this happens, simply, my intestines get locked in a complex dance with my scar tissue. Most likely, the dance gains in intensity for years without my knowing it. Then the dancing stops but the dancers are still intertwined. I can no longer process food. I find myself vomiting, stream upon
stream of thick yellow bile. And the pain—it is like being ripped in two, tissue by tissue; I am being ripped in two, no similes necessary. Then, as mysteriously as these episodes begin, they simply end.

That night at the bar, Brian, my editor's assistant, asked me how I was feeling. I explained to Susan, the publicist who was there with him, that I suspected the pains had something to do with the stabbing, although no doctor had yet confirmed that. Susan said she didn’t know I’d been stabbed, and Brian said I’d never told the whole story. So off I went.

Having had a couple of cocktails, I had become tone deaf. So I told the story in all its glory, lingering on the gruesome details. At some point, John got up abruptly and walked away from the table. Brian looked concerned, but I was sure that my fiancé was only going to the bathroom. I turned back to the table, and to my story, but Brian kept his eye on John, who suddenly fell backward on the floor of the bar, flat as a domino.

It was remarkable. John, my John—so solid, strong and steady—falling backward like a tree having met an ax. His head went thunk as it hit the marble floor. The lights in the bar came up so swiftly that it was as if God himself had flipped the switch. Brian was suddenly at his side, cradling his head, pelting questions like “What's your name? What's your social security number? Who's the president?” Brian and I must have watched the same TV shows. John lay on his back on the floor in his suit jacket. His eyes were dazed, straining to register Brian's face, the words coming out of his mouth. It was all that talk of blood, he would tell me later, the blood that I don’t remember, the blood that was, according to police reports, all over the walls. Brian said it was the most romantic thing he'd ever witnessed, but I think the fainting had to do with being a man—women, after all, become well acquainted with blood over the course of our lives. At any rate, the story of my stabbing belongs to John, too.

This story also belongs to my twin daughters, Giulia and Isabella, now five and full actors in the world, careful observers of and frequent travelers across the terrain of their mother's body. They have questions. Their questions about the scar, lead, inevitably, to a knife. What happened, Mommy? A man hurt me, he was sick. Why, Mommy? He was really sick. Like he had a stomachache, Mommy? Yes, a really bad stomachache, but it was in his mind, and he didn't have any medicine. The girls fall silent, worry tightening their foreheads. It will never happen to you, I say, and it will never happen to me again.

Being a parent brings up the question of what to call this story. Over the years: The incident. The accident. The stabbing. My stabbing. What do my daughters call it? Your face, Mommy. Your face.

The girls were two and a half years old when I was taken to Yale-New Haven in the fall of 2008 with one of my bouts with adhesions. It was late at night when John and I finally realized that I would have to go to the hospital. We had to ask a friend to come over and stay with the girls while John took me to the emergency room. I can’t know what it was like for my daughters to wake up in the morning and find me gone. Gone I remained for seven full days. What sense could this make to a two-year-old? Once I was
stable, John brought them to see me in the hospital. What did I look like? Hair wild; eyes
glassy from morphine; an IV in my arm; an NG tube in my nose. The nasogastric tube
goes through the nose, down the throat, and into the stomach. It is as unpleasant as it
sounds, and it has saved my life three times now. It was there to decompress my bowel,
which was in distress, and it was held in place by several rudimentary pieces of masking
tape. It hurt, and it looked terrible.

I could tell how bad it looked from the expression on Isabella’s face. True to form, Giulia,
who never takes anything very seriously, who has a “well, that’s life” way of approach-
ing the world, hopped right up on my hospital bed and began fooling around with the
call button. Isabella, however, clung to her father, her impossibly big brown eyes even
impossibly bigger. She said nothing and stared at the wild-haired creature, and shook
her head when I held my arms out. She was “fixed to the spot.” Even now, when she
remembers the hospital, remembers what it was like for her to see me there, what her
five-year-old mind seizes upon, what she may continue to seize upon for the rest of her
life, regardless of her own wishes or mine, what she remembers is captured in a single
phrase she repeats over and over again, which she first uttered as she sat in her car seat
a couple of weeks after I was home, back from gone, taking her home from school. She
repeated it recently when studying my scar and asking me to explain the how of it once
again: “Your face, Mommy. Your face.”

SEVENTEEN YEARS AGO, I was stabbed in the gut by a stranger in a coffee shop. I have
proof: a scar (puffy and wormlike, over the points of entry and exit); another scar,
similar in texture but much longer, that covers the work of two surgeons (so far); it
covers the points of entry and exit of their knives. A midline incision, it’s called, and
it begins just under my breastbone and ends at my pubic bone, stem to stern, fore to
aft. Reminders. Every morning and every night. Evidence. I have police and hospital
records, newspaper articles, and Bruce’s prize-winning essay, my memories and the
memories of others close to me. This happened to me.

I’ve been telling this story since the night of August 7, 1994. That night, I told the
story to doctors, nurses, police officers, family, and friends. Since then, I have told it to
gynecologists, a dermatologist, dentists, ophthalmologists, general practitioners, even
a podiatrist, and of course, emergency room physicians—all of these men and women
in white coats, and their assistants, too. “Have you ever been hospitalized?” reads every
single form in every single doctor’s waiting room. It’s either “yes” or “no.” There’s no box
for “I’d rather not get into it today, thank you very much.” So, I tell what happened: in
1994, I was stabbed in the gut by a stranger in a coffee shop. I raise my shirt and reveal
my wound. I reassure my listener: it didn’t hurt; no one died.

It’s the same story, and it isn’t true. In the story I tell, there is little blood; the police
reports say otherwise. In the story I tell, I wasn’t badly hurt; newspaper accounts and
hospital records have me in serious condition. In the story I tell, there is no anger; my body begs to differ. Memory lies. To this day, when I speak of the knife, my mind conjures up a butter knife, a small thin blade, flat and tidy. It is a quick, involuntary association, like Daniel Silva and the ’70s comic. By chance, several years ago, I saw a hunting knife in a glass cabinet. I got close to the six-inch blade, and shook my head. No, that has nothing to do with me.

But surely the knife, as well as this story, has everything to do with Daniel Silva, to whom this story also belongs.

Not long ago, I received an email that included a link to an article from Renee, a friend in New Haven. “Is this you, Emily?” read the subject field. I opened the link:

Daniel Silva, who burned down his house, then stabbed seven people with a knife at a New Haven coffee shop, pleaded guilty to second-degree arson Tuesday and received a suspended 10-year sentence that will allow him to eventually be placed in a halfway house.

During a hearing at Superior Court in Waterbury, Silva, now 53, apologized to the stabbing victims and said he was not in a rational “state of mind” on that day in August 1994. Senior Assistant State’s Attorney Gary Nicholson told Judge Richard Damiani that the state recommended the plea arrangement, which includes five years of probation and a list of conditions, because Silva has been confined at Connecticut Valley Hospital since the assaults and arson.

Nicholson noted Silva had been repeatedly ruled incompetent to stand trial for the assaults. Those first-degree assault charges were dismissed in 2000 because, under state law, a defendant facing such charges must be restored to competency within five years. No such limitation applies to first-degree arson. Last month, Silva was ruled competent to stand trial on the arson charges, based on testimony from an assistant clinical professor at Yale School of Medicine who interviewed him...

Silva, dressed in a coat and tie, is bearded and balding. He rose and told Damiani, “I apologize to the court and to the people that were hurt. I never meant to do what I did. If I hadn’t been in that state of mind, it never would have occurred.”

—New Haven Register, September 9, 2009

Yes, Renee. It’s me.
When I was a child, I knew national flags by the color and design alone; today I could know diseases the same way. This occurs to me on my morning commute as I note the abundance of magnetic awareness ribbons adhering to cars. A ribbon inventory on the Internet turns up 84 solid colors, color combinations, and color patterns, although there are certainly more. The most popular colors must multitask to raise awareness of several afflictions and disasters at once. Blue is a particularly hard-working color, the new black of misfortunes; 43 things jockey to be the thing that the blue ribbon makes us aware of.

Awareness-raising and fundraising 5K races augment the work of the ribbons. Maryland, where I live, had 28 5K races in one recent two-month period. I think it might be possible to chart a transcontinental route cobbled together entirely by annual 5K charity and awareness runs. Some memorialize a deceased loved one or raise funds for an affliction in the family (“Miles for Megan,” for example, or “Bita’s Run for Wellness”); others raise awareness of problems ranging from world health to Haiti to brain injury. A friend of mine who works in fundraising and development once observed, and lamented, that some medical problems were more popular than others and easier to solicit money for. Conditions with sentimental clout elicit more research donations, and cute endangered animals such as the giant panda, the World Wildlife Fund’s mascot, lure more donations than noncuddly ones.

On some days you’ll see makeshift shrines for victims of car accidents or violence by the side of the road, placed next to a mangled guardrail or wrapped around a lamppost. As more people hear of the tragedy, teddy bears, flowers, and
notes accumulate. Princess Diana’s was the biggest of such shrines, a mountain of hundreds of thousands of plastic-sheathed bouquets outside her residence. Queen Elizabeth resisted the presumptuous momentum of all the grief but finally relented and went to inspect the flower shrine and its handwritten messages, a concession to sentiment depicted in the movie *The Queen*. Maybe I was the only one in the theater who thought the Queen was right; I rooted for her propriety over Tony Blair’s dubious advice that she drag the monarchy into the modern age by publicly displaying a sentiment she probably didn’t feel. The mourners didn’t even know Diana, the queen reasoned by an obsolete logic of restrained stoicism, and the palace flag didn’t fly at half-mast even for more illustrious figures. But she caved in the end. We most always do.

Sentiment surfaces fast and runs hot in public life, and it compels our attention. On good days I dimly register this makeshift iconography of people’s sorrows, losses, and challenges. Some of them have been my own, too, but I don’t have ribbons. On my dark days I believe that pink ribbons and 5K runs and temporary shrines and teddy bears and emails exclamation-pointed into a frenzy—the sentimental public culture—is malicious to civil society and impedes in one elegant
motion our capacities for deliberation in public life and intimacy in private life. On the days I’m feeling melodramatic I suspect that we are in the grips of death by treacle.

The age of the ribbon unofficially began in 1979 when Penne Laingen, the wife of a hostage in Iran, tied a ribbon around a tree in her yard to memorialize her missing husband. America was “seething with rage” over the hostage crisis, The Washington Post reported. Psychologists proposed ways to handle this “emotional distress.” Laingen, quoted in the article, had taken inspiration from the 1973 popular song “Tie a Yellow Ribbon Round the Ole Oak Tree,” about a boyfriend, soon to return from prison, who wondered whether his girlfriend still loved him and proposed that she tie a ribbon to signal her enduring love. Laingen tied her ribbon in the same spirit of a collusive vow, intending to keep it there until her husband could take it down himself, which he eventually did. In the Post article she suggested that other Americans could tie ribbons, too, and millions complied, and so her personal code became a sentimental-political icon. Today the flagship yellow ribbon raises awareness of at least six afflictions and events including endometriosis, deployed soldiers, bladder cancer, suicide, bone cancer, and the Australian 2009 Victorian bushfire victims.

Around the time of yellow ribbons Americans also got the exclamation-point typewriter key and victim impact statements—two other suggestive, modest cameos in the drift toward a more sentimental public culture.

The exclamation point is singular among all punctuation because it has no true grammatical function in English except to amplify a feeling—excitement, enthusiasm, or shock—presumably not adequately conveyed by the words selected. It wasn’t even a standard feature on typewriters until the 1970s. Before then, you had to be judicious about that exclamation point because assembling it required that you type a period, backspace, and type an apostrophe above it. Today the exclamation point is used with unprecedented, hyperventilating frequency in correspondence, deployed to soften underlying hostilities or to gin up excitement where no true reason for it suggests itself.

As a default punctuation setting, occupying the place in email and texting where the staid, neutral period once stood, the exclamation point is the grammatical mascot of an age that values the public projection of sunny emotions and feeling.
One of the first victim impact statements made outside a civil courtroom was that of the mother of actress Sharon Tate, who was murdered in 1969 by Charles Manson and his family. At the time of Manson’s 1978 parole hearing in California no state specifically allowed victim statements in criminal cases—those brought by government and “We the People.” Today, however, they are a routine part of the sentencing and parole process in every state. According to advocates, they allow victims to personalize the crime and elevate the status of the victim by describing the effect the crime has had on them or their families. Some laud the courtroom ritual as an aid in the emotional recovery of the victim, with the criminal proceeding envisioned as part of a larger therapeutic process. A few legal scholars suggest that the well-intentioned personalization of a crime can blur the line between public justice and private retribution. Conversely, does a criminal deserve a more lenient sentence if his victim was someone of so little charm or social worth that he had no one to testify movingly for him? Of course, rape charges used to be mitigated on just such grounds, that the victim had so little virtue or sexual morals that the crime against her didn’t mean as much.

In the late 1970s and 1980s, public discourse was becoming more personal, sentimental, and emotive (!!!). We were becoming victim conscious. Or more precisely, consciousness of victimization was shifting away from poverty and inequality in race, class, or sex and toward individual victims of, say, a hit-and-run accident, a disease, bad luck, or circumstances indisputably not of the victim’s or even society’s own making. The 1980s backlash against federal welfare programs entailed becoming less politically obligated or sentimental toward the poor, sometimes derided as welfare queens (a term attributed to Ronald Reagan). This process coincided, and I do not think accidentally, with the rise in a sentimental public culture for individuals who were victims of unimpeachable, blameless things.

Victim awareness zoomed in from the grand to the granular, from the schematic, sociological view to the fine-grained personal. Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD), founded in 1980, was a prototype of sentimental political culture and of its victim advocacy in legislatures to protect citizens from misfortunes that were devastating, random, and undeserved. The name of the organization draws on the iconic status and moral authority of motherhood, and its acronym even spells an emotional response.

MADD isn’t wrong in its agenda. How could it be? No one favors drunk driving or supports the heart-wrenching personal anguish of vehicular manslaughter. But any individual, by the shifting sands of luck, could become this sort of victim and fall into this category—even a law-abiding, responsible middle-class person—and that makes the sentimental draw more personal. Not everyone is black or female, nor could we all become so, and only a few will fall from prosperity into poverty. But anyone could be
vulnerable to cancer or a badly designed product. These were the right and easy kinds of victims to contemplate in public discourse during years of growing disillusionment and frustration with the downtrodden beneficiaries of welfare.

It’s also my suspicion that the sentimental wave paced, or perhaps helped cause, a decline in American tolerance for risk. As we move from a culture that celebrated risk to a more cautious culture of “risk factors” and “at-risk” people, victims of random, tragic fate become more monstrous to our sense of fairness. This and the corporate-class bogeyman of sentiment-drunk jurors who grant extravagant personal injury awards must explain the growth of product warning labels such as “Shin Pads Cannot Protect Any Part of the Body They Do Not Cover,” “Wheelbarrow Is Not Intended for Highway Use,” “Do Not Use Hair Dryer While Sleeping,” or “Eating Pet Rocks May Lead to Broken Teeth.”

The strong timbre of the victim in public life at this point has tangible and serious effects. Among other things it distorts our sense of risk in foreign and domestic policy. Indeed, victims seem to occupy a special tier of citizenship in public deliberation according to a makeshift sentimental hierarchy; let’s call it inequality. Publicly shared sorrow puts a thumb on the scales of public discourse. The Ground Zero mosque debate of 2010 dramatized this most vividly, as even stalwart defenders of First Amendment freedoms deferred to what the Anti-Defamation League called the “sensitivities” of the 9/11 victims’ families. Before the noise finally abated, Ted Koppel hazarded to propose that the voices of those who had been personally injured shouldn’t count more loudly in public life than, say, the voices of those nonvictims who worried about religious freedom and intolerance.

It’s not that “sensitivities” and personal sentiments have no place in public life. To the contrary, our civil society relies on the creation of affinity and obligation to each other, across distance and difference. The sentimental story can help forge that bond, and it can galvanize social justice. It was true with Uncle Tom’s Cabin, and equally so in 1955, when Mamie Till Bradley displayed the mutilated, lynched body of her son, Emmett Till, and insisted on a public, open-casket funeral. The outrage and sympathy that her publicly shared, personal tragedy inspired across the color line is widely credited with having accelerated the civil rights movement. Likewise, and to pick just one historical example among many, the first “Speakouts” by the feminist Redstockings in the late 1960s publicly shared stories of rape and sexual violation—but with the purpose of catalyzing action and making a hidden crime visible for political redress.

Theirs was transformational sentimentalism. For Mamie Till Bradley, and for the Redstockings, the personal confession of grief was the raw material of a longer political process. They told their stories not so that others would defer to their sensitivities or hear their voices more loudly than those of other citizens,
but to change the status quo. It’s the difference between a sentimental display that aspires to transform consciousness and one that aspires to raise awareness. The two overlap, certainly, but the former emphasizes *I tell you this story so that you will change something.* The latter emphasizes *I tell you this story so that you will feel something.*

**If the expanded uses of sentiment had demonstrably benefited our public life over the past three decades—if they had made us more sensitive, kind, compassionate, and gentle toward each other—they might be worth these downsides and perils. But where is the evidence that this is so?** Instead, the drift in public life, as observed by P. M. Forni, Jedediah Purdy, Bill Bishop, and others, is toward insensitivity, political incivility if not murderous rage, lack of manners, ironic detachment, cynicism, mutual estrangement and cultural sorting across creeds, and especially in schools, bullying and cyber-bullying. If anything, we seem more brutal and calloused toward each other. True, most of us no longer tolerate, in public, sexual harassment, racist slurs, or cruelty toward those with disabilities. And Americans were outraged when a Rutgers student used a hidden camera to stream on the Internet his roommate’s sexual encounter with another man, prompting the roommate’s suicide. And yet, we still hear ethically bar- barous and morally reprehensible stories of cruelty almost daily.

It may even be the case, ironically, that the proliferation of a cloying, saccharine culture has contributed to a less forgiving, meaner attitude in public life. After all, the flip side of a sentimental public culture of weepy confession, fast if not fraudulent empathy for victims, and the infusion of emotion into public discourse is that it establishes precedent for the public, political currency of all the darker emotions on the spectrum of sentiment: anger, fury, and hatred. When emotions of one, gentle kind are privileged in public culture and invited into political discourse, then emotions of another kind can slide in just as easily and gain stature and political relevance, too.

Today, it so happens that rage is all the rage. Yet the problem is more metaphysical than a matter of Americans having meaner emotions in 2011 than they did in the hyper-self-congratulatory mood of the 2008 presidential election. Our civil society’s syntax and logic are awry. The habit of thought that a pop culture of treacle and a pop culture of anger hold in common is that we needn’t polish the expression of our private feelings and sorrows into a form that’s relevant and useful, even to strangers and fellow citizens in the commonweal. We can take for granted that our treacle or our anger speaks for itself and presume the relevance of private feelings to public discourse. If, in fact, we’re drowning in a public culture of meanness, it is one that the public culture of cloying sweetness unwittingly helped create.
It’s also likely that our exposure to public displays of sentiment inoculates us just a bit and leaves us requiring ever more dramatic displays of real, raw feeling. As with any other discourse, we’ve learned to decode the genre: having watched a stranger grieve and suffer or having been a stranger who grieves and suffers in public, we know what to expect. This pushes us to find really and truly extreme anger, or really and truly blameless victims who can stir an unmodified empathy in our stonier hearts or sharpen our blunted sensibilities. For social conservatives, the most blameless and absolutely inculpable victim today might well be the unborn fetus. For liberals, the most unimpeachably blameless creature on the margins might be the suffering lab animal or the endangered whale. As for sentient humans, who most often suffer under a complex amalgam of social circumstance, inequality, character, injustice, and bad luck, the narrative standards of pure victimhood are higher, the skepticism sharper, and sympathy now harder, not easier, to come by.

Public displays of sentiment compete against critical acuity and skepticism bred of familiarity. David Shields, in his 2010 book, *Reality Hunger: A Manifesto*, posits that our age is defined by an insatiable desire to get real and find *more* real and emotionally true things. It’s a paradox of the tell-all age: how can it be true that we have no fig leaf of private life remaining but we hunger for yet *more* reality? Still, it makes quirky sense. In conditions of sentimental overkill we restlessly sense, or hope, that somewhere else there is a more real thing, a deeper intimacy to see vicariously, an even more raw, unmediated feeling—and we want to find it. “Penetrating so many secrets, we cease to believe in the unknowable,” H. L. Mencken wrote. “But there it sits, nevertheless … ” Real feeling and real emotion, like coolness, have a way of staying one step ahead of us.

**Social Media and Reality TV Shows** increase the opportunities for the casual sharing in public of feelings and secrets. But strictly speaking, they aren’t the culprits. The online social media function as a superhighway for the perfusion of sentiment into public life. The firewall around a private life of intimacy and emotions is now membranous at best. We let it all hang out. Participants on reality TV shows profess their love for each other after one episode.

I scan the friends in my Facebook account. Many are acquaintances from earlier lives to whom I’ve maintained an abstract loyalty and affection but no actual contact. Some are friends-in-law that Facebook thought I should meet; I dutifully obliged, but I’ve never met them. And yet I know minutiae of their daily domestic life. I once friended a man by accident because he shared a name with a true friend of mine. He accepted my misled offer, and now I read updates on his ups and downs as a single dad.
Facebook has created presumptive, default closeness among casual acquaintances where we once had presumptive, default formality, and I don’t know that it’s such a bad thing. I’m a social media agnostic. I’m also wary of sounding like, say, a middle-aged crank, nostalgic for a prelapsarian face-to-face social life that she most likely found strange when she was actually living through it as a young person. New forms of connection get invented, and an Elegy for the Private Man in the Privacy-Loathing Age told in dismayed rumblings doesn’t preoccupy me.

But what do we call this chimera of being closer—in each other’s business—yet not at all intimate? On Facebook we call it being friends. It’s harmless enough. We all know that there are gradations of intimacy and that there is a friendship deeper than a Facebook friend. The lucky ones among us have people with whom we are genuinely close: those who will help us in an emergency, whom we could call at midnight with a problem, with whom we feel mutual obligations, who provide us with social identity and place, and without whom our lives would be tangibly compromised. Facebook and the like promote intimacy lite.

Lite intimacies in social media create a background din of disclosure, confession, closeness, and familiarity. It isn’t inherently fake or objectionable, and if it were only a semantic problem, I wouldn’t be concerned. But there is danger, it seems to me, of losing our coordinates. There’s a danger that the lite intimacies of the sentimental culture might deplete the resources of our true intimacies. If the intimate building blocks that once belonged mostly to a domestic partner or family—the sharing of a million little details about our moods, and what we ate for breakfast, and our daily rituals and secret gripes—now belong to everyone on Facebook in the world of lite intimacy, then how much deeper do we need to go to find the everyday material out of which to recognize, solidify, and build that deeper intimacy? Do we have to scream emotions louder to be heard over the cacophony of the lite intimacy? A mild hypothesis for the new social life of our age: the easier it is to be close but not intimate in public, the easier it is to be close but not intimate in private.

Psychologists and researchers have noticed this intimacy confusion even in the closest of relationships, finding that a predilection for virtual sex and online pornography deters real sexual contact. Dagmar Herzog, a historian of sexuality, writes that young men must be reminded to touch their actual girlfriends’ breasts once in a while. This reminds me of birds who are disoriented at night in their instinctive, migratory paths by the dazzle of millions of artificial urban lights.

It’s hard to imagine human sexual instinct undone or perturbed by the virtual—
some would say pretend—intimacies of social media, but sex researchers worry that it’s so. Maybe the amplification of sentiment in public life is like an addiction to high-fructose corn syrup sodas. Drink too many—consume too much fast food of sentiment—and eventually you get diabetes of the soul. It’s harder for the soul to process and use sentiment, even the healthy stuff, and it works sluggishly and inefficiently. None of this happens suddenly; it occurs bit by bit but momentously over the years.

Even if the culture of treacle does no damage to our civil society or our “real” intimacies—even if it is a benign or socially neutral phenomenon—at the very least our notion of self is changing apace with social media and the sentimental public life that social media have accelerated. And the changes have come in ways that we’ve yet to recognize or fully appreciate.

Cultural historian Warren Susman charted the shift from an American culture of character in the 19th century to a culture of personality in the 20th century. The culture of character valued personal virtues like hard work, achievement, and duty; the culture of personality revered those who were fascinating, stunning, attractive, magnetic, and forceful. Charm was its currency. This character type solved the social quandary of the new mass society because personality proposed the means by which to emerge as “a somebody” amid the anonymous masses. Susman theorized more broadly that changes in culture tend to change our “modal type” of character like this. In other words, a culture finds (in fact creates) its ideal person.

What, then, is ours going to be? What modal type matches our culture as it has shifted in the early years of this century? It doesn’t seem to resemble a culture of either character or personality. It’s not accurately driven by a goal of dominating by means of achievement or larger-than-life magnetism. Its dream may still be to command attention, to emerge as a somebody from the primordial ooze of the social media world but not through the projection of a monumental star celebrity, as was the case in the 20th century’s culture of personality. Influence and charm in social media travel through much smaller capillaries than that. “You must Twitter,” it is often said. The amassing of influence happens through intimate whispers to 20,000 followers en masse, but it feels personal.

It’s a microbroadcasting of personality and personal emotions. *Time* magazine’s 2010 person of the year, Facebook CEO and co-founder Mark Zuckerberg, aspires to connect every person on Earth—not as subjects or fans, but as “friends.” Maybe this century’s culture is a culture of feeling in which the ideal citizen-feeler has the qualities of soulful transparency, audacious disclosure, and candor, who knows the skills of whispered confession, intimate revelation, and the trade in secrets to make you think
that you and you alone are hearing something new and experiencing a new feeling; who emerges as somebody not through the achievements of character or the mesmeric charm of personality but by the emotional spontaneity of personal impressions and stances. From these, the citizen-feeler will build an empire on the ephemera of thousands of confessions, posts, and tweets.
Playing at Violence

HAVING GROWN UP AMID THE HORRORS OF BURUNDI’S CIVIL WAR, A YOUNG MAN IS BEWILDERED BY THE AMERICAN LUST FOR WARLIKE VIDEO GAMES

PACIFIQUE IRANKUNDA

On a fall afternoon a few years ago, inside my dorm room at Deerfield Academy, I started hearing gunshots. I had been warned that in America people hunt with guns. I comforted myself with this thought at first, but the sounds went on and on and grew increasingly familiar. *It can’t be hunting,* I thought. *Why would anyone be hunting on the grounds of a Massachusetts prep school?*

I threw my door open and rushed outside the building, but I couldn’t hear the sounds anymore. I saw students chatting and laughing as if everything was normal. Was I just dreaming? I went back inside the dorm. Walking down the hallway, I heard the sounds again. *Oh, it must be a student watching a movie!* I thought and returned to my room, closing the door. *Idiot!* I laughed at myself—where was I going to go anyway? I had just come to America, and I could hardly find my way around the campus. Even if the gunfire had been real, I would have had no idea where to run.

As I sat at my desk, the sounds brought back images from my home village in Burundi. This disturbed me. Finally, I covered my ears. From time to time, I would uncover them, hoping the movie had ended, but the sounds went on and on. *A movie of gunshots and nothing else?* I wondered. *What type of movie is that?*

As dinnertime approached, students started emerging from their rooms, and I joined them in the hallway. “Were you just watching a movie?” I asked one of my dorm mates.

Pacifique Irankunda, who moved to the United States from Burundi, graduated from Deerfield Academy and, recently, from Williams College, where he double-majored in political science and psychology.
“Oh, I’m sorry! Was it loud?” he said.
“No, no!” I said. “I just was curious to know what movie you were watching.”
“It wasn’t actually a movie,” he said. “I was playing video games.”

_Huh_, I thought. I did not ask for an explanation. At the time, I didn’t know what video games were, only that they made noises that sounded like gunfire.

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There was a time when silence reigned all over my village. Rivers were loud, but their rhythmic sounds were part of the silence. People worked in their fields with hoes. There were no cars, no factories. I imagine that to Westerners that time and place would have resembled the Stone Age. Planes flew over the village, but never more than once a week. There was another season that broke this silence. It was the time of crops growing. From the early stage of the seeds’ sprouting, parents would send their kids into the fields to make noise and chase away the birds that ate the seedlings. This went on for a month, and after that the silence would come again. I enjoyed the quiet, but it did not last. Another season erupted and broke all the silence. It was the season of war. It came in the fall when I was four, and it lasted for more than a decade.

In this new season, just as in any other, some things died and others were born. Everything was transformed. When the militia attacked a village, it left behind the remains of the dead—people and animals—and the houses in ruin. People moved from their houses to live in the forests. New words appeared—*_ibinywamaraso* (“the blood drinkers”) and *_ivyamfurambi* (“deeds of the wrong first born”)—and new expressions: _kamwe kamwe ku ruyeye ku rwembe_ (“one after another, gently on a razor”). This slogan and others like it said not to worry if you did not kill many people. The secret was to keep killing.

This new season made children my age wish they had been born blind and deaf so they couldn’t see their houses being burned and their mothers being raped before being killed, or hear the sounds of bombs or their parents screaming and crying. But at other times, you wished you had the eyes of a hawk and the ears of a deer, so that you could distinguish, in the dark, a black stump with branches from a man dressed in black pointing a gun, or a thin string tied to a mine from a long blade of grass lying across your path. These were times when you needed to know that the sound of raindrops falling on leaves wasn’t that of militiamen approaching on tiptoes. For a while you wished for something, and after another while you wished for the opposite. You learned to cover your eyes in the day; you learned to see in the dark.

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In the hallway at Deerfield, the boy, whom I’ll call Luke, went on talking about video games, as we waited for our classmates to join us for dinner. Almost everything Luke said was so confusing that I asked him: “What do you mean by saying you killed so-and-so?”
“Well, my enemies. Paci, how often do you play video games?”
“Actually, what are they?”

The other students looked at each other and smiled.

“Come on, Paci!” Luke led me to his room. He took up a little device in his hands and turned on his computer. He pointed at the computer screen, at images of people with guns. “Once you press this button, they start moving and you hunt them, see?” Out of the computer’s speakers came the sound of shooting, the sound of war.

“You’ll have to play with us, Paci!”

I faced the computer but lowered my eyes. I didn’t want to offend him, but I didn’t want to watch what was happening on the screen. Instead, I watched his fingers moving, handling the device.

“What are you doing with this thing?” I asked, pointing at the little device in his hands.

“I’m playing! That’s how you play!”

“So you’re actually doing the shooting?”

“Yeah! Here, you try it.”

“No, no. Thanks. Let’s go to dinner.”

In the seventh year of war in Burundi, I went to a public boarding school by the shore of Lake Tanganyika. At that school and many others, returning students hazed incoming ones. Although the rigor and form of hazing differed from one school to another, the objective of hazing was the same everywhere: to embarrass new students. Usually a group of returning boys and girls would gather in a circle around a new student, ordering him or her to tell vulgar jokes. This worked best with girls, who would often start crying halfway through a joke and be doubly embarrassed. Some new boys enjoyed telling dirty jokes, but all boys were embarrassed if they were made to cry in public, and if you were a boy, no matter how tough you were, you were unlikely to leave the center of the circle without wiping your eyes. Every word—every gesture—was treated as an insult by the hazers, and the penalty was for one of them to rap his knuckles on your head. If you were a girl, you often had to do more than tell a dirty joke. You might also be commanded by one of the boys, “Date me until I fall in love with you!” The hazers would tell you to caress the boy who had said those words. And then that boy would scream and call out, “She is harassing me! Please stop! Stop! Leave me alone! Leave me alone!” Other times the boy would make noises as if he were having sex and say things like, “What a whore!”

A person was assigned especially to haze me. His name was Chrysostom. Most of the hazers wanted to inflict only psychological pain. Chrysostom was different. If, for example, you saw a new girl cradling her breasts in pain, you knew that she had been hazed by Chrysostom.
I met him on my first day at that school. He came up to me and yelled, “Kinyuzu!” The name designated a new student who, according to the rules of hazing, did not deserve a proper name.

I did not reply.

“Why don’t you open your mouth and say, ‘Yes!’”

I kept quiet.

Chrysostom looked puzzled, as if I had done something not only incomprehensible but absolutely stupid. He then laughed ironically and called me by my proper name. “All right, Pacifique.”

“Yes,” I said.

“Are you surprised I know your name?” he asked.

“Well, yes, because we just met,” I replied.

“Do you know my name?”

“No,” I said.

“Because mine is too unimportant to know, but yours ... You’re a big shot, huh?”

Chrysostom was short but strong. He had a thick, muscular neck, and when he laughed, the muscles around his neck would get bigger and bigger as if air were being pumped into them. He was the boy who could get away with offending anyone, no matter how strong the other person was. Students would tell you: “Unless you intend to kill him, you should not try to fight Chrysostom.” Whether you started the fight or he started it, it was for you to end it. You had to accept humiliation and ask for mercy. Otherwise the fight would never end. He would never quit.

From the moment we met until the end of the year, Chrysostom never let a day go by without spending some time with me. He made me his closest friend, in his special way of companionship. He always wanted me to tell him jokes, but he also made sure I did not go to sleep without being beaten up. Unlike others who often were not interested in jokes but only in inflicting humiliation, Chrysostom would listen to my jokes and would laugh when they amused him. If someone else had beaten me up, he did not need to beat me again. I only needed to go see him and tell him I had already been beaten, and then tell him jokes.

There was a particularly vulgar joke that hazers found funny, so new students told it often. The joke went like this: two children are playing outside their house on a sunny afternoon. It is a hot day, and their parents are napping—windows wide open. All of a sudden, funny noises come out of their parents’ room; they are making love. One child runs over, looks through the window, and calls to his sister: “Mom and Dad are fighting!” The other child joins the first at the window. After a while, the children begin to cry. As they cry, the sister watches Mommy grabbing Daddy’s shoulder, and then she shouts, “Go, Mummy, go!” The brother grabs his sister, and a real fight begins—the kids are taking sides. After the parents have “come to peace,” they hear their children
fighting outside. They rush out and separate them and angrily question them, and the kids reply, “But you were also fighting!” This was the punch line.

When I told this idiotic joke to Chrysostom, he didn’t laugh. After a moment of awkwardness, he asked me, “Were the kids seriously fighting?”

“The story goes that they fought to their bleeding,” I said. Then he broke into laughter. If there was anything related to violence in a joke, Chrysostom always wanted to hear more about it.

Another interesting thing about Chrysostom was that he wanted to tell me stories, too. He told me he lived in Bujumbura Rural, a province where a group of militia called the FNL (Forces nationales de liberation) camped. He would tell me how he enjoyed watching the FNL combatants—whom he called friends—fighting with government soldiers. Though he never said that he himself killed or had fought for the FNL, in his stories he sometimes used “we.” He would imitate the sounds of different guns and would keep doing it for such a long time that his voice would get hoarse. He repeated one story often. He never seemed to remember that I had already heard it. He laughed while telling it as if it were new every time.

“Back home, my friends, the FNL,” he would start. “You know the FNL, right?”

I would nod.

“When we catch people … oh it is so funny … the soldiers … those for the government … oh dear! Ntakintu kiryouse nkico, wohora uraraba! Nothing else on earth could be more amusing! You know how a cat, when he catches a mouse, you know how he can play with the mouse knowing that the mouse won’t go anywhere? It is just like that. Oh, boy!” Then he would laugh and laugh. The muscles around his neck would swell. When he stopped laughing, he would go on: “We ask them questions, you know, and when they hesitate … You know, in the eyes!” He would stretch out his arm and point his long fingernails at my eyes. “And then after …” He would interrupt himself with laughter again. “The FNL would never waste their bullets, you know, they would use a rope, you know, even a shoelace, and put it around their neck, and …” Saying this, he would grab my neck and squeeze it. “And … strangle the idiots!” Then, as if hit by an electric shock, he would release my neck and fall backward onto his bed, and laugh so hard that tears came from his eyes. “I miss home! I very much look forward to vacation.”

I could see he was absorbed by his story, as if he were right back there strangling someone. He did not realize that I was shivering the whole time.

“What do you do on vacation?” he would ask me. For me, going on vacation did not mean going to my family’s house, but rather joining my mother and brother in the forest, where we hid from Chrysostom’s friends, the militiamen he always told me about. I could not tell him this, of course. I would change the subject.

I tried to please Chrysostom, hoping he would stop abusing me, but he was not aware of what I felt. I would take him to a restaurant, buy him soda and cookies, but it was like
caressing a stone. He would often put his arm around my shoulders, and we would walk around while I told him jokes. He would listen very carefully and would laugh and even give me a high five. Students who saw us walking side by side thought we were the best of friends. In fact, Chrysostom himself seemed to think I was his best friend. When he learned I was going to another school for my remaining years of high school, he told me: “I will miss you! You are very sweet. I do not feel I will have someone else to spend time with and have fun.” And I could see in his face that he actually meant it.

It was an interesting friendship, but I am glad that it ended.

That evening at Deerfield, on the way back from dinner, Luke asked me to go play war video games with him. “No,” I said. “I have a lot of work to do.” I did have work to do. But I had other reasons for staying away. I thought that the boys who played the video games probably took drugs, that they were gangsters who pretended to be innocent.

One evening, I was having trouble with my computer, and I went to Luke’s room to ask him for help. I found him in the midst of shooting imaginary people. After he fixed my computer, he asked me if I wanted to watch him play for a little bit. I said I did not and tried to explain: “You know, I’ve seen the real thing. So I’m not really interested. I’m sorry.”

“Wait, you … How?” He stopped playing.

“There was a war back in my country,” I told him. “I was little when it started, and I grew up in it. So I saw a lot of that.”

“Wow!” he said. He asked me to tell him more. There was excitement in his face, which surprised me, and frightened me a little. When I first came to school in America, I assumed that I would never talk about the war in Burundi. Doing so might refresh my bad memories. And wouldn’t the other students think that I was violent myself? Besides, who would want to hear about such horrible things?

He wanted me to tell him about the war. I said I would tell him some other day, knowing that day would never come. It would have been like telling jokes to Chrysostom. Was this boy like Chrysostom? Was he addicted to violence, too? “And thanks so much for fixing my computer,” I said and quietly left his room.

Over the next few months, I realized I was wrong about Luke. He and my other dorm mates who liked playing violent video games weren’t gangsters at all. They were just young, inexperienced, innocent. It took me some time to realize that the shooting

He was just doing what many American kids did. I felt relieved, but puzzled by what seemed to me like an odd sort of entertainment. How could violence so easily be turned into a game?
wasn’t real to them. They were just playing. For them the games were “mindless,” as one friend told me. Many kids at the school played the same kinds of games. So there was nothing unusual about Luke. He was just doing what many American kids did. I felt relieved, but I was also puzzled by what seemed to me like an odd sort of entertainment. How could violence so easily be turned into a game? How could companies invent such games in the first place? And how could parents buy them for their children?

I lived through 13 years of civil war. I know that violence can become almost a culture in itself, and that it twists not all but many of the people who are trapped in it. Of course, not all the children who grew up in the war became violent. How you responded to your own resentments, whether you seethed with thoughts of revenge, how your parents, neighbors, and friends responded to the bloodshed—all of these things helped determine your own taste for violence. I was lucky. Many others were not. Maybe Chrysostom was a particularly sadistic case. I don’t really know. Maybe he would have been a bad guy wherever he grew up. But he was not born violent, and certainly the war helped shape him. I don’t know what happened to him as a child, but I imagine that since he himself grew up in that season of war in Burundi, he probably underwent a transformation and adapted the way a plant adapts. Violence in my country and in neighboring Rwanda and Congo had a similar effect on soldiers and militiamen, and especially on children drafted into armies or rebel militias. I remember how Nyandwi, a schoolmate and a neighbor who had joined one of the militias, hunted my family. When we escaped from him, he killed his own sister, apparently out of nothing more than frustration. I recall how Nyandwi, when he was no longer a militiaman, would proudly tell stories of how he killed 30 children with machetes in a single night. It was how his militia colleagues had initiated him, he explained.

I remember how Gilbert, a neighbor and Nyandwi’s friend, enjoyed telling similar stories of when he was in the militia. How every one of his reactions, when he was back in the village, was violent and how he always laughed after he had done something violent. How he would heat a nail and stab the feet of his sisters to find out the truth if he suspected they had told him lies. To many young people, violence became easy and fun. It became one of their hobbies, as it seemed to have become Chrysostom’s hobby. It is hard to allow yourself to imagine that you could become one of those young people, but you have to admit that you could, when you remind yourself that the children who are twisted by war were once lovely three-year-olds who smiled and charmed with their innocence.

I think back to the season of war and remember how we fled deep into the jungle, far from any people. That was how we managed to survive, by hiding, by turning our backs on the rest of humanity. Those parents who sent their children into the jungle to protect them from the bloodshed—they would have envied the peace that Luke and others like him took for granted. Most of all, they would have envied the fact that these lucky children did not know the true devastation of war. That they only played at violence.