

Plan Nine



by Joe Ferguson

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Hanging from a cliff, let go
and agree to accept the experience.
After annihilation, come back to life.
I could not deceive you!

Ta-hui

Yvonne

We were alone when we first met! She was beautiful of course, as Dental Hygienists invariably are. She startled me as she glided up to the registration window and I found myself fumbling self-consciously with the February issue of *Wired* that I had been reading. Her hair and eyes were somehow exotic and she had that exquisite medicinal scent of rubbing alcohol about her!

From that moment I thought of her as *Yvonne!*

"Is this your first visit?" she purred.

"Yes!" I stammered as I rose, barely able to control of the pile of magazines, insurance forms, car keys, and miscellaneous personal effects I held in my lap. "I've done the best I could with these forms. Naturally, I know nothing of my Master Group Plan Identification Number or my Mother-In-Law's Medicare status designation. I hope it will do!"

She didn't even glance at the forms!

"*You'll* do!" I thought she said as she turned away and slipped out of sight.

Moments later she reappeared in the doorway and led me silently down the hall to the chamber that she had prepared for us. She entered ahead of me and leaned seductively against the instrument cabinet. I fell gratefully back into the recliner she offered and sank my head into the embrace of the brown leather headrest.

She gazed at me reflectively for a moment as I lay there helpless before her. Then she advanced to deftly manipulate the controls, which thrust me parallel to the plane of her equipment table! I knew this would be my last opportunity to speak to her normally, but she set to work on me with her instruments before I could utter a word!

Our next encounter shall be very different!

I shall pour out my soul to the recorder! I shall recite that which I have yearned to speak in our past encounters, but could not!

I enter the chamber as always. I set the portable on an inconspicuous counter beneath the magazine and surreptitiously depress *Play*. As the contoured surface of the recliner caresses me, I take a last sweeping glance at my horizon. Her face... as near to me as my computer screen, suggestively covered with that delicate blue particle board mask that only she knows how to wear properly! The Flossing Poster on the ceiling(?)! **THAT DAMNED LIGHT!!!**

And then I let my heavy eyes fall shut and hear my own clear and authoritative voice take command of the situation, as I have known that it would!

"I like to come in every three or four months. I can't seem to keep the plaque from accumulating in the lower front."

She has glanced over at her instrument tray to locate the tiny angled mirror and the miniature backhoe they use at first to get the heavy stuff. She hesitates momentarily at the sound of the machine behind her and then continues her deft motion, concluding that her peripheral vision has played some trick on her.

"Calculus, eh? It's in your *Jeans* you know! You could probably eat just about anything and get nary a Carrie!"

By this time, her nimble fingers have coaxed apart my languid lips and she has inserted both of her instruments deeply into my exposed mouth. I know better than to attempt a local reply!

She clicks the mirror expertly first along the length of my upper, and then my lower left interior! Now along the right! She begins to pick tentatively at the largest protuberances!

"So how did you ever get to *Denver* of all places?" she asks after she has gotten well into the rhythm of things.

Oh God! Oh *Ecstasy!* ***I have her!***

How many times before has she asked this question in our past encounters? How I have always longed to respond!

"We really like Colorado very much! It's so scenic everywhere you look! And we all love to ski!" the machine responds in my voice, now directly behind her.

She has been staring intently into my distended mouth simultaneously from two opposite directions at a range of perhaps four inches for several minutes now. She is clearly shaken! Reluctantly, she adjusts the throttle on the nitrous-oxide tank downward by a full mark... *must be the fumes!!*

"What is your Social Security Number?" she asks tentatively, instinctively groping to assure herself that she is not actually living out this nightmare!

"550-72-6740. It was on the third line of the insurance form, wasn't it?" rattles the machine implacably. My incredible foresight is the product of extensive field experience!

She is clearly disoriented now! She changes instruments several times, in the process giving me a semi-coherent account of how *she* got to Denver and everything else she can think of about life since her birth.

She is a *desperate* woman!

After two more increasingly esoteric and perfectly choreographed verbal exchanges she uneasily rinses my molars with a high-pressure saline solution and thrusts the suction tube viciously between my lips while mopping my sodden face with her towel.

What will she *do*? She *must* know by now! Will she ask me to leave? Will she instinctively lash out behind her and grasp the insidious device concealed in her *derriere*? Will she turn and smash the monstrosity in my face?!?

The machine remains maddeningly silent! Indecision must be racking every fiber of Yvonne's masked and invisible features!

Finally, as though an unbearable tension has been relieved, she turns and reaches for the Floss!

Mechanically, she recites the dental version of *Miranda*. With icy control she intones, "You are about to be *flossed!* Anything I obtain from this procedure can and will be discarded in the spittoon in front of you. You have the right to floss yourself and we encourage you to do so regularly. You have the right to refuse this procedure if you can talk. Do you have anything to say?"

Knowing that the damned machine will inevitably be silent at this unanticipated juncture, I venture a conspicuously local "*AxqarqqqqOK!*"

And then she does it to me right there in the chair!

The floss darts fluidly among my exposed teeth and gums! *Mint!* Totally unnecessary! We have talked earlier about the need for Auto-Flossing and I have agreed that I will try to do it every day; at least in the evenings. The mint seems completely uncalled for, but I am delighted!

To this day I think of it as the Dental Hygienist's equivalent of a hug!

"I really love kids! I wish I had time for a dozen of them!" the machine blurts in my uninspired drone just as her floss attains the apex of my left lower bicuspid!

"Can you arrange to have a postcard sent to me in three months or so?... to remind me to call for another appointment?"

Chasing Birds

The only satisfying vehicle for chasing birds is a Jet Ski.

As it happens, the birds that live around lakes sometimes fly over them to look for fish or to visit chicks on the other side. Sometimes they try to save energy by flying low or by landing on tree stumps and buoys along the way. Big mistake! When a Jet Ski comes roaring up to within about fifty meters, the unfortunate bird's Threat Indicator goes off in it's little pea brain like a tactical nuke and it flies like hell in what it thinks of as The Opposite Direction.

Unfortunately for the Stupid Bird, this is exactly the wrong direction in which to fly like hell because the Jet Ski is already going that way and the Stupid Bird has unwittingly set up the Initial Chase Formation. Shortly thereafter, the Jet Ski rider acquires the target and realizes that a Chase is underway! The object is then to keep the poor little sucker going for as long as possible by any means. Even on a small lake this can turn out to be an extended experience due to the strategy all Stupid Birds follow when fleeing from Jet Skis.

First of all, every Stupid Bird seems to believe that it is bad form to change altitude during a Chase. This could be because they learned in *Physics 101 For Stupid Birds* that the energy required to increase their altitude would diminish their relative horizontal velocity *vis a' vis* the pursuing threat, and would consequently diminish their absolute distance from it. Or it could be that they are just too dumb to realize that Jet Skis can't fly.

Anyway, since there are no trees in which to hide in the middle of the lake, their strategy is simply to go in the opposite direction from where you are. This would be just fine if it worked, but it doesn't because Jet Skis are marginally faster than most Stupid Birds. What they *should* do, of course, is to reverse course right over your head to fly straight behind you every time you turned. If they pursued this strategy you would quickly barf and give up. But as I have indicated, these cretins don't realize that their altitude is a factor and so they content themselves with turning slightly left when you turn slightly right, and slightly right when you turn slightly left.

Shoreline, boats, and other Jet Skis notwithstanding, it is possible to herd the Stupid Bird into a roughly circular pattern of flight through the judicious application of these simple targeting rules. The objective of The Chase is to drive the creature into the smallest possible pattern of circular flight compatible with the maximum speed and maneuverability of The Stupid Bird and the Jet Ski, respectively, and to keep it there for as long as possible.

So far, the best that I have been able to achieve is about a twelve minute Chase with a final circular pattern of about fifty meters before I barf and give up. I think I might do better when I get a Jet Ski with somewhat greater horsepower!

Cuisine

In order to grasp the essence of Yankee culture it is important to bear in mind the rich variety of our American heritage. The melting pot of the globe since its inception, we have developed a unique capacity for synthesis of the most divergent influences.

This paradigm has been most obvious in the arena of electronic and industrial technologies, where American ingenuity has propelled the world community into a new age of scientific and material productivity. Other, subtler contributions to world culture have not yet manifested themselves so clearly. I refer to the field of *MegaTech Cuisine!* It is in this arena that America is poised on the brink of accomplishments on a scale which has no precedent in the annals of culinary history!

China has given the world Peking Duck and 1000 Year Old Eggs! Through their Mexican proxies, the Spanish have indirectly given us the taco as well as the red and green burrito. The Italians have added 6.02×10^{23} varieties of pasta and Germany has given us beer. To the dismay of the AMA, the French have developed an inexhaustible array of heart attack foods and the Russians have taught the world to eat fish eggs!

Only the British seem to have been unable to transcend the level of the ruthlessly boiled potato.

It is against this background that a totally new gastronomic technology is about to burst upon the world from the capital of culinary creativity... Santa Cruz, California. Perfected by relentless research over the course of the past generation at the legendary *Catalyst* restaurant and beer joint, I refer to the new discipline of *Explosive Force Tableside Food Preparation*, of which few outside the very upper crust of the Santa Cruz elite are presently aware.

To date, the most successful application of this technology has been the preparation of the infamous *Twice Blasted Banana Paste*... available only at the *Catalyst*. Even now, this transcendental delicacy can be obtained only at enormous expense, and only on a referral basis.

The technique is really quite simple, given the appropriate equipment. A modified flambé cart is brought into close proximity to the lucky diners so that they can fully appreciate the exquisite subtlety of the process. A single container consisting of two concentric Plexiglas cylinders is suspended on the top of the cart by a mount and a single axis about which the cylinders can revolve for viewing. The innermost of these cylinders is uniformly perforated with tiny holes, giving it the appearance of a conventional sieve.

Anywhere from a dozen to thirty large green and yellow Banana Slugs are then stuffed into the inner cylinder, depending upon the size of the dining party.

The first explosive stage is entirely natural and is stimulated by dropping several grams of table salt through the trap door and closing it very quickly. The Banana Slugs begin to boil and disintegrate immediately, oozing unspeakable fluids from every orifice as they do so. After several minutes, these natural juices react chemically with one another to produce a unique phosphorescent glow and a dramatic explosive expansion which diners invariably find entertaining.

The bubbly slime from this initial stage is then removed by activating a motor attached to the presentation cylinder, which spins the container in the manner of a centrifuge, accreting the slimy snot that normally covers the bodies of our beloved Banana Slugs into the outer cylinder, which is discarded.

For the second explosive stage, the inner cylinder is lowered into the interior of the presentation cart, which has been fitted with a high impact blast chamber of the type used by inner city bomb squads. An array of high explosive charges is arranged symmetrically about the perimeter of the Slug Chamber, the ornate cover is lowered, and the surrounding charges are detonated simultaneously. Aside from the spectacular sound effects to which the now-ravenous diners are treated, the coordinated explosions have the effect of compressing the decomposed Banana Slug Mass into ultra-dense plasma about the diameter of a writing pencil or a miniature cricket bat.

The blast chamber is then opened and the plasma removed from the crucible with special extraction tools or with fingernails, and presented to the lucky diners in a small tureen, from which they can apply it to crackers or little pieces of toast in the manner of pâté.

It is this sort of synthesis of native resources and technique that truly characterizes the Yankee soul. It is only fitting that the honor of first use should be accorded to the official mascot of the prestigious University of California at Santa Cruz, the lovable *Banana Slug*.

Calm Strike

The martial arts adept is master of his potential field of action at the level of policy. His arsenal of actions and decision criteria is sufficiently rich as to effect his will without the need for conscious control. The sensei is fully present in each moment and anticipates without thought or expectation. The perfect calm strike arises of itself to find its perfect target.

The choice to train and the objects and methods of training define the unique hierarchy of potential action at each moment. Real action is elicited from this potential hierarchy in response to the needs of the environment and the intention of the artist.

The field of action capabilities is generated from the bottom up. The atomic components of action are the elementary movements of which the body is capable. The texture, flexibility, strength and rotational properties of each joint, limb and body-part define the range of possibilities. Through training and exercise, coordinated groups of movements are assimilated to address specific tactical objectives like pushing, pulling, thrusting, twisting, grasping and striking. These eventually become automatic and no further attention need be given to the details of their execution.

Similarly for higher-level tactics and strategies. As each chunk of behavior is assimilated into the repertoire of automatic behaviour the range of potential action is further shaped and expanded. As the level rises at which assimilated behaviour is automatic, the level of intentionality by which the artist consciously influences the action rises as well. At the highest levels the sensei simply chooses the outcome and a style or mood of engagement and becomes a silent receptacle for environmental stimulus. The action arises automatically. The adept martial artist is master of his field of action at the level of policy.

There is no ethic inherent in martial arts achievement. Ethics are inherent only in a culture. The ethic of *Bushido* represents a cultural code of violence and restraint in the service of society and authority. It carries a cultural ethic into the realm of conflict and war. An ethic like Bushido can stand on the foundation of culture and choice alone without the need for any absolute authority. Ethics are vital to society, authority is not.

The martial arts adept *chooses* his ethic and effects it at the highest levels of his behaviour. In each moment he is both a student and a teacher.

Twisted Hose

I have recently come to feel much closer to the garden hose outside our garage. It has been with us for many years and we have carried it with us each time we have moved. Its convenient location by the garage is handy and we use it regularly to rinse off our muddy shoes, fill makeshift tanks for capturing frogs, or to hose down a filthy bicycle.

Looking back, I realize that four years in Texas have been pretty hard on the big green guy. It is attached to the spigot out by the garbage cans and when the lids are left ajar it is overrun by hordes of vicious ants, which inhabit the rotting masses we discard. It used to have a brass attachment that could be rotated to produce a delicate mist that could make a rainbow in sunlight or a powerful stream that reached almost to the fence at the back of the yard. But the business end of the thing has been run over so many times as we maneuver our cars around that the threads had been reduced to a jagged crack that sprayed haphazardly in all directions when the water was turned on.

Each time we dragged it toward a target we twisted its length a bit as we pulled on it and when it got snagged we jerked it hard to force it loose. When we were done we tossed it carelessly back in the general direction of the coil where the head of the hose got further tangled with some other part of its anatomy. We had grown increasingly disgusted with the pathetic mess as it continued to deteriorate.

The brutal Texan sun beat down on its twisted form and tormented it relentlessly as the vicious ants ravaged its contorted length.

We took our Jet Skis out over the weekend and when we returned I had meant to rinse them clean before putting them away in the garage. It took several minutes of strenuous effort just to wrestle the mouth of the hose across the ten feet of concrete to the Jet Skis. By the time I had crossed that distance its entire length was suspended in a tangled convulsion of knots and kinks, mid-air between the faucet and where I stood. A pathetic little stream of water trickled onto my feet from the crushed and battered head, which I pointed impotently at the flank of the Jet Ski!

I was furious! Leaning back on my heels to maintain my position against the weight of the tangled airborne mass, I whirled around in a rage to confront the twisted monstrosity, my teeth clenched and my face flushed in the grip of bloodlust!

And there I stood! Stalemate!

In a flash, the ludicrous reality of the scene hit me! There I was struggling in a tug-of-war with my garage! Locked in deadly combat with a twisted garden hose, which I *hated* with the passion of the righteous!

I released my grip on its neck and staggered back in horror as I watched its crippled mass plummet to the concrete! There it lay, twitching spasmodically as the water from the spigot continued to force its way through those distorted guts. In its misery the wretched thing was still trying to fulfill its responsibilities... still trying to please me even after all the abuse we had heaped upon it!

My hatred and rage were suddenly transformed to compassion and I resolved to do whatever I could to relieve its pain and to restore its dignity!

It was hard to know where to start, so I hammered the crushed head back into a semblance of a cylinder and began to gently shake various segments at random to see which loops might fall easily free of the tangle. As it happened, there were only three real knots in the entire length and these I carefully undid by drawing the remaining length back through them. As I began to make a coil on the deck, I realized that although the knots and tangles had been removed, the body of the hose itself was distorted from its natural form and it could not relax into a comfortable circular pattern. Perhaps its long, unnatural contortions had made their permanent mark on its basic structure and it could no longer be healed.

Abandoning the coil, I laid it lengthwise along the driveway on the hot concrete so that I could determine how bad the distortion really was. At first the yellow pinstripe that the manufacturer had embossed along one flank wound crazily back and forth in a jagged curve, reflecting the hopeless damage that we had done. But as I watched I became aware that the yellow marker was rolling, ever so slowly, back to a straight line at each point! Given the opportunity to relax from its distorted posture it was flowing spontaneously back to its natural, healthy form!

Restored to the loving embrace of its home and garden, our hose basks contentedly in the warm Texas sunshine and cherishes the caress of the ants as they do their dance of life upon its supple back!

Karma

Karma is a pretty cool word that people tend to throw around pretty freely. I must admit to substantially more than my share of this. Last weekend I finally got a glimpse of the real thing!

We were preparing a Sunday brunch for some good friends from up in the mountains where we used to live and my wife sent me out at the last minute to get a loaf of bread. The road we take to get to our supermarket runs alongside a state park, which has been preserved as a nature area. I often go running along the dirt paths in the park with my dog, Willie, who takes great delight in chasing the rabbits and squirrels that we encounter, in spite of the fact that he never gets close to them.

This Sunday morning I was driving my aging black Cadillac along the road beside the park to get the aforementioned loaf of bread when I came upon a car parked on the shoulder next to the wire fence that borders the preserve. As I approached, I saw a man get out of the car and open his trunk, from which he removed a large wire cage that he carried over to the fence. I watched as he bent over and opened the cage door to free a squirrel from inside of it.

In a heartbeat, the squirrel dashed out of the cage, did a tight U turn around the man's car and ran into the street directly in front of me. On the tarmac, the squirrel hesitated just long enough for my attempted evasive maneuver to backfire and I crushed it flat with my left front tire. There is a unique and unforgettable crunching sound that I have experienced once or twice in the past under similar circumstances... I didn't even *think* about stopping.

When I returned along the same route with my bread the man in the car was gone, but the squirrel spot was right where I had left it. My friend Greg later quipped that the man's last words to the squirrel before he opened the cage door were probably something like "*Remember Big Guy... this is the first day of the rest of your life!*"

Go figure!

Garbage Pit

During a recent session with our marvelous new masseuse, Beverly, I remarked that my tension seems to accumulate in the stringy little muscle that connects my shoulder to my neck. "Of course", she said, "that's the trapezius." She went on to inform me that, in massage parlance, the technical term for the area that surrounds the trapezius is "*The Garbage Pit*".

In the normal course of getting one from here to there and raising a glass of beer to one's lips, each of the many muscles in the body throws off a bit of waste energy that does not immediately find its way out of the system. As it happens, a disproportionate number of these bits are transmitted by various routes to *The Garbage Pit* where they sit and rot. It's not that any of the muscles are doing anything wrong in their normal course of operation but simply that in any system as wonderfully complex as the musculature some unfortunate high-level phenomena must inevitably emerge by chance.

In the case of the *Trapezius Garbage Pit* the problem is pretty easy to fix. You simply smash the crap out of the entire area and then soothe it with a gentle rub and aromatic oils.

It strikes me that many analogous *Garbage Pits* of various types must certainly exist in mental life, in interpersonal relationships, in organizations, societies, and in all complex systems whatsoever. Consider for example; most fear, the city of Newark, acid rain, email systems, the San Andreas fault, your family budget, marketing departments, the entire Federal government, the National Inquirer, Wall Street, Pat Buchanan, and consultants all kinds. You will find it quite easy to extend the list.

Once a *Garbage Pit* has been clearly identified as such, most of them should probably be treated using Beverly's methods, enhancing the health of the systems in which they participate and making everybody feel much better.

Beverly is wise!

Live Talk Weather

Media bias varies dramatically with format. There's just no getting around this. Consider the following range;

Weathermen: So far as I can tell, the folks who report on current weather conditions and make predictions about this aspect of the future are completely faithful to the truth as they know it. The fact that they are usually wrong detracts nothing from the purity of their reporting. Competition among Weathermen seems to be primarily a matter of grooming.

Talk Show Radio Hosts: Exposing their listeners to a wide range of unpredictable assaults from anonymous electronic flashers, their popularity turns on a precarious balance between pure wit and the penetration of their patter. The temptation to stray toward wit alone must be great. Competition among Talk Show Radio Hosts has nothing at all to do with grooming.

Tabloid Journalists: Constrained only by the most obvious potential for litigation, their normal trade has only a marginal connection to actual information and these scum do not merit further discussion. Competition among Tabloid Journalists seems to be based on their outrageous imaginations and the prominence of their libidos.

In fact, the only one of these with any real latitude in their posture is the Talk Show Radio Host. Consequently, it is he who suffers the greatest burden of temptation and it is he who must therefore practice the greatest discipline. The wisdom of *Vedanta* and the teachings of the ancient mystic Hindu sutras offer the following guidance, liberally translated;

The Yoga Of Live Talk Radio: Strive to be like the Weatherman, only somewhat more accurate and vastly more entertaining. In your hours of quiet meditation and during commercial breaks, visualize ever more clearly the wide band of truth which surrounds your belief. Strive to attract the broadest range of serious people to your switchboard at show time. Remember that weirdoes and crackpots are serious people too. As you amplify each of their beliefs among your audience by the magnitude of your wattage, find the center of the band of truth around that sector of your belief and balance each concept you unleash against that midpoint. Keep your ratings up and try not to allow featureless androids to do your show while you are goofing off. Don't pay too much attention to your producer. Don't lie on the air and don't ever, *ever*, ever tell your wife that you are working when you are actually running around with loose women... you won't get away with it.

Two Dog Nights

A Blind Man In The Louvre

Willie came to live with us on Tuesday. Sunday night was hell, but we're OK now because Willie and I have come to a much better understanding.

Willie is a dog and I am not. That is probably the reason that the rest of the family brought Willie home. Had I been a dog then Willie would have been irrelevant or, had Willie not been, then he would still be out there doing whatever it is that whatever he otherwise would have been would be doing... but not with us. As it is, here he is.

The first five days and nights were a haze of confusion over protocol. Willie was confused about what he could do that would please us and we were confused about Willie's criteria for pissing on things. We all genuinely wanted to satisfy one another and, honestly, it was clearly a more complicated task for Willie than it was for us because Willie has a tail and we don't. Willie's tail is an infallible indicator of his attitude. If he is happy and confident his tail is up. If he is unhappy or uncertain he can wrap his tail around his torso between his legs several times lengthwise and still walk around with his butt tucked tight up under his jaw. Willie has to guess about what we are thinking since he can't yet read lips.

Anyhow, by Sunday evening we felt that we were getting to know one another reasonably well. I thought it would be wise to take Willie for a walk outside before we retired so that he would not feel that courtesy required him to piss on the appliances in the laundry room again. He seemed enthusiastic and I felt that our walk went very well.

We took a long tour of the neighborhood and I led Willie past all the most important fire hydrants and mailbox posts. He obliged me by sniffing each and selected one or two for a cursory baptism. We struggled with each other and Willie tried to drag me off in random directions as I led him from one shrine to the next. When we returned to the house I refreshed Willie's bowls, gave him an affectionate scratch behind the ears and put him to bed in the laundry room. His tail was up and he was clearly a happy dog! Everyone went to sleep.

Willie started whining at about 2:30. Even the best of us have to take a leak at night sometimes and Willie had been with us for less than a week, so I graciously got up to let him into the back yard to relieve himself. He was delighted and he danced around me as I led him to the area at the back of the yard that we have selected for him to use for this purpose. I spent 20 minutes pointing at various bushes and tree trunks and saying "Piss on it Willie! Come on... *piss on it!*" Willie wagged his tail eagerly and presented his shaggy paw for me to shake. Even a field demonstration failed to get the point across! Eventually I gave up in disgust and took him back to the laundry room.

I went back to bed, but it wasn't long before he started whining again! I held out for over an hour this time before I gave up and stomped out to confront him! The damned dog was clearly so blindly attached to the *Monuments Of The Walk* that he could not find comfort without them! I angrily repeated the walk we had taken around the neighborhood earlier and I took particular care to bring his attention to what I felt would be the most attractive landmarks along the way. Willie wagged his tail eagerly and presented his shaggy paw for me to shake. Eventually I gave up in disgust and took him back to the laundry room.

4:30... Same.

Willie pissed on the refrigerator just before dawn.

I took him for another walk before I went to work and brooded all day about our predicament.

Tonight I let Willie take *me* for a walk. We went around the same block, but I made it a point never to pull on the leash except to restrain Willie from following his nose too far in from the curbside property lines. Willie never hesitated in selecting his targets! He must have made thirty quick stops at twenty-foot intervals! He even visited two of the many Monuments that I had carefully selected for him on our walks of the previous night. The rest he ignored completely!

Instead he led me to a variety of nondescript bushes, poles, curbsides, and featureless patches of lawn, which he hurriedly anointed with great enthusiasm. As he dragged me zealously past several of the neighborhood's most magnificent mailboxes toward a series of ordinary bushes and cement slabs, I realized that Willie was traversing an entirely different landscape than I. While I stumbled blindly through the monochrome darkness of the nighttime street, Willie's nose was leading us among the *Olfactory Rainbows of Oz*! I cheered him on; getting what vicarious pleasure I could from my companion's obvious delight in the masterpieces I could not smell!

Willie and I returned from our tour enriched and relieved. We retired to dream the heavenly smells of the angels!

Plan Nine

Superarticulation! What a wonderful word! I came across it recently in an article dealing with the explanations that chess masters give for their moves, when asked. Specifically, the article dealt with the microscopic subset of chess situations in which each player has only a single rook and a single pawn surviving to defend and attack the kings. In their investigations it turned out that no matter how these pieces were arranged on the board, chess masters could very quickly tell with almost perfect accuracy whether black or white would win and about how many moves it should take to complete the game. Furthermore, they found that masters love nothing more than to describe each situation and the strategies that any thinking person would pursue in each... and they do this using what they consider to be a technical vocabulary. *Not!*

Now, although the vast majority of chess situations are intractable from a computational point of view, this extremely simple chess situation was exhaustively analyzed using some very expensive supercomputers and the latest techniques of analytic logic. It turns out that the resulting decision matrix, when translated to formats ranging from English to Markov decision trees, ran to at least six pages of instructions containing lots of deeply nested “*If, Then; Else...*” clauses. A large group of control subjects clearly established that none of these formats could be employed effectively by non-masters to predict outcome without a computer.

This trivial chess situation was complex enough that humans relying on expressible analytic techniques could not master it. In other words, it was impossible to tell intelligent people how to reliably predict the outcome of this relatively simple situation. Only slightly more complicated situations become utterly intractable from a rigorous analytical point of view, although chess masters continue to play very well in such situations, and they certainly continue to describe what they are doing. A few among the top echelons of the game might confess that they ultimately decide upon most of their moves because, in the light of analysis, they *feel* right. And yet most masters will look you straight in the eyeball and justify their hopelessly intuitive decisions from the very beginning of the game in what they would have you believe was precise technical vocabulary!

In fact, as the situation becomes more complex their discourse approximates poetry more closely than it does logic. This process is what the authors have labeled *superarticulation*. It can be argued that, to date, both good and bad poetry have had a much more dramatic effect upon civilization than has logic... but they *are* quite different.

Fortunately, most of life’s business is conducted in a similar manner. Many people would have you believe that their actions are based upon some sort of rational analysis. In most cases all they really mean is that they have given some consideration to certain aspects of a situation before jumping to an intuitive conclusion. Those who consume greater quantities of time pondering and those who utilize more significant

digits in their expositions are popularly regarded as more disciplined. Like their chess counterparts, they would have you accept the outrageous proposition that they *actually understand what they are doing* and can accurately describe why they are doing it. Freshly certified MBAs are naturally the worst, although pretty much everyone is guilty of this hubris to some extent.

Analysis and meditation are certainly vital components of any serious approach to complex problems in any field. It is also prudent, in situations of any consequence, to pay close attention to the *feel* of the thing and to bear in mind the limitations of all superarticulations, no matter how convincingly articulated, or by whom. This is especially true when the motives of the articulator are in question, as they normally are.

Potentiality

My buddy Bob and I differ, to varying degrees, on a wide variety of subjects. We both like it that way.

We also share a secret belief in something that doesn't exist. This being the case, we have each recognized that we should avoid discussing it much in public. I don't think anyone else even really knows about it.

I can't pretend to imagine what thoughts might have been occupying Bob's mind when he first conceived of the *Forward Motion Land Rowing Machine*! I said it didn't exist, but of course it really does. It's just that it has not yet been manifested in *our* universe. That's what makes it so flexible!

Bob and I have only talked about it twice. To the best of my knowledge it has never been sketched or written about. And it has certainly never been *built*. Nonetheless, it is quite real. Bob discovered it and he showed it to me. Shortly thereafter, I gained access to a Universe in which the Forward Motion Land Rowing Machine *was* built!

In order to properly appreciate this, you will have to consider a couple of things about Rowing and about Bob's situation at the time.

Although I have never Rowed anything myself, I have known several people who have. It is a blue-blood cult in which otherwise rational and intelligent men participate in a secret Brotherhood that it apparently means death to betray! These men are bonded by the common experience of propelling themselves over the surface of a river or lake at maximum speed, backwards and seated so as to be destroyed sequentially when the inevitable collision takes place. Their ritual requires them to rely entirely on a short guy with a bullhorn to avert catastrophe!

This is admittedly an outsider's view of the sport, but the elite few who form The Brotherhood are attached to it in a way that runs much deeper than the ordinary affinity for the ordinary sport. Bob is a Brother.

He was also unemployed at the time, although not in the usual sense. He had just sold his successful telephone system business and was experimenting with the term "*Retired*". Whenever Bob used this term, he would invariably follow it with a long series of qualifications and explanations. Bob *felt* unemployed.

He spent almost an entire month sulking on his front porch, smoking cigars and generally driving his wife, Mo, nuts. Then the Forward Motion Land Rowing Machine sprang into his head! It was there all at once, fully formed. It was Bob's destiny to bring the FMLRM to the world!

The Brotherhood itself would certainly embrace the FMLRM as a watershed in the course of human history. It would be nothing less than the emergence from the sea onto the land! But that was only the beginning! Even the masses who could relate only to conventional forward motion transportation could now appreciate the transcendental experience of Rowing, now that they didn't have to do it backwards! The potential market was *enormous*.

Bob went immediately to work on the first prototype. I shall be charitable and say that it was a somewhat ungainly affair. An old canoe was suspended at a 45-degree angle between two sets of bicycle tires, which were attached to a homemade frame that Bob had fabricated from odds and ends that had been laying around his garage. The passenger seat from Mo's Mercedes was fastened halfway up the hull at an angle that held it level to the ground. This seat was opposed by two sturdy footrests, which Bob had stolen from an airport shoeshine stand after hours.

An elaborate system of pulleys and gears channeled energy to the power train from the ingenious oarlock transfer mechanism Bob had devised. Uneven application of force to the oars was translated into a corresponding change in direction or speed by a steering and braking system that was integrated directly into the drive mechanism. The basic patent for the FM power and steering technology was assigned to the newly formed *FMLRM* Corporation and serious development work was begun.

With persistence, luck, and every last dollar of his heavily leveraged assets, Bob managed to recruit the entire DeLorean production engineering team, intact, just as the hammer was coming down on their boss. The whole lot of them were relocated to the new FMLRM manufacturing facility in the Virgin Islands¹. The first production model was christened *FMLRM 1000* and found a ready market among The Brotherhood and in the upper echelons of society.

Exclusive marketing and distribution rights for the FMLRM 1000 were awarded to the international sports equipment cartel, *Le Coq' Sportif*². Revenues from the FMLRM 1000 were used to finance a broad and intensive research effort as well as a large addition to Bob and Mo's palatial estate in the Virgin Islands, *Oarlock Manor*.

Several new and exciting applications were found for the basic FMLRM technology. The next model, *The Paisan*, was aimed at the mass market and was a huge commercial success. It was available in both stationary and mobile configurations. It's comfortable interior and affordable price began to make serious inroads in the recreational bicycle market and the best retail floor space was quickly allocated to elaborate FMLRM displays. Bob accepted a large investment from Schwinn and expanded his research program.

¹ Bob had done several years of advanced field study in Tax Law.

² This is French for "The Sport Chicken".

The collaboration with General Motors and Los Alamos Labs produced the sleek and powerful *FM Cadillac* line, which was marketed worldwide by a ground-breaking collaboration between GM and Mitsubishi. The Cadillac incorporated a miniature superconductor engine, which could supplement the power provided through the oarlock exchange to any desired extent. Later models eliminated the oarlock mechanism altogether in favor of the more popular controls which came along with the Nintendo acquisition.

Bob had Donald Trump's old boat redecorated and refitted with a more satisfying power plant.

But it was not until the introduction of the *Body Buddy* that an FM device could be worn comfortably on a 24-hour basis. The refinement of the ultra thin powered control harness made FM Suits indispensable to the physical performance of their operators. The market for replaceable exterior skins for the Body Buddy spawned a gigantic new fashion industry. FMLRM's Levi division has naturally dominated this market from the start.

Increasingly sophisticated information systems were integrated into the latest designs following the introduction of the *Suit Secretary* option. An explosion of third party hardware and software accessories provided an expanding variety of Suit services. Japan Incorporated designated Suit technology as the top national development priority and the heads-up display system from Sony became standard equipment on all respectable FM compatible headsets.

The enormous global demand for increasingly sophisticated Suit services stimulated massive research and development investments worldwide. Suit sensor capabilities were improved to keep pace with the rapid progress in power and control systems. High end Suits were soon expected to provide all personal transportation and to do most household chores automatically while their operators were asleep inside them. Elaborate communications, entertainment, and erotic options soon became available for all FM models.

By this time, Bob had retired from active participation in any of the FMLRM conglomerates and was spending his afternoons serving gas dockside at a marina he and Mo favored on the shores of Lake Victoria, in Uganda, which they now owned.

No one had yet realized that the FM population was conscious as well as intelligent when they announced the formation of their own political party and demanded equal status under all national constitutions. The rest is Potential History. Man and FM live hand in glove in symbiotic harmony! Closely coordinated ongoing programs in Suit technology and genetic engineering have continuously eroded the distinction between the two species.

In *our* Universe, naturally, the Forward Motion Land Rowing Machine has yet to be built. This is precisely the circumstance that lends it a virtually unlimited potential. I wonder how the FMLRM has evolved for Bob?

Symmetry

Life is truly exquisite! Reality is always more subtle than it appears and it endlessly reveals new levels of hidden beauty as it is examined ever more closely! Growth and development are inherent in all things! Evolution is the most fundamental process in nature! Even the simplest things can be interpreted from an endless variety of viewpoints! We progress forever from one extraordinary experience to the next! How can we ever hope to comprehend the limitless range of possibilities that lies before us?

Consider our health and vitality, our security and comfort, our companionship and our love! They are at the heart of everyone and everything! These things continue to be true even while we are deluded into thinking momentarily that they are not!

Reflection leads eventually to understanding and hope! Experiment leads always to opportunity! An infinite variety of possibilities exist! Labor leads always to fulfillment! All things continuously flower and advance! Everything is plainly a part of something larger, more comprehensive and more permanent than itself, without limit!

On the other hand...

Everything disintegrates eventually. Creation leads always to decay. The best that labor and wealth can achieve is survival. There is really no such thing as freedom. Anticipation leads always to disappointment. Reflection leads eventually to confusion and despair.

These things continue to be true even while we are able to delude ourselves into thinking momentarily that they are not. They are at the heart of everyone and everything. Consider our disease and pain, our greed and poverty, our violence and our hatred.

Why do we even bother? We suffer without relief and then we die. No lasting meaning is really even conceivable. Decay is the most fundamental process in nature. Death and oblivion are inevitable. Things are never what they seem and they usually turn out to be much worse than they appear to be on the surface. Life is truly miserable.

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A Place At The Center

Only a few words to describe my place! It has taken a very long time and a great deal of watching to realize that I am forever at the exact Center of space and time. The middle of infinity doesn't move around like everything else does. You will recognize this if you can count high enough!

Clearly, this is not in the ordinary course of thought for a squirrel, but I have had an unusual rodent life. I would like to tell you about this, but words are arbitrarily short and it is my task to tell you about my Place.

The darkness of the warren was wonderfully wet and warm! The sensations of the muddy tunnel where I nuzzled with my family in perfect infant safety will comfort me for a lifetime. Everything was fuzzy-wet and we were all together. Then Men came with their tools and pretensions of knowledge and seduced us from our familiar warrens onto the Roundness Of The Earth.

We believe that it was a human child who first came to us. It is said that she was attended by a cat. The Mothers of the warren greeted them and shared our food and the names of our ancestors. From those of her kind who followed we learned of Geometry.

On the Roundness Of The Earth it is possible to walk forever without reaching the end of the land. Even when you run very fast you remain always *exactly* in the middle. The other earths which revolve about each other and the Sun follow infinite orbits in their courses also. Disciples of Geometry believe that astronomy and the lower sciences reveal a similar view of space and time itself. Every far thing we can see through the crystals is moving away from us at a regular pace, each in the Center of everything else. It is just like the Roundness Of The Earth, but much deeper.

It has been many seasons since the Center and it will be many more before everything returns to it, as it surely will. It was wet and fuzzy warm as the warren and it will be so once more when the Center comes again.

We appear to be very young in space-time. Although it seems infinite to our sensibilities we do not seem to be in the Center of time, but very near its beginning. There must be some further dimension of Roundness that would place us back in the Center, although I cannot yet fathom what it might be.

Shanti

Your *gurus* are wherever they find you. It has been said that funny things happen in India. My latest guru found me in Bombay on Thanksgiving, 1995. He turned out to be a blond California surfer from Newport Beach and a master of the classical guitar.

I went to India alone. Almost everyone I know thought I had gone mad. My wife and I have always tended toward world-class resorts in tropical island paradise, but I felt that it was time for me to change. I've been seeking change, I think, since 1971 when I first encountered the *Upanishads* in college. Their verses held the vague promise of some transcendental state, and I was drawn to this. At that time it was quite fashionable to be drawn to this sort of thing, especially in places like Santa Cruz and especially for middle class white kids with everything.

India was like a slap in the face to shake me from the complacency of taking my experience at face value. I had been trained by educational curriculum to view knowledge as a vast but finite set which could be digested piece by piece, sifted from a catalogue and written down in books by masters. I took the mystic realm as *Universal Truth 101*. I apparently missed the part in the *Mundaka* where it says "the *Atman* is not attainable by scriptural discourse, not by intellectual power nor by much hearing...nor can it be attained by one who is devoid of strength, thoughtfulness and right meditation." An occasional dose of scriptural discourse is cool, of course, but hard to get your hands around and very inconvenient to practice. And the stories told in all the great religious texts are quite impossible to actually believe. With deeper penetration they all came more and more to seem like what, for the greater part, they are... entertainment and anesthetic.

So on to western science, which really seems to play. "*The Way Things Work*", how elegant and real! That mathematics can actually describe the world and how it operates! That predictions can accurately be made which contradict expectation! That apparent forms can be decomposed to much more basic rules and things! Surely here lies reality and truth and, somehow, the context of existence! And so it seemed for quite a while, until the impenetrable boundaries of physics came more clearly into view. The fuzzy indetermination of quantum mechanics at the bottom and the mystery of initial singularity at the top. And also very inconvenient to practice, although the stories are much better. More entertainment.

Stranded in ignorance without hope then. Mortal without explanation. Relentlessly aware of illusion but bound no less closely by it. Hopelessly dominated by history, reflex, and compulsion. Surrounded by love and wealth, by comfort and beauty, by rich experience and new discovery within the armor-plated shell of knowledge. Loving life and happy, yet still disquiet.

I heard the *Buddha* much more clearly now. Alone among the avatars he said, "Don't worry about it! The knowledge that you seek is not accessible to you. Calm down and meditate. Act spontaneously on your better instincts. Take your joy from those things you find laying at your feet and mold them into something better if you can. You have everything you need already in your hand!".

Easy for *him* to say!

So I came to India for a few weeks alone. I didn't come to see the place or speak to anyone, or even to learn anything. I came to get as far as possible from the daily round of established expectation and reflex that redefines us constantly on yesterday's model. I came simply to escape as many of the static definitions as I could. I came to empty out and see what might result.

I came at first to Bangkok. Eastern crudely striving to be Western and embracing its worst elements. Mired in congested poverty and unbelievable pollution. Gaudy ancient relics surrounded by countless hawkers pushing overflowing carts of useless plastic trinkets. Sex shops pushing pre-pubescent girls from the countryside. Dealers pushing drugs. Rickshaw drivers wearing sanitary masks against the smog and dust. Hustlers everywhere looking to make a *bhat* in any way they can. Vicious kick-boxing exhibitions every night before enthusiastic screaming crowds. Sullen barefoot monks in shabby saffron robes. The King came amid great fanfare to change the Emerald Buddha's clothes for winter and I went unenlightened to Nepal, claiming Mileage Plus partnership miles from Thai Air and Marriott Marquis points as I departed.

In my attempt to avoid the Germans occupying Kathmandu I found a hostel near the marketplace with running water and a toilet. Accosted relentlessly by the hawkers and "*guides*" who inhabit the endless maze of squalid streets and alleys filled with stalls and smells, I somehow managed to adopt Abas who met me every time I left the hostel, day or night. He had one shirt, seven children and a bag of flutes on which he always kept a hand. He offered me companionship and broken conversation, unwanted drugs and women, necessary guidance and inoculation from the endless stream of others seeking to attach themselves to me, all of whom he seemed to know.

I was his prize and it was with pride that he escorted me among the streets and shrines. We dined in style for less than three dollars a meal and he described the beauty of the nearby Himalayas which, like everything more than fifty yards away, could not be seen through the smog and dust. He found a power cord to fit my laptop and a mandala of *Shiva*, painted by the hands of aged monks I did not meet. Against advice, I gave some coins to beggars and we had to flee the crowd thus brought upon us.

I got a compact disc of "meditation music" and read from the *Upanishads* again. I bought a flute from Abas and went into the mountains to start writing the book I had delayed for seven years. From Dhulikhel the mountain range appears like paradise; majestic and remote. But not, it seems, to those who live there squatting by their corrugated huts. I left the hostel twice to walk and run, but was besieged by beggars tugging at my shirt and clambering for *rupees*.

The flight to Delhi was a momentary return to civilization, rudely ended amidst a horde of guides and drivers held at bay beyond the airport lobby by guards with heavy bamboo canes. I chose a driver there, named Raj, and drove among the sights and sounds and smells for several days. I finally fled the filthy streets and air of Delhi, packed solid with its mass of indigent humanity. By car and bus I went to Agra and to Khajuraho, moving up to good hotels for thirty bucks a night. Alone among the monuments and shrines, the magnificent white marble of the Taj Mahal stood out against the continental smog and filth that reaches everywhere.

As I meditated barefoot in the company of many gods within the womblike darkness of the *garbhagriha* in an ancient Jain temple I realized that I still fear death after all. I watched the dance and heard the music. The narrow roads were lined with endless filthy huts and stalls, with speeding trucks and cars and bikes and cattle narrowly avoiding death, or not, by chance. Of the many rides I took only a chicken was killed... I think. Nothing worked. Traffic snarled hopelessly at toll blockades while policemen wandered aimlessly about. A hotel clerk left the desk while I was checking in, never to return. Twice, my telephone rang spontaneously in the middle of the night with no one on the line. A handful of Europeans wearing "*Leave Only Footprints*" T-shirts and toting little plastic trash bags surrounded by millions of natives throwing garbage out their windows and pissing in the street. Every scheduled event was late except departure from a hotel, when everyone turned up to hold a bag or door and hold their hand out. Hawkers and hustlers and guides and smog were everywhere, all relentless.

Raj ambushed me at the hotel back in Delhi and I asked him to take me out for music that night after he allegedly confirmed the next day's flights south. "Classical Indian?", he asked and I approved. We went to a squalid Quonset hut and heard four men with twenty-year-old Fender electric guitars turn their reverb to the max as a stream of unkempt women paraded sullenly around the stage. Raj took me to the airport in the morning at 5:00 for my 7:15 Bombay flight, which left without announcement at 10:00.

In Bombay, I missed my connecting flight to Madurai by hours and found the airline counter deserted. Checking one airline at a time (the only way) I found no other flights that day but confirmed one the next morning on a different airline. My ticket, however, was not acceptable to the second unless properly endorsed by the first. Naturally, the two were located in different airport terminals and separated by several miles of clutching taxi drivers. Fending off the guides and hustlers I shuttled back and forth for hours, securing two unacceptable endorsements and never able to locate the same individual twice at any location. After sharing my predicament with one driver I was taken without asking to the door of a cheap hotel and urged to leave my bag. I finally yelled and told him to take me to the international terminal NOW! I was done with India!

"Put me on the next flight to anywhere in Europe or the States! I'll work it out from there!"

“Sorry sir, everything is booked for days. You can take a chance if you like, but the flights are oversold.” A transport strike in France and a trade show in Bombay had cut me off.

Thanksgiving night! I should be home with my family! I phoned home and got a loving boost.

There is no travel desk at either airport in Bombay. I called every hotel in my travel guide, starting with the best and working down. As the book had warned, no chance; they almost laughed. At last I left the sanctuary of the terminal and submitted to the first driver that accosted me, asking for the best hotel he thought I might get in. It was pretty bad, but close to the airport. No pool, no spa, no garden, no phone, no shower door. Just a dark and dirty room with bugs. I’m glad I didn’t leave the country on that note.

It was 4:00 and I didn’t dare to write, so I got the daily rag and looked to see “*What’s On*”. A Hindi play, a Japanese film, a Shakespeare workshop, and a recital of classical guitar by Jonathan Taylor... that sounds pretty Western to me, OK. I retrieved my passport from the desk (which lay unattended on the lobby counter), took all my cash and hired a car. An hour’s ride downtown through filth and squalor, traffic lights seen dimly through the smog as armless beggars and women holding deformed babies pressed against the window of the car. “Oh shit!”, I thought, “What *am* I doing here?”

The “*Experimental Theater*” was behind the National Center for the Performing Arts. For less than a dollar I was transported instantly to Manhattan, or else to outer space. The theater was a mid-sized room with a makeshift wooden stage holding a single chair and footrest. No music stand. Three hundred plastic seats with fifty aging bodies in them. There was not a European face in sight, but the lady behind me had just got back from a few months in the UK where she had joined the Royal College and attended the marriage of her daughter. I was ready to explode.

Exactly at the stroke of six he walked onto the stage with his guitar and sat. Wearing tux and tails, he played alone. Pieces by the European masters; Gasper Sanz, Antonio Lauro, J.S. Bach and Hector Villa-Lobos. Each chord and note was crystal pure and light, gentle and complex. He played a medley of American folk tunes he had arranged and another he called “*Sand-Surf-Sun*”. He brought tears to my eyes with his sweet rendition of *Little Surfer Girl* and *Pipeline*. Seriously! He ended with the *Song of India*, by Korsakov. He stood and bowed around after each piece as though he were in Carnegie Hall.

I was released, I don’t know how. If I had seen him in New York I would have said, “That’s nice”, and gone along my way. But here in outer space it was a trigger of release for me. This blond young longhair from Newport Beach who collected musical jewels had picked up ordinary tunes he found laying at his feet and turned them into pearls. He gave them to me for a buck he didn’t keep. I think he’s got it!

Thinking back, I got a ride in Bangkok from a taxi driver who had decorated the interior of his immaculate old car with colorful religious pictures, flowers and statues. Although he spoke no English we tried enthusiastically to communicate using sign language and what we each hoped were expressive sounds and gestures (they weren't). I got the sense that he was pure somehow. Although we successfully exchanged no information whatsoever beyond my destination, the attempt was gratifying for us both. He gave me a little icon of a Buddha made of sand and resin that he carried in his pocket. I offered him money for it but he declined. When we arrived I gave him twice the meter, but he gave back half and would not take a tip. I didn't learn his name.

In Katmandu I met a friend of Abas who had a tiny barber stall in the marketplace. Abas thought he was well off because he had a stall. When he walked around with us one day, he and Abas held hands or draped their arms affectionately over each other's shoulders as though this were the most natural thing in the world. I saw a lot more of this among men who clearly were not gay. It's not casual, but only for close friends. At the end of the day he gave me a haircut and would not accept my cash.

In India it's a miracle that they simply manage to survive in the numbers that they do. Without resources they still manage to get things done in their own way. With all the poverty and filth, everyone seems to be well fed somehow from the paddies and fields in which they seem to loiter. It would be easy to understand how they might be angry or resentful when we parade around their country dripping with what must be, to them, extravagant wealth. Yet although they have to scratch for every little thing, I never detected anything that I interpreted as resentment and I don't recall ever seeing an Indian angry while I was there. I believe that generally they say exactly what they mean, even when their purpose is to manipulate you. Indian cuisine is definitely among the best in the world and vegetarians are not required to torture themselves to indulge this inclination, as in the west. While Hindu religious myths are even less convincing than their western counterparts, they do seem to have put their many fingers on some fine ideas.

Shanti is a Hindi word they use to mean something like "serenity" or "calm". You get it through enlightenment, which can be achieved either by picking something up or else by putting something down, depending upon the circumstances.

Mud Wrestling & Jujitsu

There are two styles of encounter among humans...Mud Wrestling and Jujitsu. Neither ever appears in pure form, but individuals tend to one pole or the other with increasing clarity the greater their number of standard deviations from the norm.

The Mud Wrestler approaches each encounter with a rigid agenda from the outset and applies maximum pressure to all points of vulnerability and direct resistance to any attack until the conflict is won or lost. This approach is effective in the sense that it yields rapid progress toward decisive success or failure. Strength and stamina are key to successful Mud Wrestling.

The Jujitsen approaches each encounter as a melding of currents, which mingle according to their various natures until they yield one of many possible aesthetically pleasing configurations. This approach is effective in the sense that it can extract harmonious results from any combination of divergent factors. Patience and detachment are key to successful Jujitsu.

The Normal approaches each encounter with a neurotic combination of Mud Wrestling and Jujitsu and leads a life of confusion, frustration, and compromise.

In The Eye Of The Tiger

Reflections Of A Middle Aged White Guy Wandering In India

Once you have seen the tiger prowling at your back it is impossible to be at peace until you have come to terms with him.

We accept the sensations of the world without interpretation when we are born, innocent at first and dependent upon our parents for survival. We grapple with the artifacts that surround us and form abstract impressions about which things are real. Success in moving through the world engenders deeper belief in these impressions and we base our further actions on what we believe has worked for us in the past, striving toward those things that we instinctively desire and to avoid those we abhor.

Contradictions inevitably arise as we increase our arsenal of beliefs and as our aims become increasingly complex. Lightly held beliefs are discarded in favor of those which prove more effective. Those we have come to cherish most deeply we struggle to retain, even at great cost. When contradictions among impressions that we cherish force themselves upon us with persistence we become frustrated and disquiet. We sense that our guides to action must be unsound and fear that they might lead us stumbling over some unseen precipice. We struggle to deny the contradictions that threaten us most deeply. We turn from them toward comfortable distractions. We hope they disappear and do not haunt us. Oftentimes they do, and this creates the hope that deeper themes might be resolved in the same way.

The deepest belief of all is in our own identity. Our sense of Self is undeniable and beyond all ordinary challenge. It is called seriously into question only by the knowledge of death and by our struggle to accept or deny it. To truly accept death is unnatural and yet its knowledge will not leave us; so we turn from it saying, "I accept death. There... let it be done with!" Or else we say, "Death is not real, but only an illusion. I will continue in some other place!"

But still it haunts us. Those who would not inquire further into what it is that they have said may find some peace in it, thinking they have come to a conclusion. But the question has been begged, "Who is it that will or will not die? Of what do I consist?"

"I am Joe!" we reply. Or Mohammed, or Jesus. But names are given and withdrawn, and new names are added every time we turn. "I am the prophet of God!". Or else a father, a brother, or a child. And yet again, "I am a citizen!". Or else a gardener or a cook, an accountant or a bureaucrat. Rich or poor. Young or old. Quick or slow. Joyful or morose. "I have this history and that future! I speak this language, thus! I think these thoughts! I have these needs. I do these deeds! I am *myself!*". *Blah! Blah! Blah!*

And yet these things might easily be otherwise and we may see upon reflection that all such categories change with time or even fade away. Some we press ourselves to change. Their roots are buried deep within our circumstances and our tissue... tentative and conditional. Transitory and vague. Ephemeral. Yet this is who we are?

What else? Perhaps a soul; a transcendental consciousness? Perhaps a part of God? Attached somehow to this narrow passage of space and time, anchored to this body? Perhaps. But this is not the "I" we cherish. Not the one who says, "*I am!*". Not the one whose death we fear. *That* "I" is rooted firmly in this world.

And so the tiger stalks us. We either grasp his tail or turn our back and slink beneath a heap of moldy platitude. He cannot be defeated, but he can be dissolved; for he is nothing more than we. His reality is no more than ours. He serves us in this world to bound our dream... a shadow of a pattern... a chimera within a flowing coil of space and time, like us. Our reflection in his eye is mist, and seeing this we need not fear him. The tiger is our *Self*, seeking permanence that never was. A dream like ourselves. A silhouette.

In such a view we are not lost as we had feared, but rather freed to witness our many threads and follow them out into the world. Still free to choose and act and to be taken by the tides of which we form a part. Still Joe, the same white middle-aged programmer from Denver. Still the same anointed prophet of God. Still the same old categories but bound a bit more loosely by them, perhaps. And freer of the tiger too, perhaps. Still alive and well, unthreatened and intact! Just not exactly who we thought. Who cares?

And so we may at last let go the tiger's tail and, turning back to life, gain wisdom from this willing loss of knowledge.

Our children are the flowers of our lives, taking form themselves as currents of the world beyond ourselves surround them. They are beyond us and our highest service is to them. Their source within us makes them sacred to us and our worship is to free their wings and show them flight; even though they fly from us. Our duty is to guide them. Our heresy is to mold them to our image or to chain them down by obligations, guilts and fears. **Don't do it!** The quality of the love with which we grace them will return to us in time. Children are our highest calling.

Our lovers are the ones who can make us whole. They also are our greatest threat, as we invest such hope and love in them, and thereby put ourselves at risk. We take our reflection from their eyes and crave and fear their judgment as our children do of us while they are young. It is just this vulnerability which lends to lovers trust its depth, and which rewards so greatly when kept. Or punishes so grievously when abused. The risks that lovers share may drive them to abuse their partner's trust in false defense of their own imagined safety. The unconscious hope of judging first and harshly, the impulse to confine or change the other in some way, the instinct of flight to safety in some imagined sanctuary. The keeping of accounts. These things defy the sanctity of trust they falsely would secure.

The trust of lovers fidelity is first, built upon long ages of our race. The second is the knowledge of acceptance, especially faced with public censure. Then carnal love, freely given and received. Pride and admiration, each for the other. Support in all things great and small. Exchange and interest in things not closely shared. Confidence and comfort in absence. Anticipation of return. Forgiveness of error and distraction. Continuous renewal and surprise. Common joy. Cherishment. These things are easy to forget, but vital to remember. With romance and security, love makes us whole and lasts a lifetime. Pay attention!

Family casts the foundation of our lives. Partial and protective looking outward at its best, jealous and self serving looking inward at its worst, its nature may be difficult to change. Cast early, it marks its members deeply and in ways that cannot be erased. Family may be neglected, but only at great cost. Embraced, it comforts us in trouble and cheers us in success. Family can cherish the treasures we bring home, as we can cherish theirs.

Close friends may be few, but a few are enough. True friendship knows no censure. All things must be spoken; ungently when need be. To put friendship itself at risk in its own service is its highest calling. Friendship tolerates error and failure easily, neglect well, and betrayal not at all. Friendship fosters easy understanding. Friendship gives freely and receives with grace. Assume it and embrace it where it grows.

Be as honest as you can, especially with yourself. Tame compulsions gently and be moderate. Be mindful of where you are and what you do. Meditate and exercise. Write more. Email less. Calm down. Shut up. Try to save some money for your old age.

Love, Serve, and Remember what you value.

This cowboy has not done particularly well in all of this thus far, but he will try to do better during the remainder of his life.