

SYD'S JOURNAL

November 19, 1989

THE YUPPIE GULAG

Everything's perfect in the yuppie gulag. The houses stand sanitary and new against the flawless Ohio sky. This is a different world. I haven't seen a single strip mine. I've seen no one living in an abandoned school bus. To tell the truth, I don't miss the sight of those things. We go driving in a car that's still under warranty. We drink from a well, its water softened with salt and alchemy-through a high-tech, multi-tank water softener. Flocks of pretty, blonde haired children play in the streets because the new grass hasn't fully taken hold. They play without care because everyone seems to drive with care on these streets. The grass, like green baby hair, is nearly overwhelmed by the red clay and wetness of the season. After a heavy supper we walk the placid streets. We discuss the houses, their similarities and differences. Most are picture perfect. We are cruel about one, but it's a misfire, a close-but-no-cigar stab at being original. There's no room for near-miss originality when you're surrounded by perfection.

Away in the distance I hear the rumble of a freight train. It is up in the direction of Lake Erie. It must be huge and running fast to make the cosmic rumble it sends so far across the air and through the ground. When I stand very still, I can feel a tremor in the soles of my shoes. The train whistle blows and the imagination quickens. I open the back door and listen. I get images of freight trains pulsing light and energy, thundering like

dragons through the Ohio night. They haul immense machines, grain, and widgets to and from the monster factories. The image is a river of spiritual electricity and metaphysical steel. I feel also the distance, as if that strength were pulling away into the past as surely as the great freight trains thundering through the night. For all its power, they're calling this country "the Rust Belt" and the pundits speculate that Industrious America, like the steam locomotive, is never coming back. In my imagination, the people standing at the train stations are dressed like Humphrey Bogart and Lauren Bacall in 40's stuff. They're sharp, self-confident, smoking cigarettes and making wise cracks.

A GATHERING OF HEROES

Ollie and me were sitting around drinking some antifreeze and talking about the good ol' days. "It just ain't the same," he said and whistled through the gap in his front teeth. "The Ayatollah bought the farm, Casey bought the farm, and Ronnie's out to pasture. Moramoron Kadaffy's still around, but he's gone soft, lost the old fire. Even Castro's no damned fun anymore."

"There's still Fawn," I said, trying to comfort him.

"She won't return my calls. Said she needed a challenge so she's free-lancing for the Israeli secret police."

"Sorry."

"What about Noriega?"

"Now there's a party animal for you, but he's gotten too high-profile for any serious fun. Marcos bought the farm. Khashogi's in jail. Secord's so drunk that all he wants to do is sit around all day and watch a tape of "The Green Berets."

"Dung Chow Ping?"

"Nah, no sense of humor."

"Yeah, I know what you mean."

Ollie got a far away look in his eyes. "Man, the stuff we were cooking up...all down the tubes 'cause that idiot Poindexter didn't know how to zap a hard disk. Can you believe that? We were going to con Gorbachov into paying thirty million dollars for a romp in the sack with Margaret Thatcher and then divert the money to the Pat Robertson election campaign. He would have been a shoe-in with that much air time. The deal was that once he got into office, we would invade Massachusetts, capture Kennedy and Dukakis and hold them for ransom until Jane Fonda agreed to donate all the profits from her exercise tapes to buy a nuclear submarine for Noriega which would be parked in New York harbor with all its missiles aimed and Dan Rather's apartment and MAKE him say something NICE about us. Man, we could have had it all."

"Nobody cooks 'em up like you do, Ollie," I said, awe-struck with the man's genius.



I have always photographed the places where I've lived. The place

where you live is a world. The place where you live is important. The sights and sounds and smells, its particular character and flavor evoke responses in you, and those responses have a powerful effect on what you do and how you see what's going on around you. The place that you live is a world. There are worlds within the world, and it's vitally important that you be in the right world *for you*. To be in the wrong world is a terrible mistake, and it affects you drastically, negatively,

destructively. To be in the right world brings out that which is strong, that which is powerful, and that which is meaningful in you.

The WordWorks



It feels kind of strange to step out on my own to try to do something that I really love and make it pay. John and Tom have been doing that for years, but I suppose I've always had an unhealthy respect for the institutions of society. Maybe I've finally outgrown it. I invested in a laser printer and started advertising word processing services.

It dawned on me that jobs only exist because someone took the initiative to create jobs in the first place. When we hire on with someone else, we essentially purchase from them a portion of the benefit of their initiative, and the price for that share in someone else's initiative is rigid demands and reduced wages. When this notion came to me I thought, *why don't I create a job and hire myself?* So I did, and it feels wonderful. If the business keeps up the way it seems to want to, this might just rank up there with the best things I've ever done. We'll see.

FREEDOM

Freedom is an odd thing--I started to say *funny* but there are too many people facing police clubs and death squads to call freedom *funny*. As long as there have been people, we have recognized

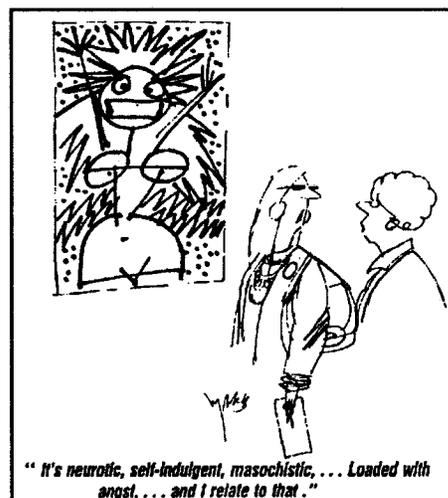
freedom to be worth the risk of life and livelihood to attain.

When I was younger, I had a sort of fantasy that freedom could be finally, decisively won in a person's life, and once secured, was everlasting. It's not that way at all. The fact is that we fight and re-fight the battles of freedom over and over again. The enemy is faceless, but utterly intractable. The enemy never concedes defeat, never surrenders even an inch of territory, and remains ever willing to renew the fight for whatever little pieces of our souls we might have won. The enemy is relentless, but I suppose we have made it that way, because we, too, are relentless in our pursuit of a freedom that we can scarcely even visualize, much less understand.

Still we fight. I'm not even sure that *freedom* is worth fighting for in itself. *Freedom from what? Freedom for what?* But I understand the alternatives. I know what happens to your mind and soul when freedom is stolen or bartered away. I know what happens to your personality when every option and choice seems to be gone. That's something that's worth fighting *to stay out of*. If I sound melodramatic, please stop and laugh at me for a while to break the mood. This isn't some kind of hero thing, no sermon on the

mount. I really have no choice in fighting it. That doesn't make me free, just serious.

Freedom means being who you are. More than anything else, freedom means the ability to be your authentic self. This sounds really good as a sort of psycho-political slogan, but everyone knows that there are times when the authentic self and the rest of the world just don't get along. Don't get along *at all*.



I've fought for a vague vision of personal freedom all my life. It hasn't been a reasoned struggle based upon ethical choices, but more like a reflex or instinct to resist and battle when the structures of society become too confining.

I believe--*I think*--it's hard to remember now, but I think I made a nearly-conscious choice to start feeling what I was feeling again. Unless I was

dreaming, I got to a place where I decided to let it all hit me and see what I thought about it. Admittedly, it was a risky experiment, but it proved surprisingly rewarding and worthwhile in my case.

The freedom to feel your own feelings and be O.K. about them is a special and uniquely powerful kind of freedom. It is also very fragile. It has flickered and sputtered out in me a thousand times. At times, I let it go out because it didn't seem to want to agree with the plans I had. At other times, it's simply been smashed out of me by shocks and bad experiences. I've reached a point where listening to my intuition and allowing myself to feel honestly my own emotions and desires has become a top priority. This isn't as self-absorbed as it might sound at first, because it's almost impossible to maintain relationships with others when we're completely out of touch with our own feelings, intuition, and shadow.

From the tree tops comes the threatening



rattle of autumn wind. It is truly fall now. My nose stings with the leaf mold in the air. The furnace clicks on and off, trying to decide if it's supposed to heat the house or not. T.S. Eliot said in his inverse way that "April is the cruelest month." It may be so, but October runs a close second. October gives

birth to a lot of good poetry, in part because of the sense of impending desolation that the season brings.

I lost a friend in October. I don't know what day it was. John Grimes, who had counselled me in Lexington during some crazy times, abruptly took pneumonia and died. He had fought leukemia for years, and it seemed like it was under control, but apparently the particular strain of pneumonia that was going around zeroed in on the chronic weakness of his system. John started out as a Presbyterian minister, then became a painter, and finally found his calling in the counselling field. He was a gifted artist and a fine counselor. I don't think that John changed the course of my life, or that he wanted to, but he helped me to see the issues more clearly, and helped me to find permission to be myself. We got past the counselor/patient structure and became friends. When he bought his computer, I set it up and got all the dip switches set right so that it would run. We traded letters after I went to Whitesburg. I didn't see him again after I left Lexington. That's a loss. I wish that I would have stopped by his place on one of the trips into the big city, but I didn't. We tend to deal with the people in our worlds as if they will always be there, unchanging and accessible, and it really isn't so.

John was a good ally in the struggle to stay human. He was one of the lights in my world. On this cloudy November day, my path seems dimmer knowing that he's gone. I'm glad I knew him, and glad for the nervous hours spent in unpacking the questions of my life with him.

Fearful, fretful November leaves. It's a warm autumn wind that feels better than I expect it to feel. The night contains more magic and surprises than I expected to find. I was born in the fall. For me, the alchemy of the season is all crossed up. Fall is a time of birth and beginnings, not mournful reflection. I believe that we must learn

to mourn the passing of all things, but then be done with it. Mourn in its season, but then let it go. Life is very short; life is terribly long. I've lived a score of lives. I don't understand Time anymore.

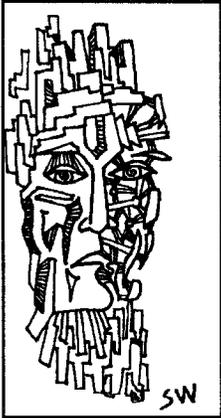
Rustling little branches in the tops of the tulip poplars--urgent, foreboding November wind--I look out of the window like a child dreaming of growing up. Wind makes a muffled thunder in the half-up, half-down storm windows. Erotic pictures appear suddenly in my mind. These pictures are inconvenient for the moment, but I file away a couple of ideas for later. I wish you could hear this wind; it's the kind that makes you want to wrap yourself in darkness and blankets.

It is the witching season, when things are not always the way they seem, when ancient witch-spirits leave their summer nests in the oaks and ashes and possess human minds with subtle twists of logic and perception. *What am I talking about? Shit, I don't know--some kind of feeling, some kind of dark intuition blown in from the night-filled woods on this unsettling November wind.*

This wind doesn't scare me. I like its restless rattling around. I've been the same way, restless, knocking around town, being as many places as I can think of to be. Suddenly, I'm trying on new identities, and it's an interesting shopping trip. That old psychic wardrobe simply wore out, and, to tell you the truth, it feels mighty good.

Drugs

The ferocity of the drug wars reveals an inescapable truth: Human beings have a ferocious craving for altered states of consciousness. One could even argue that altered states of some sort, but not necessarily drug induced, are necessary for us to have an adequate grasp of the reality we experience. It is important for us to be



shown that so much that we consider "real" is colored and shaped by the way we perceive it. The more sublime altered states offer us at least the sense of self-transcendence, and perhaps, when the vibes are right, even the

fact of it. If the transcendence of the isolated, finite self is possible, then it is necessary and must be explored. This drive to get beyond ourselves for a while may be something akin to instinctive, and it may be the root of the universal desire to get high. Even religious people are not averse to speaking in glowing terms of their "highs" as long as it is clear that those states are not induced by chemicals.

On the other hand, we see the enormous social cost of drug abuse in our society: drunken drivers, madmen with assault rifles, the loss of jobs and families through cocaine abuse, AIDS spreading like wildfire through shared needles in the shooting galleries of major cities, gang warfare over drug sales turf maiming children at play, and lost productivity in business and industry.

I've always been of the opinion that government did not have the right to control an individual's state of mind. What goes on in *my nervous system is my business*. Government does have the right and responsibility to protect the general population from dangerous individuals, and many forms of substance abuse render individuals dangerous. It's my feeling that government and the society at large will be forced to re-think its "cops and robbers" approach to drug use. The more this issue has been bantered about, the more arbitrary the dividing lines have come to appear. Is marijuana more dangerous than

tobacco? Does cocaine do more damage than alcohol? What about caffeine and some of the other wild stuff you can buy over the counter if you know what to ask for? Where do you draw the line?

For myself, I know that I will continue, like millions of others, to need to get beyond myself from time to time, and I may even resort to an illegal means if it suits me. At the same time, I don't want to see the streets turned into a war zone and hundreds of thousands of lives ruined. I'm not sure what's right, but I am sure that what's going on now isn't it.

I struggle with my feelings about this. A simple, unqualified yes or no answer to the question of drug use is impossible. Maybe it's the wrong question entirely. Maybe we should be asking about what's missing in our culture. There is a void in our civilization that makes drugs attractive. It is in ourselves and in the world around us. We have no sanctioned modes of self-transcendence except danger and sex. I don't include the religions here because I believe that we're enamored with safe, conventional religions that confirm our preconceived notions of ourselves and our world rather than challenging those notions.

Ours is an age of shrill rhetoric and hysteria, not calm and rational deliberation. It's a shame that we don't have the opinions of Thomas Jefferson or John Locke on the drug issue. I honestly wonder what they might have said.

I want to engage in an experiment in rationality for a moment. What are the rational facts of the drug debate? People get high, always have gotten high, and always will get high on something. A number of substances, *when used in moderate amounts by emotionally stable people*, are harmless, and in some cases, beneficial. Addiction of any kind to anything is harmful. Guns are harmful. Free-basing, self-administered injections of

narcotics, and gang warfare are harmful. Economic self destruction is harmful. So is cardiac arrest, hepatitis, and AIDS.

Government *cannot control drug use*. Imagine what life would be like if we had a government so powerful and intrusive that it could control the consumption of every citizen. Such a society would reduce the individual to the moral equivalent of a rat in a cage, and no great civilization has ever been built by rats in cages. Humans need autonomy, self determination, and the capacity to make responsible decisions in order to achieve our potential. How can a nation such as ours which aspires to world leadership, assert leadership with a population composed of individuals who are unable to make responsible decisions for their own lives? It would be laughable were it not so profound and basic a question.

There are several fundamental approaches which could be made. (1) We could legalize all currently controlled substances and let the bodies fall where they may. If people want to destroy their own lives, let them. (2) We could install urinalysis machines in every toilet in America and bust everyone, perhaps setting aside a couple of states for the new prison which will become necessary to hold all the substance offenders. (3) Some compromise could be struck, such as decriminalizing marijuana, some hallucinogens, and some stimulants, while keeping the heavy narcotics such as heroin and cocaine controlled. (4) We could develop new drugs which might meet the need of heavy drug users without creating the attendant societal problems. (5) We could develop a new cultural ethos and myth which would make room for, or even encourage, altered states of consciousness, but in a mode which would render chemical consumption unnecessary.

What do I think? Well, we can rule out (1) and (2) as unreasonable

(but there are a lot of folks in America who haven't seen yet that (2) is both unreasonable and impossible). (5) is "unreasonable" because such a cultural alchemy is beyond reason and can't really be programmed to meet the needs of an immediate concern. Societies don't develop new foundation myths in rational, conscious ways. Being a political realist, my hunch is that we'll see some combination of (3) and (4) with a re-thinking of how to deal with acute addiction problems. A bit of (5)--a new cultural ethos--may be necessary, but it must evolve on its own terms, independent of our immediate conscious agenda.

To be a little more specific--*hell, I can say what I want to now...paid for it...might as well use it*--I think marijuana should be legalized and taxed. If someone can't handle that, let them go into a therapy program and work on that. Nobody is *making them do it*. There would be problems with legalized pot, but there's problems now, and making it the province of the criminal justice system may not be the best way to deal with it.

I'm not sure that I'm ready to see stuff like LSD on sale next to the breath mints in a Convenient, but I don't think the people who make it and take it deserve to go to jail. There is a question of basic justice here: Does the punishment fit the crime? But pot and psychotropics are not where you see the stuff that scares people. The scary stuff happens with heroin and cocaine. And again, I'm not ready to see heroin and cocaine sold over the counter at SuperX. I have a hunch, that with the hard-core narcotics users, something better will need to be offered to them, better than the life they've been facing. That may even mean taking care of them.

Eliot Ness made a lot of noise, and helped to make Al Capone into a folk legend, but Ness and his strong-arm tactics didn't change the course of Prohibition. The same is true now.

Guns and warrants will not solve the problem. There are times when they need to be used, but they're not the solution. We need a calmer, kinder world which gives some shelter to the fragile and marginal people of the world.

I'm just amazed
at what I see.
The feeling that's
inside of me.
and as the world
starts to collect me.
I'll reveal myself
to you.

Oh storm as you
tumble out to sea,
carry my soul's
turmoil and spread
it over the waves
Now passion and
reason rise together.
I become whole
again.

And it takes time
for a thing to be
My love will grow
and break ground.
The whole world will
tremble when my
heart skips a beat,
and you'll politely
ask me to come
down.

And we'll talk.

--Tom Browning, 1989

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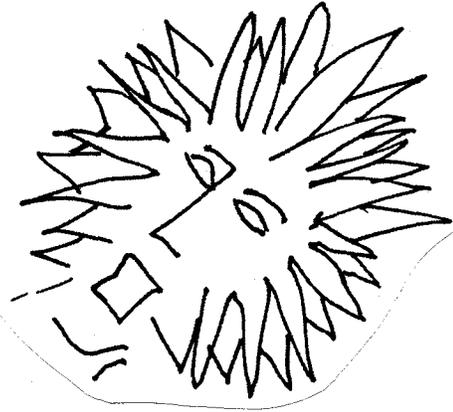
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