

occasional reflections

-the miniessays, 2012-2024

Neil E. Das

2012.12.12

"laughter, chatter, cheer, play, fun, joy"

Whilst talking to my brother Virgil several weeks back, those were some of the things that I heard in the background as his children were preparing dinner together. It was a lovely sound.

It brought to mind one amazing Punjabi word which expresses them all: ronak

There are many ways one can write out a word in what is called "Roman Urdu" to try to get at its sound, but one term usually seems to get more traction online. I think "roenuck" might actually be a bit better, where "roe" rhymes with "o." And you must absolutely roll that first "r" 😊

For ronak to be ronak there doesn't absolutely have to be children involved, though there quite often are. In my experience, ronak seemed most often mentioned when it appeared after an absence, when grandchildren visited or when guests who were young or simply young in spirit arrived. It was something that one could almost feel viscerally, a change in the atmosphere.

And most poignantly in Pakistan the people who missed the ronak were not ashamed to acknowledge its presence, to openly admit their need for it, and to

thank, yea even bless with open hands, those who brought it back.

The holidays sharpen the point on the barb of loneliness that sticks deep in the side of so many in these United States. I desperately wish it were not so, that ronak might break in--that we might not be ashamed to say that we miss it, that we need it--that if we are surrounded by it in abundance that we may not be too preoccupied to somehow bring it to the lives of others.

2017.09.18

M sits next to me in group, his freckled elbows resting on his knees, his muscles appearing and disappearing as he rotates his forearm. In church, the cute baby, one of a hundred it seems, crooks her arm with a pudgy little elbow dimple just above the joint. At work, a policeman who used to be a student has an entire arm that hangs useless, the elbow bent slightly. He is perhaps one of the most engaged men on the force. At church again, a dear old friend has his arm permanently bent at 90 degrees, his hand contorted. I wonder again as I have done before but now with more sympathy about how he manages the daily tasks of life, the daily tasks of mind to bear up under limitation.

I have become a connoisseur of elbows, as my own continues its healing. I look with envy or pity and try to gain some perspective. Perspective is a hard thing to gain and to keep, to hear and to believe my occupational therapist when she says I am really doing quite well, to feel increased pain on a day and to worry that something is not as it should be, that my doctor's appointment in a week will bring unhappy news.

Through it all, I grow in amazement at the joint that is the elbow--three bones coming together to not only provide extension and flexion, that may appear the easy thing, but also pronation and supination, to help turn the hand--the radius and ulna in a pas de deux, loosely connected at the ends, rotating around one another, changing from being like the parallel bars into a helix.

I read somewhere, in the legion of web pages I have visited, that one of the key roles of the elbow is to allow your hand to work at varying distances from your body. I had never thought of things in quite such a way, but now it becomes abundantly clear in every new stretching of my elbow to accomplish disparate tasks, to turn the faucet, to curve my belt through the belt loops behind me, to bring the razor up to shave the left side of my face, to attempt to button my top button--I am still working on that one.

2017.10.08

In the quiet before church loading up the coffee makers-20, 25 cups each of regular and decaf...should I make it 30 each? The stress of decision wafts up like the steam from memories of streams of coffee poured out in the janitor's closet. I settle on 25. The bare wood counters stare up at me blankly and I wonder if they will be filled with the requested sides and salads and desserts. They almost always are, but there was that one time....And by church time they and the fridges are burgeoning with abundance. After half of the service, it's time to plug in the coffeemakers, load up the ovens for warming, and go to get the chicken. The calculus for the coffee was nothing compared to the consternation over ordering the chicken. Two hundred pieces should feed a 100 people the folks at Lee's tell me. Nonetheless, I school marm the folk waiting for lunch and ask them to only take a piece to begin with or two small ones. And then I tell myself, "Don't look at people's plates, Neil, just don't look!" I mostly succeed at this and remain calm until the bottom of the chicken boxes appear and seven or so late-comers get none at all. It feels like failure, but actually was about as close to on the nose as one could get. Next time 250. And as I get my cup of coffee to go with my carrot cake, I notice that both pots are completely out. Again it feels like a mini-failure. But, of course, it is not. We have had more than enough food in aggregate and many, many hands to serve and clean up. And if there were more

folks than expected, well that is a wonderful problem to have. And the only lesson I really have to remember, is one I kind of already knew, that when it comes to fried chicken, people lose their minds! And the dessert table with kids (and adults)...well I am not even going there!!

2017.11.04

An older student--North African--his height, his body type just so to awaken an echo, to elicit a response, though their faces are nothing alike. And then, too, their neediness and my obligation to them--my student because it is my job to patiently teach him, to repeat the lessons that language and inexperience make so slow to sink in; my father because I was his son and it was my call to patiently hear him, to take care of the needs that I could meet. How odd to miss not just a face, to miss a bright, sweet soul, but a body, too, to remember the head with wispy hair and board-taut neck and shoulder muscles that I would massage, often too begrudgingly, to remember the thin cramped legs in the night-time, that made him cry out in pain and called for extending the leg and pressing the toes firmly back toward him--to miss the companionship of touch even in inconvenient, difficult tasks.

2017.11.07

Vincent's Cheese Soup, a Mini-essay

When I was young, on a typical New Year's Eve we would go to dear Auntie Catherine's large house which was attached to a girl's hostel and school which she ran so faithfully with a number of other single ladies from Scotland and Pakistan, each one my Auntie in her own right, especially dear Miss Martin, always pristine, bedecked in an immaculate sari, who rather spoiled me.

In the dining room, a number of tables were abutted to one another, forming a large U with 30 or so people at table together. The cook would bring out the steaming haggis and a visiting kilted male Scottish missionary (John**, I believe you sometimes had the honor) would address it with an "ode to the haggis," ending with piercing it with a dirk. Then it would be served for dinner along with steaming potatoes and hunter's beef and a host of other nice things, with trifles and sweets for dessert. After dinner it was time for Scottish dancing, with energetic reels and jigs and wild whoops from Ian A Murray till just a little before midnight. Whereupon, we would have a devotional, wish one another a Happy New Year, and then have a steaming mug of cheese soup that my father had prepared earlier.

Last night, on a whim, I made some cod chowder with some things I had in the pantry and fridge, and though it does not really belong, I tossed in some leftover shredded cheddar cheese. As it melted into the soup, I thought of Dad's soup, which seemed to take the whole day to make, which he made along with our cook. I don't remember what went into it really, other than the cheese, which was a rare commodity in Pakistan at the time and a special treat. I do know that I eagerly anticipated the eating of it at midnight and looked longingly at the bottom of my mug when I was done.

A text from a friend reminded me that today was the day that my father died. It has been a full Sabbath cycle of years. I thought of how best I might commemorate it and remember his sweet person. An essay? A haiku? But then as I ate my chowder for lunch, I thought this simple mini-essay would do.

Dad was the principal of Murray College and the moderator of the Church of Pakistan, in short a rather important person, and I am very proud of him for all of those things. And, yet, it was in his eagerness at stooping to make some soup together with his cook that I want to remember him today, an eagerness revealed all the more in his later, more prosaic life in America (a life which was often hard for him), where he poured himself with all his energy into whatever he did, whether that was building houses or making fruitcakes or getting the meatballs just right or

planting a garden. It is that eagerness that I miss so much, along with his deep, deep love for me.

At lunch time, I also had another epiphany. It is not for no reason that I love large ramshackle dinner parties (like the chaotic one I had for my birthday this past Sunday); that I long to host a big, wild square dance; that I love the Scots (though I have a bit more affection for Jane Austen than Oor Wullie or The Broons these days); that, as in Jane Austen, I have a soft spot for formality and a structured society, though without the inequality. And, though I know that my life is far, far too elegiac in tone than is good for me, it is hard for it not to be so with so many sweet blessings, blessings, blessings. Thanks be to God.

#miniessay

*Catherine Nicol

**John Ferguson

2017.11.21

I bought a bike today.

This phrase would not be so remarkable if it weren't for the fact that I can have a tendency to buy bikes as compulsively as some women buy purses or some Americans trade in their cars or Imelda Marcos

bought shoes...well, maybe not quite as readily as that. In my defense, though, these are almost always good bargains on solid bikes which often find their way to be the ride of a friend, sold at cost or given away. And the compulsiveness of this purchase was at least partially propelled by the potential of it being an upright riding bike which I might, just might ride in tonight's Moonlight Ramble with my as yet broken arm. Oh, please. Oh, please!

Alas, it was not to be 😞

After stopping to pick up Eddie, to whom I give strict instructions to talk me out of buying if it is a bad deal, we make our way up St. Charles Rock Rd., park in the strip mall, and are buzzed into the pawn shop, where the man behind the bulletproof window indicates that the burly man at the counter will help us. Perhaps it is just as well that Eddie's wife Laurie doesn't always know all of the details of our adventures together 😊

My excitement grows as I see that the 1980s/90s Raleigh is in great shape aside from a badly out of true front wheel that will keep me out the Ramble. I fiddle with this for a while hoping with my actions to impress that the wheel is really in very bad shape...such bad shape...really, so bad, Mr Burly Man.

The Craigslist listing said "\$100 OBO," and as I test ride it, Mr. Burly Man yells out, "\$80! It's yours As Is for \$80." That was the price I wanted to pay for it in

great shape (though I would have paid \$100) so I counter, “how about \$60?”

And so it begins, the classic tennis match of time immemorial where we bat offers back and forth. Pulling \$70 out of my wallet, I say, “Let’s split the difference,” which I am convinced will work and begin to feign the “I’m walking away. See, I’m walking away” tactic. And Mr. Burly Man begins the “I’m chaining it back up. See, I’m chaining it back up” tactic. And I am thinking I might just have him, until my faithful companion chimes in, “I don’t know, I might have \$5” and then, laughing, says to Mr. Burly Man, “I don’t know, If he doesn’t buy it for \$80 maybe I will.” And then, of course, both I and the Burly Man know that I am had and he peers at the bills in my wallet that I am already reflexively opening and gleefully says, “See, you’ve got it in there.” And \$80 it is.

Gee, thanks, Eddie; a poker face you do not have...but then again maybe neither do I.

#miniessay

2017.11.28

to be crestfallen:
buoyed, then down to depths; so is
the nature of waves

I've never been a great one for change, especially when pleasant plans that I was anticipating have to be changed even for excellent reasons. Today, my brother and his family have had to leave one evening and one sleep earlier than anticipated as the youngest is ill and the dominos may begin to fall. Poor little thing. It is not that we even had much planned tonight except a dinner and maybe a movie and time at home. But it was a night with my family in my home, and judging from the diagnostics of my heart upon preparing for them to stay yesterday and watching them sleeping this morning, the results do show some of the things my heart hungers for. Seeing them now, teary eyed in their car as they left showed that they feel exactly the same way about this disappointment. Still, Christmas is not too far around the bend!

2017.12.11

Since the summer, two uncertainties have been hovering over my head, one intensely personal, the other shared with others. If they were not so

unsettling, their dramatic swoops and dives and turns, like a pair of swallows in flight, would have been stunning to watch, almost balletic. And, now, at the end of the semester, at the end of the year, they are swooping around one another in a tight, helical pas de deux and seem to be coming to rest, to some type of conclusion, just days from one another. On Monday, I will have my unhealed bone and broken hardware removed to make space for a shining metal bauble that will help with pain and hopefully motion. And on Wednesday or Thursday or Friday (there is still a little more dreadful anticipation), there may or may not be visits with someone from HR in store for me and many others. What to do? What to do? Well, first, try trust the Lord that all will be well for all involved, and then churn that pain into creativity 😊

check, check, check the mail
both snail and electronic
pink slips for christmas?

2017.12.18

A view I did not expect.

Just outside of the margins of this view looking South out of an ICU at Barnes are several things important to my story this year. There are a set of racquetball

courts like the one where this adventure began this past summer. To the West is the library where I will work for one more semester. I am thankful for the good insurance that that job has provided me.

I am here because during surgery my oxygen levels dropped markedly because part of a lung collapsed, probably due to asthma. So they had to cut things short 😊 and just remove the hardware and not install the artificial head, which was always an option. I can get it put in on an elective basis. But I think I elect not! 😊

On a serious note, the thing I feared the most, complications with breathing, etc., somewhat happened, and I am very, very, very grateful things were not worse. On the whole, I think the day was probably much worse for my loved ones than it was for me. And I thank you all so, so much for your prayers and kind words.

I shall see if I can fly on Christmas or not, but at least I won't set off the metal detector!
Photo by my lovely, lovely brother Pastor Adrian who I made work on his day off. 😊 Lord willing, I am being discharged in the morning.

2018.02.05

In the crowded ER, triaged, some patients wait in the hallway, one with an IV port stuck in his tattooed arm, another with a blood pressure cuff and monitor beside her chair as she moans in pain, begging for relief. Some moments later, her husband returns and tries to soothe her, to little avail. I sit for a while and talk with my friend who seems a bit out of place as she is nicely dressed, having just been to the symphony the morning before. She sits clutching her P. D. James novel, on which she is making no headway at all. We talk for a bit about how all of James' novel plots seem to blend into one another, though the writing is good. She has, however, made friends with David, the young, tattooed man from Texas, who is in for pain in his stomach, and to whom she introduces me. Later, a pregnant woman in distress sits down uncomfortably, her partner tending attentively to her needs. More moments pass and two law enforcement officers, a man and a woman, come through the door, which must be unlocked with a card for anyone to enter or leave. They have with them a woman with an orange garment draped over her front, but her manacled ankles make it clear that her wrists, too, are cuffed. They sit her down and then the man goes and returns, bringing for himself and his partner a packet of chips and a Gatorade each. It is a break of sorts in what to them must be a pretty normal day and they affably talk with the staff, while the inmate quietly waits.

The last time I was in this ER it was when an ambulance had brought my father here, and our visit was punctuated near its end with the gentle words of a doctor, “And then he did die.” I am not distressed by that just now, at least not in ways that I can tell. And, yet, something does quicken in me in response to this diorama of disquiet, through which the nurses and techs walk with caring detachment, knowing themselves, I am sure, how to triage their emotions, measuring right responses to so many stimuli and supplications. It is not so hard to nor too sentimental, I think, to view them as somewhat angelic—not in any sappy cherubic or New Agey sense, but as ministering spirits, clear-eyed, kindly-severe, set with a purpose. Something quickens. Should not such suffering call out some response from me? In the moment, I do not know what it should be, except to sit and talk and wait, to not hide away my eyes from the eyes of others. I sit for three quarters of an hour until my friend insists that I go home. I hug her, say my goodbyes to David, and slip through the door opened for another patient.

2018.04.09

Many years ago, when I was fussing over a dish I was making to get it perfect, my wise eldest brother Virgil said, “Neil, every dish you make does not have to be a

home run. For everyday meals it is OK if it is not perfect.” It was very good advice that I have never forgotten, and sometimes even manage to apply!

I think that when he gave that advice I had been missing an ingredient or two, as I was yesterday when I could not find cardamom to make chai for guests over for lunch, and did not have a can of evaporated milk to make it extra rich. Remembering Virgil’s advice, I told my other wise elder brother Eddie Jones that I was going to be OK with serving sub-par chai. He was not fooled. In the end I added some cardamom infused tea leaves and it was passable and my guests praised it. It was perhaps better, in any case, than the chai we got in boarding school for afternoon tea, and on par with the tea at the school of nursing’s mess hall, the school where my mother taught and where the nurses would pinch my cheeks. So, evidently, I need to keep learning the lesson of the goodness of the everyday, of the ordinary. In a related thought, how nice would it be now to have a life structured around a regular afternoon tea, to be in a culture or community that took time to so do.

2018.05.15

The man’s hands shook as he told us about the shaking of his hands, the aching of his body, and the

debilitating side effects of the medicines that were taken to help alleviate the suffering. Sometimes he used his left to grasp and still the shaking of the right, the one hand knowing all too well what the other was doing. And the rest of us in a circle listened, helpless to do anything but pray. On the couch to the left of the man the baby clicked his tongue and fussed a little as he worked on feeding, his mother periodically walking with him. And after we each had spoken and shared our needs that we, too, were helpless to change--after we had prayed--the mother took the baby and placed his new, soft form into the large hands of the man, the weight pressing them to stillness. He let the small hand instinctively grasp his thumb and remarked about the strength of the grip, as he gazed down into his face. And there was displayed the great mystery, the weak mediating to the weak strengths and graces not their own.



2018.09.07

“What if I were to speak? What if I were to show you all my cards, just lay them out on the table between us? The cards that I hold so close to my vest. No, that is not quite right; they hide much deeper. Nay, not even just inside my vest—inside my chest, beside my wildly beating heart.”

One might well imagine that the above is about being in a romantic relationship. Sure, it could equally apply to that, though that is not part of my world just now. Rather it is a description of how I feel whenever I consider actually saying anything of substance on Facebook, a desire that seems to be percolating up more regularly inside me these days.

Not that one must say anything substantive at all on Facebook; indeed, it may be that Facebook is an irretrievably flawed platform for doing that. It may be best that I just stick to posting the creative or the clever or the emotional post, for which no one will likely take one to task--though sometimes I even know that I am being pathetic and unhelpfully maudlin 😊

I am not sure. I may be wise. I may be lazy. I do not want to do all that work. Or it may simply be that I do not wish to be disliked. "In short, I am afraid." I am sure that has much to do with it.

And so I'll end this little ramble with some lines from a much greater poet, who was talking about romance I think. But I'll still borrow his lines, for saying anything substantive at all on Facebook feels very much like "squeezing the universe into a ball."

Should I, after tea and cakes and ices,
Have the strength to force the moment to its crisis?
But though I have wept and fasted, wept and prayed,
Though I have seen my head (grown slightly bald)
brought in upon a platter,
I am no prophet — and here's no great matter;
I have seen the moment of my greatness flicker,
And I have seen the eternal Footman hold my coat,
and snicker,
And in short, I was afraid.

And would it have been worth it, after all,
After the cups, the marmalade, the tea,
Among the porcelain, among some talk of you and
me,
Would it have been worth while,
To have bitten off the matter with a smile,
To have squeezed the universe into a ball
To roll it towards some overwhelming question,
To say: "I am Lazarus, come from the dead,
Come back to tell you all, I shall tell you all"—
If one, settling a pillow by her head
Should say: "That is not what I meant at all;
That is not it, at all."

-from the “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” by
T. S. Eliot

2018.11.02

The Fall

Given my photos you might think that this will be about Autumn or perhaps a theological reflection on the Fall of Man. Close, but in truth it is really just about the fall of one man, namely me.

This weekend on the campout, I was barbecuing chicken for supper along with a group of others. We were using a Weber kettle with coals and a metal fire pit grill bolted to the ground with a wood fire. The chicken was on the bone and we had started the fires late, and so I was a little harried. The last thing one wants to do is to sicken one’s dear fellow church members. Even so, the dinner hour was approaching and so I was also hurrying, too much it would turn out.

If I could draw I am sure a single panel cartoon would better capture the moment. The drawing would be of a scruffy, overweight, cargo short and bandana

wearing man tripping on a partially buried railroad tie marking the edge of the campsite, his arms outstretched, a look of...well, I don't really know what look I had on my face. Flying from his outstretched fingers would be the four marinated drumsticks he had heretofore been holding between his knuckles to carry them to the grill. One of these drumsticks might be pictured flying over the head of a terrified six year old girl kneeling at the edge of the fire pit who had been occasionally tossing twigs and bits of paper into the fire. It was found about 10 feet away.

One can think a lot when one is falling. When I broke my arm last year I had time to think of trying to reach out and grab the wall of the racquetball court. I was too far away it turned out. This time my main goal was simply to not fall in the fire pit. I don't know that I had much to do with achieving that end, though I think I did try to contort myself and lean to the left. It was likely landing on the edge of the fire pit on my upper thigh that really did the trick though. And I have the bruise the size of a peach to show for it, and a smaller matching one my left leg where I rolled over and landed. And thankfully roll over I did, because it meant no smoldering landing and a trip to the ER. I don't know exactly what my slightly wonky left arm was doing in all of this, but it is perfectly fine.

Though I did not have much time to be so at the time, the dinner still needing to be finished, it is rather embarrassing to fall in public, metaphorically or for

real. But on the other hand, it does let one know that one is loved.

It is going to be a busy month of events in October, I may have to remember to slow down!

P.S. I am very thankful to God!

2018.11.23

Meshuggah Redux

Yesterday, I told a friend at breakfast that @meshuggah_cafe used to have this table that had the same wood grain as the one that we were sitting at (1st picture) but that it was darker. I then did a little circle of the first floor looking for the table, but in vain. It was only towards the end of breakfast that I observed the slightly darker edges to our table and realized that it actually was the old table, only now with the finish faded. It is not quite as vibrant now but every bit as intricate and interesting in its pattern which still matches the swirls on my Americano and cream. Going into my 50th year next week, which I am viewing as my year of jubilee, I feel that there may be some sort of object lesson here 😊 See the 2nd picture for how the table looked in 2011.



2018.12.03

I pull off I-255 on to New Poag Road and am compelled to press pause on the Glenn Miller Orchestra swinging me In the Christmas Mood. Ahead is the short stretch of road which often makes me pause and which deserves a silent passage. First, it is up over the bridge under which a railroad track runs askew, allowing me to look along its length to the vanishing point. On the far side of the track, I have been following the progress of the abandoned nursery with its rows of trees changing from summer greens into vibrant reds and yellows and browns. After I roll down the overpass, the road intersects a narrow band of trees which itself intersects farm fields on either side and I wonder why it, too, has not made way for

planting. But I am thankful it has not. On misty mornings the trees rake the scudding clouds; on evening return journeys they frame the setting sun. Continuing through the trees, on either side of the road there are fields of unharvested bean fields. With their leaves withered and the seed pods a dark brown, there is something sad about this, though the farmer must have had good cause to leave them so. The road then sweeps to the left and makes its final approach across a wide plain of farmland to the ancient bluffs of the Mississippi, which here are gentle tree covered hills.

On this late autumn morning, it strikes me how many shades of brown there are in the world. I am certain there are more shades of green in springtime—as hope requires there must be—but today I note the browns, the beige of the soy stalk and its leaves and the dark brown of the seed pods, the dark mustardy colors of the grasses, and the light harvested corn stalks in dark loam. And then there are the trees with their bare branches reaching up to clouds of equally varying shades of white and grey. I understand from one perspective how the bleakness of it all could be enough to place one in a brown study—I am prone to such myself, though not from Autumn—but the only brown study I am interested in today is a color study. I wonder what a painter's palette would be like with all those shades. Now up on top of the bluff, I park my car, smile, and am thankful for the color brown.

2018.12.26

We had lunch together once in the back room with the yellow curtains. We had Lee's chicken and you made some sides that reminded me of my grandmother, you and her both being country folk. I loved to hear about the ways of your family and your upbringing.

More than that I loved it every time I saw you with your wide expressive eyes set in a face which showed its emotions: serious attentiveness while listening, a look of disgust for tomfoolery, but most of all that smile that spread over your entire face and broke a benison over all who saw it.

I will never sit in our church again and not think of that right front corner—the first bench and the chairs on the dais—as your corner. I will never think of cans on the shelves in the pantry without remembering your faithful stocking of them. I will never forget being with you and Marte together, when in one instance you two would glow as glorious matrons of the church and in the next be as giggly as schoolgirls.

There are hundreds of people with thousands of memories who knew you better, but I will always be grateful to God for each and every interaction I had with you, whether it was hearing you speak truth to us in congregational meetings or sharing a simple dinner

and several hours together in a back room will yellow curtains.

Linda, I am so, so very sorry for your loss. May God bring comfort to you and to everyone in your big, beautiful family of whom Juanita was so justly proud.

I am not sure what we at Grace and Peace are going to do without her. It is certainly going to hurt for a long, long while.



2019.03.23

Vincent Amrit, named half of the West, half of the East. How apropos for your life lived straddling cultures and worlds. Vincent Amrit Das, the final name echoing memories of an exit from Hinduism two generations before and the humble holy heritage of your father who pedaled the villages and bazaars in and around Sialkot on his bicycle but never peddled the gospel of Jesus, which he saw as a sweet precious gift only to be offered in love to neighbors and prisoners and enemies alike. And he gave his name to your mother, too, proud, stern matriarch, but deeply kind as well, bringing blessings upon the heads of her grandchildren with her hands upon their heads, “Jeethai roh, beta.” And you, as passionate as the mad Dutch artist with whom you shared your name, brought colors to your world that you could not have imagined when you welcomed your bride to the bright Punjabi plains. But that is a story for another time. You—psychologist, educator, churchman, world-traveler, leader—sitting with increasing discomfort over the decades in conferences, symposia, colloquia that you began to feel had lost the plot, in the great cities of the world—Geneva, New York, Seoul, Amsterdam—in one photo even standing gazing at that other Vincent’s “Sunflowers” while visiting his homeland. And then after our great catastrophe—greater for no one more than for yourself—you settled down for a simple life of building houses in Middle America near all of us boys.

Settled is not quite right, though—you wanting people to remember the man you were, the life of service nested in a great heritage—you eager to continue to speak into the workings of the church. I cannot tell even now whether you ought or ought not to have wanted your laurels to be so remembered; I do know that I ought to have remembered them to others better, to bring you honor. Even so, I was and am immensely proud of you. Though what I have always remembered more, and remember today again on the day of your birth, are the details and ephemera of our life together—the span of the 90s living, travelling, eating, making a home together, just you and me, even when we did not always see eye to eye—and bittersweet snatches together in your last decade, the decade you probably grew the most, perhaps finally coming to terms with the taking of your wife so long before and learning the pains and joys of having American boys with American jobs and wives—American as you always wished us to be, but perhaps once not knowing the cost of that reckoning. And just before the end, you were perhaps never more fully you, distinct from each of us—more whole, while your body began to fail—you and me seeing eye to eye, man to man, person to person. I treasure every moment.

2019.04.05

This morning, I head south down the heavy stream of traffic on Kingshighway. I think to myself, not for the last time, that there certainly are advantages to living on the north side and having a commute that heads further north still. At the donut shop, I wait in line and observe the ancient couple in the back assisted by another elderly gentleman and a young man. We patrons mentally tally our place in line and flow in and out of each other in a sort of fluid dance as we are each served. And today the woman's bouffant is still there, which I have seen every time on my intermittent visits here over the last two decades, only now she sits on a stool bent over with an orthopedic brace, but she still totals up the types of donuts in each order and oversees the place with a quiet dignity. I jump on I-44 and throw in a CD. Heading up this southwest to northeast spoke of the city, I arrive at my favorite curve, where the Arch sweeps into view amidst the spires of the churches of Soulard. And then they all trade places as if in diorama as the highway curves northward. Today, the clouds are scudding over downtown and the lights are already on at the stadium. It is opening day. As I cross the bridge and see the four lanes of gridlock heading west, the slow crescendo of keyboards and chimey guitars that has been building explodes, "I wanna reach out and touch the flame / Where the streets have no name."

2019.04.11

Chicken curry always feels like an extravagance, a guilty pleasure when eaten alone. It is not that I did not try to find sharers of the pot that I had cooked halfway before prayer meeting last night and which I finished afterwards, but the notice was short and the eating time a little late for most folks.

Every curry is a bit of an extravagance when one considers the time it takes to make it, but somehow chicken curry seems especially so to me. Even though chicken is not the most expensive meat in the market in America, when I grew up in Pakistan it certainly was. And one only got chicken curry on special occasions such as Christmas or when we had guests at the house or when one of my three dear aunts was wanting to spoil us with a rich meal, which was pretty much every time we visited after a long while. They each were amazing cooks and amazingly loving.

And chicken curry with its wisping whiffs of garlic and ginger and cardamom and cilantro also strongly elicits the sights and sounds of a Pakistani wedding, when men would erect makeshift stoves in a field out of stacked bricks and make wood fires under huge round pots called “daegs.” And they would cook it all there, curries and rice, both savory and sweet, scattering the coals on the ground and letting the daegs sit directly on them to finish the cooking of the rice to perfection but to keep it from burning.

And, oh, when one arrived at a Pakistani wedding what fantastic smells came wafting out of the brightly colored tent pavilions. And inside, all around the perimeter, tripods would have been placed topped with steaming platters of food. Admittedly, some of the scenes could be a bit unseemly—the plates of some guests piled high almost to collapsing and the chicken bones in the grass—but together with the pomp and finery, perhaps even these conveyed the sense of what a feast is meant to be, an infrequently occurring communal meal characterized by a certain prodigality by the hosts. These days we tend to want to feast too often, and too often alone.

And ever since I carried my lunch to work in the car and while I ate with colleagues in the lunchroom, making our office area smell like a restaurant—South Asian food certainly makes its presence known for good or ill—I have been thinking these thoughts, aroused from the hardwired memories of tastes and smells.

2019.05.01

Sometimes on days such as these my father would not notice for a while that I had shaved off my beard or cut off my long hair and then suddenly exclaim, “Oh, mera piyarah beta!” or “Oh, my beautiful son!” Then

he might grab my forearm in the way in which he would do to stress a point to someone and say, “Now, Neil, keep it just like this,” as he would also say when I had made a curry particularly well. “Neil, think exactly how you made it this time and write it down.” I think that by our last decade together, though, he had come to accept that his desires for fixity in my beard and hair styles as well as in my curry making were unlikely to be fulfilled. And he would simply chuckle in acceptance. It is interesting to me that those closest to us can sometimes take a minute to register such colossal changes in our appearance. Once in boarding school it took me a while to realize that my brother Adrian had shaved his mustache off (rather his friends had pinned him down and shaved off half, forcing him to take off the rest). I like to think that this delay is because when we see someone we love, we first “see” them with our hearts and sometimes the brain just takes a little while to catch up.

2019.06.22

Sometimes one is feeling pretty crappy about oneself and one goes over to a friend’s home for some small practical matter and ends up staying for half an hour and talking over all manner of things, light and weighty, and it is one of those holy households, holy not in any rigid sense, but in the sense of plain,

ordinary goodness and kind, mindful folks, and the conversation has not been therapeutic in any intentional sense, but one still leaves feeling more whole, and sometimes your conversation progresses from the third floor to the second and lingers on the steps to the first and then one sees a cool shot which seems to encapsulate it all with the dog named Esengo (joy) cocking his head just so.



2019.08.11

Yesterday at pantry team meeting I said to the lovely Jane Hutchinson that I wanted the Cardinal giveaway that night so much that I considered buying the cheapest ticket and just picking one up and leaving, but that I had dinner plans. Being a good Cardinals fan, I joked that she should just nip downtown before her own evening plans and get me one. And, lo and behold, already having a ticket, she did just that and presented it to me in church. I was floored! And to make the story even sweeter the newly engaged Betsy and Jeremy had gone to the game and Jeremy very kindly offered his hat to Jane, who very gladly accepted (it is a really sweet hat) making her gift to me appear all the kinder.

Just after this I had an epiphany of sorts. I just caught a glimpse of something peaking its bright face out from the shadows. It seems as if I had not seen it for ever so long. In fact, I might have caught some glimpses of it yesterday, too, as I rode my bike on a beautiful morning with friends or prepared a spontaneous birthday gift for my friend Eddie and a handful of other times this past month. It is a shy thing that seemingly mostly appears on my periphery, but my heart feels that it has been there. It looked an awful lot like Joy.

2019.09.11

My dad was a great one for dreaming up fusion dishes such as Pakistani meatballs on a pizza. Me not so much. I prefer to keep flavor profiles separate, even if it is true that all of our cuisines really are so many mashups themselves over the long ages, a fact which occasionally becomes more evident when cultures bump up against one another to create items such as the Bánh mì sandwich. The chicken of which I made crackling on Sunday, was actually 3 chickens used to make a huge pot of chicken pilau, the first step of which involves making a rich broth from spices and chicken called "yukni." Most often there is more yukni made than is required for the rice. Not eating rice just now it would not do to make more pilau, so last night I added some cannellini beans and a mess of spinach to make some soup. Having just had some for lunch it was, indeed, delicious, but the cognitive dissonance still was there. I guess the flavor of chicken and browned onions and coriander seeds and cumin seeds and cinnamon and black pepper and cloves and large cardamom is just too strongly tied to the pilau of Christmas dinner or some other fancy meal in Pakistan. Even so, it will do nicely for lunches for a while.

2019.12.16

Sometimes it is quite difficult being a see-er (quite different from being a “seer,” though there may be some overlap). It is not always so, but it can be hard to keep on seeing so many details and vignettes when one is driving or walking about and thinking about how to frame them or deciding which angles one might use. It can all be a little overwhelming. And seeing begets seeing begets seeing...

One might think that on a snowy day, this would not be the case; one would be mistaken. It is true that the snow blankets and eliminates much of the visual “noise” of the world, but often this only serves to make the details even more evident. The subtlest, palest shade of color is illuminated against the white. And if the snow is the sticking type, architectural details are often literally built up into a deeper sort of bas relief, and the black, bare branches of trees, too, are given a sort of negative shadow of white, making intricate patterns.

And in a city such as St. Louis, in all of its wonder and ruin, it can all be a little much, gloriously overwhelmingly much.

2020.03.10

I have been reading the news and the stories are getting dire—a whole country on lockdown, a university sending 60,000 students home, a governor setting up a containment zone around an entire municipality.

And it seems the infectiousness of the disease is greater than thought, with a longer latency period and even with non-symptomatic individuals being able to readily pass along the virus. There are questions about whether our health care system will be able to handle even only the severe cases should the spread of the disease not be contained, while those who are less virulently affected will likely be asked to ride it out at home.

The story of an infected exchange student returning to the country from Italy via plane and then finishing her journey on train reads like the script of the sequel to *Contagion*, with her irresponsible relatives perhaps being the first ones to spread the disease to the city of St. Louis by ignoring their quarantine. And each surface on which she sat, each space in which she breathed is now a suspected breeding ground, her fellow travelers dispersing in all directions new potential disease vectors. One can almost see how they would visualize it in the movie, a red mist, a red thread moving along a map.

I finish the day by going to Aldi. I enter with three other shoppers and they are passing around a small bottle of hand sanitizer. I buy food for only a week, but add to my cardboard box several bottles of hand soaps and 4 boxes of fever reducers and generic Nyquil. Miraculously I find some toilet paper—who could have predicted this would be the item everyone stockpiled? As I walk past a lady with her hands laden with groceries she drops two pizzas. My impulse is to help her pick them up, but I wonder if she would be worried about contact with a stranger and I pull back.

Next at CVS I stock up on Albuterol for asthma and I ask futilely about hand sanitizer and disinfectant wipes. At home I have dug a half of container of wipes out from a cupboard where they were long dormant. And before I left home, I had placed one sheet in my jacket pocket to use while I am out. Yesterday I was taking two, but I begin to think in terms of rationing, perhaps even hoarding.

I have talked and joked about shortages and quarantines and stockpiles but today it is all a bit more real, and I wonder what a crisis such as this will reveal about me, about us all. I have already begun to feel the contrary impulses of selfishness and altruism start a sort of tug-of-war in my soul. And if I should get ill myself, would I have the courage to bear it well, to potentially even bear death? And what of social life? My church has already begun to think about ways to modify our communion practice, the dearest part of our service. And I wonder, too, whether I should

even continue the relatively small gatherings to watch films or eat together that I have in my home.

It is my first day of pandemical thinking.

2020.03.21

Even in just driving from home to Forest Park to Aldi and then back home, an urban postage stamp of about a mile squared, there was evidence that the magnolias of St. Louis are blooming. This is always a time of serendipitous joy where one might encounter one or a pair of them in front of a mansion on Lindell or beside a blighted city lot. This year that joy seems especially sharp and poignant. My own magnolia, Queen Magnolia, is a little behind schedule as she often is, perhaps taking her royal prerogative a little too seriously

😊 I have just taken my first shots of her Rear Window style (only from the front window) to post later. She has, however, inspired hundreds of shots and several haiku over the years (which I will link to in the first comment). I expect the coming weeks or more to consist of days that are an amalgam of drudgery and worry. May they also be punctuated with beauty, connection, and love.

2020.06.22

Rather melancholy today. I don't know that I ever set (or perhaps acknowledged) becoming a father as a life goal, but every so often the absence of that reality bites in like the ca-thunk of an ax into a log.

Even so, yesterday involved several sweet gifts, including a kind text from a friend along these lines and also teaching nephew Jack how to split logs safely.

We are both hoping for ripped cores 😊

Uncle-ing is a kin to fathering, and I have been richly blessed with 6 dear nephews and nieces.

In ax-related news, I think being an ax man has officially passed the threshold of just being one of my here-today-gone-tomorrow hobby infatuations to becoming a full-fledged hobby proper. In addition to learning how to chop and split more-or-less effectively, I have learned how to re-profile, sharpen, and hang an ax, and also minutiae like the fact that the shiny part on the right side of the edge of this blade tells me that this heavy ax head from India needs a little more work before it is fully sharp.

2020.06.27

The story of my axe is so much older than I know. With a vintage hand-forged axe head with no markings it is hard to tell just how old. The previous handle certainly showed it to be quite old as it had a

lovely dark patina (no worries, it will be reused). You may have seen its new handle which I made from a piece of honey locust here at various stages. I only used an axe and a hatchet and an @opinelofficial #10 and a four-in-hand rasp and sandpaper to shape this handle and applied boiled linseed oil. I am very pleased overall, especially with its shape, though there are some little gouges and it could have been hung better. But the story of an axe is never quite finished. This handle swings decently but does not really have a whip to it and creates a tiny bit of shock to the hands. I will likely slim it down some more in side to side width when I get some other hand tools more apt to the purpose. It is 26 1/2 inches long and 3lbs 9oz,

2020.08.13

dog depressed, waiting
for his ulysses, away
in his own great war

Today, I briefly visited with the dog of one of my best friends who is in the hospital. I heard about the dog's disquiet and lack of interest in food. What a state to be in, to be so low and perhaps to not even have a clear understanding of why, except just feeling that something hugely important is missing. It brought to mind Ulysses' (or Odysseus') faithful dog, Argos, in the Odyssey, who waited for twenty years of war and a long journey for his master to return home to him.

My friend's war and journey are not mine to speak about publicly, but I am fervently hoping and praying that once again the situation shown in the second picture taken this summer may return where the dog has his paw contentedly draped over his master's foot.

#miniessay #argos #ulysses #odysseus #haiku



2020.11.07

I wrote in an essay in August, "I am hoping—I am asking—in counterpoint to the travesty of this year for this to be the most beautiful Autumn in living memory." In St. Louis at least it has been just that, with such bright colors and very temperate weather. I do like the cold, crisp nights of an autumn, but this year I am thankful that we are able to have fires and dinners with friends safely out of doors for a little while longer, though I intend to keep up with them as long as people will come or invite me to them. Some of us might even end up being like the delightful little

party in *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* shown in picture 3 who are celebrating Christmas in the snow.

Picture one is from last night at my home. The magnolia was decorating the table herself, by dropping broad yellow-brown leaves around and on the place settings. It felt a little like the Shire or a feast of the Wood Elves in Mirkwood.

Picture two was a beautiful table that was set by [@acschmidts](#) for a party last week.

With a little creativity and leaning into the beauty that has been given us, we might just redeem some joys.



2020.11.14

As in grief, there are moments in this pandemic that fill one with unexpected emotion. It has involved enough actual mourning for lost lives, and that often in isolation from others with the foregoing of funerals. But there have also been the losses of so many aspects of everyday life, especially communal life.

Today, I walked into the empty kitchen of my church and it looked much like it might on any Wednesday afternoon—the counters and floor clean, the pots and pans and stoves waiting in readiness, the refrigerators humming away in the dimness. Only now, of course, the kitchen has been many, many, many weeks in such waiting.

While I have worked in this kitchen, I have always felt the history in the place. It is almost as tangible as the row of decades-old, large empty olive oil cans lining the tops of the cabinets, each a different Italian brand. And as I have worked with others in the kitchen, I have been blessed to hear stories of its uses and stories of the people that made it go. And I have seen such stories myself.

For the running of the Grace and Peace Women's Winter Shelter alone, I have seen the families that came early on a Sunday morning to make a fancy breakfast for the guests; I have seen the groups from other churches who would come and make their acquaintance with the place, opening drawers and cupboards and figuring out the dishwasher, to feed

the women their evening meals; and I have seen (and on a very few occasions been) the overnight volunteer who wakes early, early to brew the coffee and put out breakfast before the ladies head out into the cold world.

And for church life itself, the kitchen is sort of a hub, often spinning with worry as us Marthas of both female and male gender have been anxious about whether there will be enough food or grumbled over the lack of helpers. And, yet, almost always there has been more than enough to go around and kind and unexpected help, including eager assistance from children.

And all of this has been in service of the room where the main action occurs, the fellowship hall, which too has been equally bereft of its common uses. It is there in the cacophony of voices that people, though admittedly often awkwardly, meet others over a shared table. It is there that the children eat quickly and then roam freely, yeah perhaps even "ferally," with their sensors ever attuned for the rolling in of the dessert cart.

And though it is odd to say, the empty kitchen and hall today reminded me especially of the sad goodness of a Christian funeral. What so many of us would have given for one of those in these last few months, where we could collectively mourn and celebrate the life of a friend or family member, hear of our collective hope of life beyond the grave, praise the giver of that life, and then retire downstairs to continue doing many of those things through the agency of a meal.

Of course, I did not think all these things in that one moment as I turned off the lights in the kitchen today, but all those feelings of loss and longing resonated in the dimness.

2020.11.20

anticipate joy
though it may nest seeds of pain;
cancelled christmas trip

I often feel ungrown, childlike in more ways than I care to admit. One of the foremost perhaps is in still feeling acute disappointment at having an anticipated joy taken away. My kind eldest brother, who knows me very well, called today to say that a trip to Texas planned for this Christmas would not be wise given the current storms of Covid swirling around the country. It was a call that I perhaps knew was coming and contained wisdom in it that I fully accept. And yet, and yet—with so many others in this horrid year, I know—it always takes a little while for the adult me to calm the child me.

And so, to process my feelings, I said a prayer, brewed some Tazo Joy tea (which my dear sister-in-law in Texas always makes sure I am stocked up with each Christmas), and wrote this post.

One of my favorite proverbs comes from chapter 13, verse 12: “Hope deferred makes the heart sick, but a longing fulfilled is a tree of life.” It is a wondrously descriptive verse that does not really tell you how to choose. But I think the rest of the book that it is in may; I think that it says to long, to lean into, to anticipate, to hope, and in the face of disappointment to try, to bend toward, to choose joy.

2021.01.01

A modest beginning

It is a new year and outside the remnants of the first significant burst of winter weather are dripping off the ice-covered branches of Queen Magnolia. The stage of jewel coated brilliance passed long ago in my morning slumber, but I am content as I sit in my bed and type. Now the ice begins to detach from the branches as little rivulets under the surface trickle down their length toward the earth. The ice becomes opaque and delineates the upper sides of the branches giving definition to the entire tree.

And as it does so in different ways in all seasons, my little neighborhood in the city seems almost bucolic. It hardly seems the same place of less than a day ago, when a constant chorus of gunfire and some fireworks (in percentages that seem almost an exact a mirror image to those of the 4th of July) rent the night air from eight pm till midnight, when they culminated in a crescendo, with a roar in the distance that sounded like a rolling artillery barrage.

A group of us had decided to sit out the waning moments of the last year and welcome the new year outside around fires—two, to be precise, which we aligned like binary stars. And though it is true that this did involve some risk of downward arcing bullets from who knows how far away, weary from the deprivations of the last year and morbidly joking about terminal velocity, it was a risk we each decided to brave. As an aside, though I have middle of the road thoughts on guns and how they are kept, it is disheartening when one hears the evidence of so, so many.

Now in the quiet, I reflect with thankfulness on beauty to be found in my surroundings, the manifest privileges of my life, and on having made it through 2020. And though I have long since passed the point when I came to know that for me that hard cast resolutions are ultimately unhelpful, I cannot but be a little reflective. I have already set one goal of doubling my bicycle mileage from 1200 to 2400 miles for the year, but I want to accomplish this with diligence and regularity, not in intense bursts that flare up and fade away with equal speed.

Indeed maintaining diligence and regularity, leading a measured life, have been the elusive goals of most of my life I think. And after the pruning of 2020, and with more pruning which still may come in 2021, I think that this mindset is a good one to try cultivate again, to try again to do the simple and the small things well—to read more and watch less, to write more and photograph with more purpose, to work first and then play, to eat with pleasure and purpose,

and to choose to do the small things that push back against melancholy and sadness.

Here's to a modest beginning. May each of our new years be happier and blessed.

2021.02.15

fix coffee, bacon
eggs; joy into my heart; my
brother in my house

Today, I am revisiting this old haiku because my brother came over with my nephew for a very kind errand (my nephew is giving me his truck!) on this coldest and snowiest day of the year, which remarkably in the age of Zoom was still a proper snow day from my educational workplace. I leapt out of bed and hurriedly cooked up some brunch, hoping they would stay a spell. And they kindly obliged.

I miss having people in my house; and when the people are "family," through blood or shared living, and they "stay to tea," so to speak, well then there wells up a deep joy.

Having people in my home is one of the times when I feel the most integrated, when aspects of Pakistani culture and hospitality bubble up inside me and spillover, I think in generally healthy ways. Needless to say, Covid days have been a bit of a bummer, though I have really had it so good compared to many

and I am grateful. Even so, it is lovely when that gratitude gets to edge up even higher.

2021.12.11

Her grandmother's regal sari came to Norma Grace by way of her grandmother's hope chest, which my niece also sweetly asked to inherit. Purchased in the mid-20th century heyday of Lane hope chests, the cedar scent has long faded, giving way to the chemical nostalgia of mothballs. I can think of more pleasant visions of how my niece might have gotten the sari, but they have nothing to do with scent. Rather they have to do with some permutation of a grandmother giving it to her first granddaughter in person, perhaps helping her to put it on for a special occasion. It does one no good to dwell on such visions, though. So, I will dwell instead on how happy it made me to see the granddaughter rather fetchingly wear it to a party yesterday and then today to serendipitously come across the picture of her grandmother wearing it so, so long ago.

#miniessay



2022.04.03

Today we got to experience that most excellent feature of American church culture, the potluck. Well, actually it was a bit of a partial slide back into the practice with a huge assist from two large boxes of Lee's fried chicken. Mmm, mmm, mmm. But there were sides and salads and desserts aplenty that folk had brought in. But most blessed of all, there were people; helpers in the kitchen chattering as they sliced and dished and plated, and there were children wandering around the fellowship hall, inevitably circling back to the dessert table. We also were there for the prosaic purpose of a budget meeting, and yet even those discussions were so much the better for being face to face. At one point, as a sort of an aside, I said that as a church we are rather in the process of being re-potted as we come out of the pandemic more fully. I suspect that feeling is widespread. So with the now standard caveats about potential future variants and with grace to each other ever expressed, I hope that we may all be able to begin to meet

together again in sundry contexts and begin to stretch out and our deepen roots.

2023.04.05

It's a thunderstormy morning in the Midwest and the sky is dark. It is early spring and there is not as much wet, glistening green as there will be during the thunderstorms of high summer. But still I am reminded of the monsoons in the verdant Murree hills. Of a cottage at the base of a green hill of meadow and pines with a sun room, which during the monsoons is wreathed in mists. I hear ABBA's pristine melodies pouring from a little mono cassette recorder. And there is tea, rich-powdered-milky-sweet. And somewhere in the house is my mother.

Tea on such a morning can evoke that sort of comfort.

2023.04.16

I read the essays, watch YouTube videos, feel chilled by the Netflix documentary, but nothing quite prepares me for how much a cyborg I have become.

I am asked to leave my phone at the Apple Store overnight for a camera replacement. I send a quick text and leave the store.

I have not left the mall before I feel the absence of my cybernetic appendage, prosthetic, lens—its case in my pocket like a phantom limb.

In the sports store, a manikin has fallen while another stands above it imperiously, an excellent photo. I reach for my phone.

My steps to my car remain uncounted. A striking building across the parking lot is framed by clouds. My car starts and asks whether it should try reconnecting via Bluetooth. Absence is presence.

I wonder whether there have been any follow up texts to an important conversation with a friend earlier. I hope for no unintended ghosting.

At dinner, it is a pleasant conversation with friends. I have forgotten to get the code for the house where I need to feed cats later. A mutual friend texts and I am set.

Then the cell phones blare a tornado warning and pings of texts from the city. Weather apps show red bands of danger. Chuckling, I imagine my phone buzzing in a tech room at the Apple store. I watch the skies and wait for the sirens.

A favorite dog lounges fetchingly on the sofa. Kids return from an outing and together they look more fetching still. My photographic finger twitches. I pull out my cell phone case and pretend to take a picture of my mug. A friend documents the absurdity.

Later, cats fed, I make a purchase at the grocery store and miss the comforting notification buzz from my credit card.

Back at home, I replugin into a previous level of cyborgian connection. On my iMac, I answer a long-delayed email about a morning meeting, joking about how I will wake up. I remember a clock radio.

In less than 24 hours I will have my phone back. I will very quickly return to mediating life through my iPhone; to mediating my life to others through it; to waiting for the dopamine hits. Aspirations for a simpler, less connected, less mediated life seem hollow. I am a cyborg. And the Machine wants more and more.

2023.06.30

After a summer night bicycle ride, I look down and see a thinner arm emerging. I am reminded of those slender arms, glistening in the humid air of a Punjabi evening after a vigorous game of basketball while waiting for my mother to get off work, that summer 37 years ago in the August of which she died. Perhaps somewhere in these arms that slender boy's arms remain; the boy has never left.

I love a summer in which I am active. They are not always so. Sometimes they consist more of air conditioning and darkened rooms. And rides on these long summer evenings are the best of all, pedaling along city streets my lights flashing or on bike paths in the parks, cicada song filling the air cooling from the day's heat.

And it is in summers such as these that I am most attuned to my body; noticing my quadriceps

beginning to enlarge and tighten, feeling my belly beginning to loosen. And eating, too, becomes a simpler affair, with black coffee for breakfast followed by supper becoming a doable possibility for some days. And in moments when my brain is bathed in endorphins, the most fantastic possibilities emerge, the simplest of which involve some long unworn sports coats hanging in my closet.

But it is not in times like these when it is most useful to talk to myself, to plan out possibilities. In the shimmering moments of an active summer, it is easy. But it is when the long, hot days begin to wane, when the chill begins and nightfall creeps closer to the end of the workday, when creamy sweet coffee and croissant breakfasts and comfort foods extend their appeal instead, that is when I need to talk to myself and remind myself to keep alive, to make manifest, the dreamy possibilities of summer.

2023.08.08

The Das boys briefly had a reunion last night, the first time being altogether after many years. And sis-in-laws and half the complement of nieces and nephews were also present, the other half elsewhere as the two nests begin to empty, which even from the perspective of this bachelor uncle is a very bittersweet process. But they are lovely, loving nests from which to fledge and I could not be more grateful. And gratitude also wells up for a long, lingering evening beginning with conversation around a good meal, which then flowed into the living room, with conversation and jests ebbing and flowing till well

past several folks normal bedtimes, until until the eldest brother thought it was time and the middle brother prayed and we went into the night. My self-appointed role as the youngest is often the jester, providing comic relief and commentary. "OK, kids, this is the politics portion of the evening." "This is the family therapy section." It is a role which I don't often get to inhabit, but is totally authentic. It is lovely to have nieces and nephews who are polite enough to sit out long conversations and even more be intrigued and amused by them and to join in. The only pity was that we did not have time for the "The Jane Austen movie viewing portion of the evening." Another time.



We missed you Andrew, Grace, and Matthew!

2023.09.01

I've finally entered the fellowship of those who have played grudging host to SARS-CoV-2. I know I am most fortunate; it is a fellowship of the living and dead. It is a fellowship of those who suffer with long illness; mine is relatively mild. Still, it is a strange feeling for my body to finally wrestle with a virus with which surely it has been bathed so often. It is strange to experience symptoms which I have only read and heard and watched so much about, to play a cross-country game of symptom Bingo with my brother, surmising that we have different strains. Having been spared from the direst symptoms, I have the leisure to contemplate the oddest, anosmia. What?

Well, to find out just follow your 'nos'e, mine which currently is not working , which also has had the knock-on effect of decimating all nuances of taste. Only sweet, sour, salty, bitter faintly register. Do the regions in which I taste these basic flavors correspond to those regions in the old medical illustrations? It is all wondrous strange...and discouraging. It is also revelatory of the degree to which I value nuances of flavor just as much as the nuances of sight in photography and inflections of sound in conversations. It is unsettling, to place aftershave under my nose and smell nothing, to cook a pot of chicken soup, not knowing what flavor I have concocted. It should not matter, and yet it does. Cooking is so wrapped up in community that it is hard to consider 'what ifs.' When I am feeling better, I mow a yard. I fill the gasoline tank and cannot smell this most volatile of scents; I mow and cannot smell the pungent aroma of grass. There is only so much summer left. Cooking my supper, I place pork steaks in the skillet and add salt, pepper, garlic powder. And there it is. An ever so slight hint of part of the smell of garlic. It is the softer, oniony component and it only registers in the tip of my nose. The sharp, spicy components remain elusive. And still I am cheered, grateful. Oddly, I find that not being able to smell makes me want to eat more, as if I can corral flavor. It just might be that less, of higher quality is the way to go. And I think I need not fear Epicureanism.

P.S. I returned to work today.

2023.09.12

A friend sends me a photo of me as a child standing beside an old man. I am throwing my head back, laughing. I remember the texture of my cowboy print shirt; synthetic, scratchy, polyester. There are servants' quarters in the background with a servant in front of them. The old man, too, is a servant. The word jars....He is our cook who learned his repertoire of western dishes in missionary households. He makes amazing curries. When I was a child he would smoke a hookah with my nanny. In summers he comes with us to the mountains, one of the hill stations of the British Raj. He does not live in the quarters pictured here but rides his heavy steel bike across the city. He is Sardar, a name meaning prince or leader. His masterful mustache matches it. And he has been a bold, imposing man in his past. My father as a young man knew him when he wildly danced the bhangra while intoxicated; arms raised, his eyes flashing red. Sardar said that the day that his daughter was born was the last day he drank alcohol. He is a quiet man, but quick to laugh or to scold if I try to sneak some morsel. He raises a water buffalo within the compound that surrounds his city house. He honors us with "boli," the colostrum after his buffalo gives birth. Our family's relationship to Sardar is close. It is not complicated, until, that is, I might tell a story later in life beginning with, "One time our cook..." And, of course, it is complicated, a tapestry of threads of colonialism and class woven with the joys and trials of a family who loved their cook, who would visit his family at Christmas. A week after my mother's funeral, when I was just sixteen, my father, my brothers, and I are in a quiet room. Outside the open window, Sardar is squatting and using a sickle to cut

the tall grass for his buffalo which he will carry home in a bundle on his bicycle. Somehow his attention is drawn and he is invited into the room with us. And there the college president and his cook sit across from one another racked with heaving sobs. Sardar weeps for his oddest of white memsahibs, who walked to work through the slums, labored so hard as a nurse, and so often right alongside him in the kitchen.

Thank you for the photo, Malcolm E Murray!



2023.11.19

More photographic gifts from the past. This time from my own camera, by way of Facebook Memories.

It is one of the platform's finest features, like perusing a visual diary, one that often presents moments of serendipity. The effects of so off-loading our memories, alas, is a question for an entirely different sort of essay and not just a mini one. These are from Artists for Pakistan from 2010, a collaborative effort to raise money for victims of the flooding Indus. These are the ones of my father. The date is Saturday, October 16th, just three weeks and a day before my father would die on a Sunday evening. It is a little hard to believe, really, as he is so vital in these photos. It is not that loss that struck me today, though. It is just that, that he is so vital in these photos.

Vita->vitalis->vital. From the Latin for "life." They well capture the energy and joy Dad had when talking to friends, old and new, of which they were many, made at Walmart, Captain Ds, Home Depot... His hands are animated. For special points, he might just clasp his hand right on one's forearm for a moment. The animation was not just in his hands. You can see it in his face; an inherent eagerness, a fundamental sweetness. In the two in which he is with my brother, it is so lovely to see their matching face-tightening smiles and their mirrored postures. And I, of course, too, remember that very vest he is wearing and the shape of his form. For many years in the library a patron from somewhere in North Africa has asked for my help. Often. He calls me "boss" and is always very grateful. His face looks nothing like my father's, but when I see him from behind or walking across the quad in a long, formal, winter coat, the dark, balding head, the certain stoop of the shoulders, reverberates an echo, an emotion, every bit as powerful as these photos do.

#miniessay



2023.12.05

My father used to both love and hate home improvement, which also extended to the shopping it entailed. There were times he shopped joyfully, jovially interacting with salespeople. At other times, he told me, he would just wander the aisles, going from one store to another not knowing what he was doing. I am aware of the jovial times because often I was with him; he was likely more jovial because I was with him. It was the same with the work; his mood was very much a reflection of whether he felt one of his sons was with him in it. My father's relationships

with us, his sons, were complex. Though he wanted us to be Americans through and through, his expectations for shared work and life together were quite Pakistani, to a degree to which I do not believe even he was aware. After my mother died in 1986, Dad and I shared almost all of the 90s together; it is a decade I cherish. His pain likely only became more acute when I moved away in the early aughts to carve out a life on my own and possibly to marry. He would only live a decade more. It would be a hard one, but one in which each of us brothers cared for him as best we could, in his own home or in our own. But by the end of his life, I do believe that he had grown somewhat in understanding the dynamics of leaving and cleaving, of living and letting live. At least that is what I felt in our final months together. I was reminded of my father's shopping by this 2014 picture that appeared in Facebook memories. My stores of wandering are not of the big box variety, but thrift stores. They are alike, however, in that they both are aspirational, promising to provide the materials to build a fuller, deeper life. But in both, truly, you only leave with what you came in with. My feelings about thrift stores, in ways that are a little too personal to explain however clever the writing, are also conditioned by the fact that though I succeeded in leaving I never have managed the cleaving bit. Proverbs 14:10 says we cannot know each other's joys or pains, but if I am in a thrift store and one of these moods descends, with its deep aches, I think I know how my father felt as he wandered, wandered the aisles.

2024.02.26

Is it an "oofy" age? Or is it just that I have been saying it a lot recently? I've noticed that I have been writing it a fair bit. I am not sure I say it much, but there have been internal "oofs" aplenty. So much so that I was compelled to Google the definition: "an interjection used to express discomfort, surprise, or dismay. It can also be used to sympathize with someone else's pain or dismay, or to express one's own." Er...oof. I had not consciously thought to connect it to discomfort/dismay so much. In actuality, it is a word likely derived from a visceral sound one's body makes when one's breath is knocked out of one. Current usage has almost made it a metaphor of throwing one's hands up, of not knowing what to do with a piece of information, except to utter it. And I very much swim in this current. It also may serve as a softening to a sort of resignation when facing an intractable problem. And in the short run this may be a very helpful thing. After a while, though, one has to breathe in again and out and in again and set about doing the hard thing. Oof.

2024.04.10

There was a time when I listened to NPR enough to keep a little running collection of NPR host names which were interesting either for their demographic diversity and/or their unique pronunciation. I'm looking at you, Michelle Norris. Did I neigh to myself each time I heard your name, Scott Horsley? I plead the fifth. With some affection, I mused about an

SNL-style skit about NPR job interviews where the interviewee's prospects would dramatically change for the better when he or she corrected the pronunciation of a seemingly "standard" name to something more dramatic.

Amused though I was, I nonetheless genuinely appreciated the diversity. Listening as a brown-white-Midwestern-Pakistani, religious and socially conservative American, I added to the diversity. Though most of my own listening preferences might readily have been tagged with #nprsowhite--Prairie Home Companion; Car Talk; Wait, Wait, Don't Tell Me; The Splendid Table, Ask Me Another--there was also the occasional dipping into This American Life and Fresh Air and our local St. Louis on the Air if an interesting topic was on offer; and often there were.

Increasingly, though, the number of my "driveway moments" began to decline in inverse proportion to the number of times I would harumph to myself in my car about bias. It was a drifting apart until there was no longer a 90.7 preset on my radio. Or if there were one it was little used, perhaps only on when a vehicle was returned from a loan to a friend. As with the country, ours was a drift that perhaps became polarization.

If I am doing things right, occasionally I will create a ping in my echo chamber, like a submarine mapping its surroundings. If I am doing it right, I will attend to

the sounds and distortions that echo back to me mapping the shape of my echo chamber. My current chamber is an odd-shaped one with numerous alcoves, some of which have passages to one another, creating resonances and amplifications, for better or worse. Pay attention to all the sounds. More instructive still, pay attention to the echoes when a ping occurs during a disagreement with a friend about an issue. If I am willing to listen, the data from such pings can clue me in when I may be drifting into seas of confusion or conspiracy.

In short, even if imperfectly, I am generally aware of my echo chambers; I am aware of my drift. In this essay in *The Free Press*, Uri Berliner (see what I mean with the names!) a longtime editor at NPR, a man who loves NPR in his DNA it seems, details the ways in which he believes that it, too, has drifted.

I will not deny that I present this article partially as a polemic, though I hope it is a winsome one. Reading it, though, was also a sort of catharsis for me, if a sad sort of one, that the drift has not been one-sided. I hope you choose to read it, too.

If you choose to respond to my words or Uri's or to others who may choose to respond, I hope we may interact with grace.

2024.07.15

Ah, the folks at Aldi. This summer they are offering a special buy of Barissimo Rainforest Alliance Certified Cherry Flavored Ground Coffee. Once having had cherry flavored coffee in Michigan, I was very excited to try this. And it did not disappoint; I am eager to stock up. Does it taste like cherries? Well, not really, though I do not eat cherries often enough to be the best judge. But it does taste like cherry flavored food, say like the deep flavor notes in a black cherry ice cream. Perhaps, it is rather pitiful to be enamored of an artificially concocted flavor, but those food scientists know their work. Better still, the smell and taste of the coffee is like what I always imagined that cherry tobacco would taste like, in a way that smoking actual flavored tobacco in a pipe or a Swisher Sweet has never seemed to match. For me the smells of cherry and other aromatic tobaccos are in that class of scents that jangle up the olfactory nerve with shockingly strong power to evoke moments from childhood. I am a child in a drug store in Wilshire Village shopping center in East Alton in the 80s with my aunt's dress shop a few doors down. And in the drug store the bags of tobacco are stacked on an open shelf for easy access. I pick them up in turn and press the plastic against my nose and inhale those rich, glorious smells. Of course one could not do that now, I think, whether a child or an adult. More's the pity.

2024.09.05

I love atlases, but they have always let me down. In truth, it is my stupidity that has let me down; me not having bothered to let the scale of a map (or just plain common sense) inform my imaginings. When I first drove to Denver on I-70, I was disappointed not to see mountains immediately upon crossing the Kansas-Colorado border, but rather only after hours and hours of driving on the same imperceptibly upsloping road through arid farmland as that in Kansas. Once (and I am ashamed to even admit this--I was younger) upon climbing a dorm high-rise in Bloomington, Illinois, I looked north to try to see the Sears Tower. Yes, it is still the Sears Tower to me ;) And today, as with the first time I took the highway up what I like to call the "west coast of Michigan," I did not see the mass of Lake Michigan on my entire journey up. Though near Holland, I did see a bright white cloud bank hanging above and against dark storm clouds which I knew to be above the lake. It was a severe, shocking, beautiful tableau. And, so, after I settled into my room and had the first session of my school reunion where we sang old hymns and choruses together, I felt the pull of the lake and even in the darkness walked down to make first contact. And there the gentle swells belied the intensity and power of that great dark reservoir. I am undone even

by the vastness of a lake, never mind the ocean. They
did well to call these lakes great.

2024.09.21

artifacts of being
deposited in layers
my spare room a tell

I am getting better at actually revising my writing.

This is growth.

In this haiku, I changed some words and even the
order of lines. I know it is not strictly necessary to be
constrained to 5-7-5 syllables for haiku, but I like the
discipline. I say that only to note that I rather cheat in
line one. I am still well pleased with my pun in the last
line.

One of the reasons that I do not get much cleaning
done in this room is because it all feels like so much
personal archaeology, only the material culture that
has been laid down is from my own life and many of
the artifacts are imbued with emotion. The process
can very quickly get bogged down.

2024.09.28

This morning just a little after midnight, my sweet Aunt Verdna died. She had been at her daughter's home on hospice for several weeks with her three children taking care of her and with her family frequently visiting. Last Sunday afternoon, my brother Adrian accompanied me to visit as well. It was very kind; Sunday is a working day for him. "Do we need to text," I asked? No.

He was right. It is nice to have folks you can visit so. My cousins all welcomed us, and Aunt Verdna insisted on getting up and we helped her to her chair. While we visited, she communicated as best she could, even though it was hard. And it was all hard for us all. It was also beautiful and warm and life-giving.

I was there for an hour, but my cousins spent weeks, so I will not be glib about how hard it must have been. I will only say, that may we all be so blessed to have family that will be faithful in such hardness. That we will have family who will be there at the end. Of course, we believe it is not the end. We believe that at the end of all things, that in the presence of Jesus, we will see her again.

It was my brother Adrian who was our Aunt Verdna's favorite. The cycles of family visits from Pakistan

made it so that he was a toddler on one of them. And he was a cute one and became Aunt Verdna's special one. Of course, we were all dear to her and to Uncle Virgil. We lived with them on one furlough, and they were the sort of relatives (and we the sort of family) where when my mom was working they could spank us if we needed to be spanked. And, though, it may be hard to imagine, the number of times we needed to be was not zero 😊

To acknowledge some of the harder parts of the past, to not let the rosy hue of nostalgia blur them out completely, Aunt Verdna and my dear Uncle Virgil had a period of years when they lived apart. That story is not mine to tell, except that in some of those years our family lived with my uncle and grandma. Yes, in those years he was a little gruffer, but I cherish them as times when I really got to know him. And, I believe, that in all of them he still planted a garden and mowed the yard at Aunt Verdna's.

And it is mine to tell that their reconciliation (and their sweet life together in the late 80s and 90's and 2000s) is one of the Ebenezers that I raise to mark the help and goodness of God. There was God.

In the later years, it is true that in some that I might have seen Aunt Verdna only once a year at Thanksgiving. It may have been more if there were a funeral or a notable birthday. But upon meeting, it was always a hug and a "How you doing, sweetie?"

And to a long-motherless child, those moments were sweet. And there she sat, regal and impeccably dressed. These pictures attest that she was a classy lady. And she and my dear Aunt Carolyn, so often seated beside her, would preside as matriarchs over our gatherings, with children and grandchildren and nephews all coming to greet and hug them, to rise up and call them blessed.

Aunt Verdna was 93.



2024.10.06

Driving home from our church's camp out, this classic Norman Rockwell illustration came to mind. Of course this was not my situation as my friend Damarcus and I, two singletons, took a bit more of a scenic route, to wend through Illinois farmland at harvest on a warm day at the cusp of Fall. It is sort of a tradition. It is always such a beautiful slice of rustic Americana, with farm machinery both rusting in overgrown yards and active in the dusty fields. Some of the soybean fields are still a bright ochre; the fields ready for harvest are a study in browns, with dark, dried seed pods. But on other roads in these farm counties, most likely on the Interstate to make the journey shorter, I can imagine carloads of friends which may be a better match for the Rockwell. Our church kids and friends, from teenagers down to the toddlers with wispy curls, well, they campout hard, with nary an electronic gadget in sight and adventures all day and into the night. It is really rather amazing and good. I hope for my parent friends that a far greater percentage of car occupants were asleep than in the illustration. And what about, Milligan, Pippin, and Nash, our intrepid trio of campout dogs, did they sleep in their respective cars? I imagine by now they are finishing reacquainting themselves with the comforting corners and couches and carpets of their homes, and plopping themselves down with contented doggy sighs. Even as did I, just after quickly bringing in all the things to place haphazardly on the first floor, even as I plopped down onto my glorious, thigh high, pillow-topped, full-size bed, echoing those contented sighs.

#miniesay



