

Vices, Vignettes, and Vicissitudes: Reflections from the Activist Road...

Notes for a Seminar Presented by

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The truth about stories is that that's all we are.

~ Thomas King in *The Truth about Stories*

...we live by stories, we also live in them. One way or another we are living the stories planted in us early or along the way, or we are also living the stories we planted – knowingly or unknowingly – in ourselves. We live stories that either give our lives meaning or negate it with meaninglessness. If we change the stories we live by, quite possibly we change our lives.

~ Ben Okri, quoted in *The Truth about Stories*, by Thomas King

... all our memories are already fictions.

~ Pat Schneider

As for the myths, take anyone's life and deny that most of it is deliberate self-delusion—an aggrandizement—a mixture of lies and truth, of what was wanted and what was had, producing the necessary justification for having been granted a life in the first place.

~ Timothy Findley, *The Piano Man's Daughter*,

I dreamed about visiting a well-known palm-reader, who had mystified a few colleagues with her insights; but when I sat down with her I said:

Don't tell me the future

I know that already

Tell me the past

I've forgotten what happened.

~ Brian Murphy, *Journal*

The notations which follow are taken from Brian's various journals and scraps of paper saved along the way...

May 84

- The world, and we, are not perfectible. The least perfect, and the cause of most sorrow, are the ones who insist on creating the conditions for perfection, at whatever cost.

September 84

- It is clearly impossible for us not in pain (poverty, oppression, violence) to work towards the alleviation of pain, unless we are willing to forsake comfort and embrace pain, and then work towards our own liberation. [The poor don't know]

August 86

- We spend our lives talking to ourselves. One long conversation, the most meaningful and profound we will ever have. If we cannot talk well to ourselves, there is little hope for our intercourse with others.
- The essence, the purpose of life, is to transcend the circumstances of our birth.

January 87

- As near as I can tell, the greatest enemy of everyone, most feared and fiercely fought, is the truth. The theist, Marxist, fascist, humanist, humanitarian, even the hardened cynic, each resent and resist the maverick who unveils the lie and folly of their revealed Truth — ironically, of course, often using a countervailing “truth” as the light which reveals the darkness.

September 87

- “Change” is not a transitive verb.
- We need to rethink our distaste for “charity”. It may be the only sound reason to act. If we wish to change people’s lives, charity; if we want to change the world, politics. There is no guarantee that these goals are linked, and considerable evidence that they are in contradiction.

January 88

- Only the committed artist, politically active with the people, can give us reality.....but only the disinterested artist, active only in her own eyes and heart, can give us truth.

November 88

From my travel journal:

- ...from Mayalán we flew for a breath-taking hour in our tiny plastic bubble low through the mountain forest canyon formed by the Rio Xaclbal, which flows from Mexico to the centre of what is known as the “Ixil Triangle” formed by Nebaj, Chajul and San Juan Cotzal in the highlands of the Quiché. I was sitting in the co-pilot’s seat, and therefore surrounded by the vista with nothing but a heartbeat between myself and the sensation of the land. My eyes and heart can never again experience such wonder as that experienced as we floated over this incredible landscape, a physical, cultural, and spiritual landscape: the mountain cradle, the mountain fortress, the mountain burial ground of the Mayan people. For a timeless moment it became a “paysage moralise” — an allegorical landscape — which contained the beauty and cruelty of human history; and the glory of all civilization was buried in that dense forest along with the slaughtered Indians. But I

also knew that beneath the trees, walking the barely visible footpaths along tiny streams and around and over mountains, life went on, and went forward, not yet defeated after five hundred years! Not down yet, nor ever, from all that I could understand of these people who had redefined the meaning of time and space, in some ways even redefined the meaning of life itself. Maybe in them, and in the struggle of people like them throughout Central America, throughout the world, the hope and promise of humanity could still be redeemed. Moments in a life, moments of the soul...

- El Salvador : ...we sat in the shade and chatted, walked about the farms, and largely listened and watched the rhythms of life — an aspect of this work at which I feel best and most confident, since it is where the aesthetic most closely merge with politics, cultural action and the struggle for free life. I trust my eyes and my feelings more than anything else, and the science of this work is to allow it to be transcended by art — by impressions and sensations and patterns-beyond-words.

Towards the end of the day we were returning from a walk to a nearby farm where Lupé “treated” an ancient man with a rotten fungus on his feet and hands, and a young boy with an infected leg. We strolled back to the stream where we were to be ferried the thirty yards across to the main bank in a community dugout. I stood on the bank listening to the children laugh in the water and the people singing pentecostal vespers in their tiny outdoor chapel. I felt the strange grace which comes over me at the most unexpected times on these trips — a communion, a connection with some profound element of life, in which the simple is made complex, and the complex is rendered beautiful in its simplicity.

...As the sun began to set, we headed back the bumpy road to the highway. In the growing darkness, with me at the wheel of our old pick-up, we drove back over the dam which circumvents the skeleton of the Puente Cuscatlán and up into the hills on the way to San Vicente and San Salvador (passing as we went the site of our 1985 adventure in wild combat — strangely enough not stirring in me the slightest emotion, which made me wonder at the distances travelled since that strange and dangerous night). Two hours later, back in the military-infested capital city, weaving in and out of the smoky traffic jam of the early Saturday-night darkness, my body was prickling with confused and exhausted sensations of who and where in the world I was, having ranged in the past hectic 120 hours from the east and west of Guatemala, as well as over the expanse of the Ixcán and Ixil, to the coastal plains of eastern Salvador (and the past) and back. Experiencing reality in this way undermines my confidence in reality, and my trust in my own experience and the sensations of time and space. My nerves were tingling, my awareness riding a razor’s edge between the real and bizarre, and my emotions were numb in self-defence, ready to rise to the surface in a plea of simple surrender to the beauty and cruelty of this world, and its transcendent incomprehensibility...

August 89 [also include possible reading from “Pan-American Game...”, Canadian Forum]

- In an affluent and self-centred society whose object is comfort and the avoidance of death, there is little in life that is honorable; it is little wonder, then, that there ceases to be any impetus to honor the dead, or the dying. And that even our grief is not so much for the dead, but for our loneliness and mortality, and our own sordid lives.
- The two-ness of things: good and evil exist in perfect balance, and will balance. The notion of feast and famine is not merely metaphor. And the force of Karma is real. It is possible to continue to act, with only the goal of generating “goodness”, but this presumes not fighting, but creating a parallel state of being/reality. Fighting is always justified in self-defense, but can never create a state of goodness.

[comment on historical events: “fall-of-the-wall”]

January 90

- The efforts of liberation movements in the Third World to achieve economic and political justice are being resisted by the same actors who smugly gaze on the people’s revolt in Eastern Europe as though this revolt were their own handiwork, rather than the struggle of decades for countless ordinary men and women who we will never know. These self-satisfied observers declare the “end of history”. But the events we have seen are not the end of history, but new blooms on old branches of an ancient but still youthful tree, and those who see the End of History in these events are merely foretelling the rotting stiffness of their own dead branch

May, 1990

- Non-violence is an effective strategy for dissent because it disarms both parties — the weak and the strong — and weakens, therefore, the strongest before the weakest: it removes from the oppressor, who himself cannot be destroyed with force alone, the capacity to destroy with force his opposition.
- The failure of Communism is not a victory for Capitalism. Except for a tiny minority — including only a minority in the West — Capitalism itself is failing the planet. Those few of us who are the beneficiaries of Capitalism are bound, even in our own interest, to face this reality.
- Not only is the “free market” not possible in the abstract, it is not being attempted in the concrete: the free market is license for the wealthy, but a prison for the poor.

November, 90

- In the Quito airport, decaying and dirty, 6:00 am: grabbing the daily Air Ecuatoriana milk-run to Miami. I saw a fat, rich man, assured and scalely, with slick hair and oily skin. He knew his place and others knew theirs. He occupied a vast space which others entered only when invited, and with deference to the ominous power which exuded from him. A liar’s smile formed his mouth, but never reached his cold eyes. I thought: in a

country of the poor like this one, a man who is rich is a thief, and the thief must kill to gather his riches. This man was a thief and a killer — and he was travelling First Class.

May, 91 [also include possible reading from “The dice are loaded...”, Canadian Forum]

- In El Salvador, May 4th. I am aware that it is Devin’s birthday, in a place called El Gualcho. I am standing inside the cool dark of a storage shed, leaning on sacks of corn, when I glance out the door-framed frieze of bright sunlight and watch a woman and her child for a brief moment of their life. Later I write in my notebook:

"I looked long through a door in my life at a woman pounding tortillas, and her crying child — then I closed the door, and walked away..."

July, 91

- Bob Dylan again: "To live outside the law, you must be honest..."

September 91

Inside an old book (Kuhn, on Scientific Revolution) I found some notes made years ago. I think they were made while reading Rollo May (Love & Will; Power & Innocence) among others (perhaps Colin Wilson’s The Outsider), but I am not really sure:

- a quote: So much of our time is preparation, so much routine, and so much retrospect, that the pith of each person’s genius contracts itself to very few hours...
- a quote: To finish the moment, to find the journey’s end in every step of the road, to live the greatest number of good hours, is wisdom...
- a quote: The years teach much which the days never know...
- an observation: It is the eye that makes the horizon...
- an observation: Freedom = the release from unreality...
- an observation: We must claim our freedom, or else... Catastrophe is inevitable to those who wait for “fate” to release them.
- an observation: Neuroses is the effect of waiting... (to be saved, or executed)

- As men, we must always assume that any woman knows at least 100% more than she advertises, and that any man knows 100% less than he pretends. This means that on most days the average woman will know about four times that of the nearest man about just about everything, and if we are only consulting men we will achieve only about one fourth of what we aspire to.

- reflections about power: you have to bring your own power. Don’t take mine. Join mine, and double it.

- We were taught in physics that energy can neither be created nor destroyed. In human affairs this is not true. Both are possible. The secret is in a milieu that generates power rather than merely shares it. This is the secret of “popular organizing”.

October/November 91

Notes from my travel journal (El Salvador, Colombia, Guatemala)

October 22nd

Later in the day I visited a consumer coop and popular stores in a relatively new colonia in San Salvador, Jardin de San Cristobal, which has emerged out of the urban organizing which followed the 1986 earthquake. The visit to this community was doubly interesting because I arrived early and since the coop members were not yet back from work I asked for a tour around the barrio. When I noticed that the houses went right to the edge of the ravine I asked if I could go down to the stream — I wanted to see for myself the network of footpaths and waterholes, the nooks and the crannies the people use to move through the city from one section to the other without detection from the army or the police. The promoters did not want to go and told me it was no place for me, but the women with us from the community laughed and said it was fine, and I was delighted that we could go. They showed me how they have drilled holes into the potable water line that runs through the ravine to service the established middle class colonias in the city; the people come down from the barrio every day to tap into the city water supply for their own drinking water, and maintain the tapping-point with great care (I would not even have known it was there if they had not shown me). The ravine is another world, thick with bushes and trees, and a web of paths going in all directions — we could have had a great game of hide-and-seek and never found each other — and it helped me to understand how the urban insurrection was able to be sustained for 10 days in November 1989. The army would never dare to follow the guerrilla into the ravines, and you can travel throughout the city “underground” in the ravine system, going down in one place and popping up in quite another. The ravines are “protected” by a buffer zone of poor barrios which hug the cliffs and spill over the sides, and provide the popular base of the urban commando.

Later as we returned to the centre of the city and Ana’s house the city bristled with its military presence, helicopters and armoured vehicles all over the place and armed foot-patrols running through the streets. As we near peace in this country, the militarization seems even more intense. On my run this morning through the early light of a strangely tranquil city, I was startled to hear a short machine gun battle break out two blocks over from my chosen route.

It is weird what can become normal. Five years ago I would have looked for cover; this time I merely altered my route a bit without breaking my stride, and continued on my run. This is not cavalier, but an attitude picked up from the Salvadorans themselves: although the fighting continues, the war is over, and it is time to move on and impose normalcy, continuing the struggle by other means, and never again ducking your head. It is the sense I picked up in every meeting I went to, in every community, in every discourse. These people have moved well-past the events being played out around a negotiating table in Mexico City. Having won the peace, they now intend to win the war; they intend simply imposing the logic of their will through base organizing and being more competent than the enemy. If they were not Salvadorans you would simply shake your head at their stubborn folly. But they are Salvadorans...and they have not yet faltered. It

will be fun to travel along with them, because they represent the new (post-revolutionary) era of “development”, and there is much for us to learn and exchange.

November 4th

My impressions from a first visit to Colombia should be guarded. It was a quick exposure, and a complex place. But I did not warm to it and am not eager to go back soon. On my last morning in Bogota I took an early morning run through the damp and misty street, occupied at that hour only by street-dwellers. The image that sticks is that of scavengers, people with bags and wooden carts carefully picking through the garbage on every corner and in front of every house. These are not street-people per se, scrounging for food. They are scrap “entrepreneurs” searching for bottles, tin, paper, objects of whatever small value for re-sale. Every corner, every house in the district is completely rummaged by these entrepreneurial recyclers, some with their very small children dashing from house to house helping to maximize the coverage ahead of the next person. This is their living, and it actually nets them more than the minimum daily wage — these folks are much better off than the absolute poor. When we hear the prophets of neo-liberalism profess economic realism and the dawning of the new world economic order, we need to remember the garbage-picking entrepreneur, the modern face of the “informal sector”; this is the legacy of the new capitalism, this and the cruel opulence of the new international upper class, even whose garbage is not available to the poor.

And other thoughts from that trip:

- You have to be careful when travelling with people who believe in “eternal life”...

March, 1992

- When they take away all your reasons to live, you find other reasons to live. (This may explain the profound revolutionary fervour of simple people after the massacres of the poor in Latin America in the ‘70s and ‘80s...)
- Reduced to the most simple terms, there are many more good people than there are bad. Unfortunately the good are terribly vulnerable to the bad. But the most dangerous vulnerability is to do bad to defeat bad. The result is not less bad. The only way to defeat bad, is to do good. Therefore all of us who are doing good, must simply do better.
- God is a slum-landlord.
- and Kafka was an optimist

July, 1992

- As I get older and stiffer (and more stubborn?) I get glimpses: the last lesson is humility. It is the most difficult, and perhaps the most costly...
- If we want to transform maleness (and we must), we must be willing to transform femaleness; similarly masculinity and femininity, paternity and maternity. It is absolutely impossible to do away with one without doing away with the other, since they are merely two faces of one relationship. It is this (socialized and institutionalized)

relationship itself, based within interdependent pathologies and oppressive social ideology and structures, which must be transformed.

- We spend too much time agonizing about which version of the truth is correct. Virtually all serious (and many not-so-serious) perceptions of reality are accurate. Where they are flawed is in their exclusivity. If we want to understand reality, we have to understand and accept the validity of all descriptions of it — except the over-arching claim of single vision...
- “Walking is less tiring than standing still...”, from Pagoda Ridge, by Gu Hua
- Devin: ‘I don’t know why people are so curious about death; death is exactly like before we were born...’.
- I found a stunning poem, hidden in a corner of a recent edition of The Nation, composed by Michael C. Blumenthal. It passed over me like a cloud, and speaks to so much that I am feeling these days, and can’t speak, nor resolve. It is the most moral poem I have ever read. It is called, “I Do Not Care Where Goodness Comes From”, and it could be my epitaph:

I do not care where goodness comes from —
whether from some subliminal ache
or a rapturous need, from the humility of Ruth

or the dull patience of Job. I do not care
if goodness comes from the deepest fatigue
or the oracles of Minsk. I do not care

if goodness gathers no heat among the conflagrations
of fame or the raptures of Babylon. I do not care
if the wages of goodness are a paupers fee

and not even the wind will pause to collect its refuse.
I do not care if I must beat my head like a stone
against the doors of evil until I am black and blue

and deflated as a paper bag. I do not care if
I am called sentimental all my life (or manly or womanly,
or childish or simpleminded). I do not care

if I am not asked to contribute to the anthologies
on the morality of form, and can find no home
for the morality of content. I do not care

if I am excluded from the Valhalla of the seekers
of truth. I don’t even care if I have failed

to look into the image of my own poor face

and missed the centre of this human world:
the Satanic fires burning in my eyes.

September 1992

- And some thoughts from Marcus Aurelius (*Meditations*, A.D. 121-180), revisited this summer after many, many years, to see whether he offered any wisdom to ease the pain. As I recalled, there was little there; but as always, there was some:
 - Things can never touch the soul, but stand inert inside it, so that disquiet can arise only from fancies within... (4.3);
 - Put from yourself the belief that “I have been wronged”, and with it will go the feeling. Reject your sense of injury, and the injury itself disappears... (4.7);
 - When men are inhuman, take care not to feel towards them as they do towards other humans... (7.65);
 - How ridiculous not to flee from one’s own wickedness, which is possible, yet to endeavor to flee from another’s, which is not... (7.71)

Recalling Adler: “It is easier to fight for one’s principles, than to live up to them...”

- Also revisited some reflections I had while reading Colin Wilson’s *The Outsider*, and a margin note made long ago: There is no point for the “outsider” in making the world better for people; s/he must try to make people better for the world. The prevailing liberal faith is only in the world itself, but this faith despises humankind, and ordinary human beings. The outsider, on the other hand loves human beings, and hates the world.
- Twice this summer — one very early morning in June, walking through a light rain in Moghegno, a tiny village in a valley in the Swiss Alps on the border with Italy; and for a few hours alone at Lac Pemichangan in August — I have found myself, centered, at the centre, at my centre, just when I thought that I had lost it for good. The sensation: I am equidistant from all things, all persons, all loves; this is me apart from all else, and gives relations with all else, and all others, meaning.

It is loss of this centre — or the fear of losing it, forever — which brings on the night which feels that it will never end. This night is not merely loneliness, the loss of the other; it is the loss even of Self. Not merely alone, or even especially alone, but nothing.

- And then, amongst all this, a reflection on “happiness”, which has been elusive and incidental, it seems, in the search to create meaning at the centre. At the end of this long summer of reading and contemplation, I accidentally came across a wonderful and simple memoir, written by a man named David James Duncan. It does not matter what it was about; it ultimately was about life, death, happiness, and the transcendental quality of experience and knowledge. The insight that the author suddenly “received” is captured in

his simple words: “...how deeply and clearly it was brought home to me, that October day, that there is something in us that needs absolutely nothing...in order to be happy.”

This does not seem so much (that is the paradox of the koan...), but it resonated with me, and the reflections of the last three months echoed. I felt my centre, equidistant from all, with nothing but itself, its Self. And I knew as I have known before, but differently too — felt differently — that this is where it begins, where life begins, where knowledge begins, wisdom begins, happiness begins: with nothing. And that it is only by touching nothing again, appreciating nothing, with satisfaction and celebration, simply, that we can understand or appreciate anything at all. This is the centre. This is the ground in which happiness can find root.

- Then while jogging through the silent dawn mist along the Ottawa River, searching the edge of sadness, I glimpsed in the shadows what had been unseen: within my centre lies an unmarked grave...
- and yes, every horizon reached presents a new horizon; openings in the mist reveal a misty landscape...

December 1992

Excerpts from my journal of a trip to El Salvador and Guatemala:

- The first place we visited was the site of a massacre in 1982, and as we crawled across the savannah over river-bed roads and down overgrown paths, we passed the crumpled shells of the adobe homes destroyed by the army in their sweeps through this area. When we got out of our jeep and walked about, there were many thoughts and emotions. I felt the ghosts in the breeze when I split off from the group to find my own communion with this simple place (this is a real feeling, a presence, not a figure of speech...). Later we sat under the trees for some time talking with a few of the old campesinos, whose faces were maps of a journey through time, and whose eyes and hands told not only of farming but of years of fighting in the underground. As I sat and watched and listened, I sensed that their resistance was not the resistance romanticized within the myths of international solidarity. These stubborn campesinos resist everything that resists them, nature and man. They are like rocks in the earth, or the earth itself.

I reflected on the reality that the war we supported is not the war they fought, and I wondered whether we will ever support their war. In my notebook I wrote: “This place, this tree where we sit with these people, this earth — these have been here for all time, timeless. History is merely shadows passing over the land. The shadows are gone, and new ones will pass. The land remains, with the people. Our story knows not this tree, and the land is silent after we pass...”.

Other images remain from that place: the road we travelled ruined by years of non-use, and the nausea I felt as we bumped along; the hidden bomb-shelters for the children, little rabbit holes which led into small tombs for the living, dug into the clay and hidden by

bushes and thorns. And the altar in the weeds, all that is left of the church which was destroyed when the army came through so many years ago.

Now life is back, and the reconstruction begins, a new era of struggle, and this place and these people continue on. International aid money of all stripes is pouring in. And somehow I think we all missed the point, and have not seen at all what has happened here, and what is happening again.

- ...the dilemma: what is development action in the modern context? How do you implement basic survival strategies in an ongoing emergency and still build a base for transformation? The framework we were provided with all week is a framework of governance, not of struggle. It has become a question of who governs; there is little room for a vision of change in the very act and form of governance, especially to confront the structures that marginalize the marginal.

I wrote in my notebook:

“...the way forward with micro-economic intervention is not to implement projects which try to wedge (a few) poor into the (few) cracks in the existing economic system. Rather it is to introduce an economics which compensates, insulates, and ultimately undermines the impact of the present system on the poor, and gradually transforms their vulnerability into their own authority and economic power. The “alternatives” on which this project and others focus do not take this approach — they deal with the crisis momentarily, but don’t confront the cause. In this sense the strategy is doomed to further marginalization, and dooms the participants to continued marginalization as well. You can’t save the marginal by moving them to the centre; you save them by changing the margins.”

Later, in Guatemala....

- On the way back from a meeting, walking through the streets of the city centre, we passed scores of homeless mothers and their children, huddled on the street corners where they live and eke out a living. The thought occurred: to be born, grow up, grow old and die young on the crumbling street of Guatemala City: there need be no other proof of a godless universe...

- ...we went across the hall to meet a small group of refugees who have returned unassisted to the country. These people are known as “silent” returnees. Their return has been clandestine and they are destitute. They watched us wordlessly, gaunt, stunted, haggard faces, stooped bodies and sunken eyes. The first sound in the room was the rattling cough of the sick child hanging limp over her mother’s shoulder. We noted later that the illnesses of the poor, which kill them, derive simply from eating and breathing. Even living is deadly for the absolutely poor, and their lives are desolate. Nothing could ever be done now to make the lives we saw before us truly humane; even simple comfort would be difficult to provide. There are hundreds of such returnees now, and little is known of them, and little is being done to help them. We did nothing either, except to take their testimony, and offer them our hand.

- *From a long epistle written that August to my friends in CA solidarity, concerning our approach to economic justice issues in Nicaragua:*

I remain very sceptical about the clarion-call, and the crusade. We simply cannot any longer believe our own advertisements without self-criticism and re-assessment: I seriously question the “depth of our insertion” and the quality of our “historic engagement”. The issue of the struggle for “an alternative vision of development” is loaded, and as time passes it will be harder and harder to defend romantic visions of the revolution and its process. And the struggle for an alternative is not specific to these decades and this country, or even this continent. The struggle for an “alternative” is a longer one than that experienced in our lifetime, and our own privileged participation in one short chapter in this history does not allow us to appropriate history and blow out of proportion the moment we have shared. We need to regain a more modest perspective that places our moment in a historical and global framework that allows us to genuinely and realistically promote “an alternative vision of development” without claims to being part of a world-historical moment.....

...Finally, I wish we could have a radical scrutiny of the very notion of “grassroots activism”. I don’t think it was ever a very good metaphor (it is a metaphor, not an actual thing that exists in the real world ...).

I believe that it is a false concept: there is no “grassroots” in the sense that we use that term. Even in the Third World, including revolutionary Nicaragua, I am very suspicious of the pretense to authentic grassroots action, but in Canada I am certain that it does not exist: a few scattered alternative groups across Canada, even those “based in community”, are not a “grassroots”, and do not constitute a movement, and even the soil in which to try to create real popular movement is depleted, not least by the way we ourselves conduct our affairs, and the limits of our education/mobilization methodologies.

We also need to scrutinize the structural implications of the larger implied metaphor which underlies the term “grassroots” — which has both organic and hierarchical qualities — because in trumpeting the sanctity of the grassroots, we implicitly accept all the other implications of the metaphor. Is there really anything about organized society and the way it actually works in the world today to justify the political notion of “grassroots”? I believe that this phrase has become part of our cant, and blinds us to the limits of our work, and the tremendous challenges that lie ahead for us if we are serious in our articulated role to promote fundamental change. If we really want to change things, at least in a hundred years, we may have to revise our perspectives and create new metaphors which are more accurate and useful, and come out of our real experience. Because, concerning fundamental change, I really don’t believe that we can get there from here.

- *And from a letter to a friend:*

The effects of under-education, under-employment and low mobility are not fully understood in terms of the line between societal vitality and decay, and especially the critical mass of disaffection that leads to social decay. It is an issue of hope. The increase in violence, social nihilism and inner-city decay follows directly from the reduction in opportunity and hope.

When, as a meagre reward for diligence and following the rules of the game, society cannot offer the underclass at least a small prospect for security, dignity and a minimal degree of upward mobility, then the underclass have no incentive to diligence and following the rules. Crime and aberrant behaviour increases when crime offers better prospects, or at least no worse, than following the rules. (This maxim applies to the rich as well as the poor, which is why there is more white collar crime than petty crime — although the latter is punished much more severely).

If we want to arrest the increase in crime, social illiteracy and indigence, we must offer better odds and a slightly higher stake in following the norms and rules of the meritocracy; we simply have to increase opportunity and hope. Otherwise we will pay the price in social decay and all the ills it brings, which are permanent and cumulative, and terribly difficult to turn around once the rot sets in.

March, 1993

- And a British environmentalist, Nick Hildyard, interviewed recently by David Cayely on CBC IDEAS struck another chord that has become a refrain in my mind:

“The groups on the ground reject the idea that the solutions can only come from those institutions like corporations, like development agencies, which have been primarily responsible for the crisis. They say: No, the solutions lie with us; we have the solutions; we don’t need to invent alternatives; in our daily lives we are working them out, we are innovative. We don’t need to be empowered; we don’t need someone to empower us. What we need is people to get off our backs.

...development...is actually enclosure, expropriation, taking away people’s land, enclosing knowledge, denying access to resources, creating the notion of resources, and then denying people access to their water, to their forests, to their land, using those lands for others, transferring control to a small minority. These are the issues that really matter on the ground and, unless those issues are addressed, I don’t see much hope for either the planet or for social justice. And I think that social justice is now the key issue, the key issue. The idea of saving the world without social justice is for me...simply not worth considering. I wouldn’t want to live in a sort of world that was a technocratic, ecofacist, but safe world.”

April, 1993

From a letter to Lance:

- The “Titanic” analogy (the accusation that we only wish to re-arrange the deck chairs) is perverse because it is bloated with hidden assumptions, and is blighted with apocalyptic negative fantasy. Our “ship” has not hit an iceberg; it is merely run- aground. It is not going to sink, but neither is it going to move. So re-arranging the deck chairs (and much of the other furniture) actually isn’t such a silly exercise; however, its not enough, and anyway, it has already been done.

Rather, what is necessary is to realize that our ship isn’t a ship anymore; it’s an island. And we aren’t passengers and sailors; we are islanders. And we are going to have to live here for a long, long time, co-habiting with this finite space. So we had better stop trying to refit a ship, and recognize that the skills of sailors are not appropriate; and start to accommodate ourselves to living on an island, and develop the skills that islanders need.

Shifting the analogy like this, while a bit of a game, is what I meant by asking new questions, and creating “discontinuities”. Between a ship at sea, and a remote and deserted island, there is an absolute discontinuity, which is why the adventures of Robinson Crusoe and the Swiss Family Robinson were so compelling to millions of readers (and certainly more compelling than the bizarre travesty of the Titanic, a mere obscenity of human arrogance and error, and not even a very good story, let alone a useful analogy for human dilemmas as we approach the millennium).

The theme of sustainability is key...whether about avoiding duplication, or promoting a new generation of leadership, or about tinkering with a failed model, an obsolete idea (a doomed ship...), or about “re-inventing the wheel”. If we all didn’t have to start from scratch perhaps all this would not be necessary, but when you suddenly find yourself on an island without a user’s manual, the first thing you have to do is re-invent the wheel...

.....Piaget said that “to learn, is to invent”. He believed that people do not learn by acquisition, by being “taught” what others “know”, but that each individual develops understanding only by inventing knowledge anew, personally. There is considerable evidence that the same is true for people-in-groups, in community. It is not the wheel that is important — it is the invention. And it is not the answer that is important, but the question itself. And, that the answer is invented by the person who originally asked the question. Only thus will the answers be applicable in real-life situations; and only thus will arise new questions.

.....Power is centralized and controlled in all societies through a system that assures that there are privileged people who have all the “answers” (which are the real collateral and capital in any society), and who also make up the questions. The answers come first; the questions are there merely to justify and verify the revealed answers. The keepers of knowledge program the questions to seek only the prescribed answers, thereby assuring their privilege and power. Anyone posing new questions, or questions that the elect cannot answer, is marginalized, censored, and often obliterated.

The one who can pose even one new question that successfully engages the consciousness and imagination of the populace, undermines prevailing power and, momentarily at least, creates the possibility of revolution.

May, 1993

From notes and journals of a trip to Peru in May:

- (May 10th)...From this meeting we drove to the outskirts of Lima to the most famous of the marginal communities, Villa El Salvador. This was one of the very first of the urban land-takeovers in the desert surrounding Lima, and over about 25 years has had a long history of social organization. To get to Villa El Salvador you drive past miles upon miles of the sand dune slums which surround the city. It is difficult to describe Villa El Salvador except by putting images together. Over one half million people living in just one concentrated pueblo (neighboured by scores of other barrios, with millions more people). Everything is grey and brown and dust, sand and gravel. No soil, no grass, the few stark trees only serving to remind you of the absence of vegetation in what is essentially a community of sand. The houses are mud, coarse brick, cardboard and thatch, hoarded tin. It goes on forever, stretching to the sky, up steep hills of sand and stones and rock and across the never-ending dunes. Dry and dusty and arid. It never rains, and water is purchased from tankers that pass by every day. The dust never settles and the coarse feeling in the throat and on your skin never leaves.

...

While meeting the women of the sewing workshop (whose spokesperson was one of their husbands!) we sat inside one of the dusty, crowded one-room shacks that serves as a home for a family of 6 or 7, plus chickens and pigs. While we were there a teenage girl returned from school, clean and sharp in her school uniform of blue wool and starched cotton; she bowed and obediently kissed us all, and kept her dark thoughts hidden behind secret eyes. It is for this that the people endure: to offer her a little more, so that she can offer her children a little more, so that the family can slowly over generations move across the sand towards the city and its promise of escape and prosperity. The adults live merely to scratch the smallest advantage for the best and the brightest that will manage to survive the blight that is their home. The dream of millions. Immigrants. Class immigrants, trying to migrate across a sea far more daunting than any sea crossed by our ancestors travelling to a new world they knew existed.

This is the real project of the poor, and the project in which we must engage if our rhetoric about transformation and justice is meaningful, Otherwise our financial support is merely the price of admission for periodic exotic visits to a sideshow that represents the existence of 60% of the planet.

July, 1994

- *And a few fragments of my own taken from scraps written on the run:*

~ The degree to which you are an expert is a function of how far away from home you are...

~ We need to make a distinction between credit (which, if called its true name, would be called debt), and equity (which is autonomous, non-repayable capital, subject to growth and profit). The poor are sometimes allowed credit, which increases their debt and distances them further from the opportunity to build equity through their autonomous efforts. Most credit programs serve only to increase the equity that the rich have in the poor, equity originally stolen from the poor and multiplied through their labour.

August, 1995

In *Possession*, A.S. Byatt quotes Robert Browning:

“How many lies did it require to make the portly truth you here present us with?”

A telling question, relevant no more to literature than the daily tales we tell to friends and intimates.

- Also returned to Chinua Achebe after many, many years — reading *Anthills of the Savannah* — and found his passing observations about humanity wry and acute:

~ “There is no universal conglomerate of the oppressed. Free people may be alike everywhere in their freedom, but the oppressed inhabit each their own peculiar hell. The present orthodoxies of deliverance are futile to the extent that they fail to recognize this.”

~ “Ehe! Talkam like that. No shaky-shaky mouth again. But oga you see now, to be big man no hard but to be poor man no be small thing. Na proper wahala. No be so?”

- *And a poem for Devin at Christmas:*

This is the year (Devin)

This is the year of short poems
I think:

I think you made it.

Not to the finish line.
The *starting* line.

Don't think that this is not much of an accomplishment.
Most people *never* make it to the starting line.
They are finished before they get there
and then stand around an entire life
Wondering what happens next.

Nothing.

The sage says, "walking is easier than standing still".
Try it for an hour. Try it for a *day*.
Try it for a lifetime....

Welcome to the starting line.
I sometimes think that I just got there
myself.
Maybe we can start together and
give each other a helping
hand.

I could use the company.

Summer, 1997

- *And from another letter this spring, to someone else who asked for feedback on a policy document, this one for one of the largest (and conservative) international NGOs:*

It is true that large mass appeal charities run a risk with donors who instinctively distrust politics (especially "radical" politics) and think charity should be "charity" and not politics. But this very attitude has been exploited, and therefore inculcated and reinforced, by the voluntary sector itself, often quite cynically. This is what happens when fund-raising is seen merely as marketing rather than education and mobilizing (cf. your point about not taking the donors with us).

.....

The NGOs themselves have established sanctions against clear talk of politics, and constantly profess their “apolitical” nature, thereby only deepening the dilemmas that you discuss. We can’t talk politics because (we believe) our donors’ understanding of development is too superficial and they don’t like it; so we proffer superficial messages and our donors’ understanding becomes even more superficial. That we cannot offer sophisticated messages with a clear political analysis becomes a self-fulfilling prophesy.

This is a bit of a paradox, as are most dilemmas. To deal with the problem it is necessary to name the paradox, for ourselves, and for the donors...

....

In the second sentence of your essay you define advocacy to mean “pushing for change”. Yes. But I think it is more than that. Pushing for change also means *taking sides* (this is what makes the dilemma of “neutrality” so critical), as is clear throughout your paper. I think that you should make this explicit right from the outset. It is the radical step of publicly and explicitly taking sides that is so deeply resisted by NGOs and which they fear will cost them support. It is not “polite” (that is, it lacks *politesse*; there is a class issue that is never spoken of here...). And it seems “radical” (which it is) and absolutist (which it is not). And therefore, it may make some people angry (those against whom we seem to be taking sides, for starters). And once you have done it, there is no turning back.

....

Finally, in all this I think there is an analogy with clear speech. Most people don’t want to say clearly and precisely what they mean, because if they do people will actually understand what they think, and judge them for it, and hold them accountable. They will also be expected to *do* what they say, and defend what they do. And they will make enemies among those who feel exposed by clarity of thought and speech.

Maybe it is not only fear of politics that plagues NGOs, but the pervasive fear of clear speech. If so, integral to the remedy is clear speech itself.

- And another year ends, with poems:

Pain heals (*for Devin*)

Pain heals
Imagination invents
The horizon is always one step ahead
(that is the purpose of horizons).

Love is what we feel for others
when we are at peace with ourselves

Courage is the brave face of fear

Confidence is the courage of those
who aren’t quite sure

of themselves.

Anger is the face of loss.

Laughter lightens all loads

No darkness can survive a smile

The hand that touches, is touched

Kindness is health.

Joy is a sun-lit breeze that moves the green leaves
of the soul.

Silence is the sound of truth.

•

And for Gaelan:

Passion

Its echo is joy,
its spectre, despair,
Its final breath a sigh.

Passion, and the heat of tears,
are Nature's way of saying
"I'm alive!"

1998

This is the year that Jane, my mother died, July 4th, aged 84. Some things I reflected (to Jean) at the time:

- The fact is that, although I have some sadness, I am not grieving; I wasn't sure, and I needed to give it a few days, but now I know. I am honouring a person, a past, some of it shared, much of it entangled. But she wasn't my mom, at least not any more, and not for a very long time. Some of the stuff I wrote in my journal was simply true: that and nothing more. I unfolded my wings and flew far above and away.

That is not to say that I am not sad. I have been, and still am, but less and less as the days go by. Sad for her, and for everybody. For me, I am not sure what I feel. Lucky. Torn,

but not maimed. Not deeply sad for me though. I think that I did that grieving a long time ago.

And of course there is the experience of nihilistic absence, the nausea of death: that she is not here anymore, its over. But at this stage of life, and when I know she wanted to go cause we talked about it, it is more a physical sensation than an emotional vortex. ...

Then there is the politics of death, that is, the politics of a life ended. This is the area that I am just now beginning to get into. It isn't very nice, and frankly, I am a bit reticent to share it until it is a bit cleaner. Now it is just flashes, that I think are useful, although private.

...The substance of all this: I am the fruit of a bitter union, the fruit of two lives entangled like brambles in barren ground. I am not bitter fruit, the source for which miracle I do not know where to look. Instinct tells me to look inside, that I myself am the source.

Awful as it sounds, a weight that did not lift entirely when my dad died, is dissipating like the last wisps of a heavy, dark fog. There is a sadness here too; this is not what a child should feel (and I am but a child in this). And I am revisiting a strange, bizarre and violent landscape of love and hate and abuse, not as a sordid tale (it is not a sordid tale) but as a place that above all was a blessing, mixed, frightening often, cruel and touching, and frankly, exciting and exotic and terrible, all at once.

Enough for now. Just to let you know that I am exploring the nooks and the crannies, seeking clean emotion, true perceptions, honesty, generosity, closure. This is good, and it is incredibly fortunate for me that this is happening at a rare moment when I can actually take the time to swim the dark waters and soar the blue-crystal sky (for example, if mom had died while I was on a field trip, I would not have the clarity nor the space that I can afford right now...

- and later (again to Jean):

But I want to share a simple, but strange (because it had not occurred to me before) insight I had last night: Sadness is one thing; sorrow is quite another. Like I said. Simple, but somehow very important to me.

This was not experienced as an idea, but as a realization. It was quite useful, because I stopped looking around for the sadness that has dissipated, trying to recapture a fleeting and often counterfeit emotion, and acknowledge this other quite different, and lasting, thing.

Now I have to explore sorrow. I am not at all clear what it is, or where it comes from, who is its subject, who/what its object.

- Some time ago I wrote a poem for a friend who had lost a friend. She said it was true, and hearing it helped.

Some deaths don't die

Some deaths don't die
The absence felt is not
 like other deaths,
 a space
Lived in once, now empty
To slowly fill again.

This is a deep, deep
 and shadowed absence,
A piece of the heart
 that can't be replaced.

Too close.

Lives too close
 don't die ~
Embraced,
Grieved and mourned,
Absent, but not gone.

Some deaths don't die
They live.

- Some read that a journey begins “with a single step”; others read that the journey begins “under one’s foot”. How different are these two readings! And how different are the journeys.
- The essence of social justice activism is not to share our privilege, but to do away with privilege; not to share our power but to transform power itself.
- Similarly, in seeking understanding of a situation we wish to transform, we should focus on the most important knowledge of those who are seen to be least knowledgeable (that is, the denizens of the situation) rather than as we so often do, seizing on the least important knowledge of the “most knowledgeable” (usually experts from away, bringing their systems and models and excuses to obscure specifics with their generalities).
- I am at the cottage, alone, in the misty golden light of early morning. Six sleek ducks fly close along the water, then up, around and down again, all in a tight 3-D diamond formation at about 80 km/hr. I am spellbound by the magic of it. Question: How do they

do that? Answer: There is no *possibility* of error. They do not try to avoid a mistake — a collision; the possibility isn't there. They do not do *it*, they simply *do*

- During the summer I write many e-notes to Jean who is away in France:
- Last night on CBC this fellow was talking about how modern persons have forgotten themselves, and need to create ways to periodically remember their original self. This memory, he said, is the most critical memory there is.

This loss of capacity applies to you and me less than almost any people I know (although it happens to us too, and too often) but he made me reflect again on what has been ever so present in my mind these past weeks: that our relationship is built on nurturing precisely this memory in each other, and loving the knowledge that is there. You help me to remember who I am, and to want to be what I remember, and to maintain the confidence that I can be. You love my memory of self, as I try to love your living memory. Wow! This is really so rare; I think most relationships are based on a terrible fear and hostility to this remembering and threatened by the spectre, in those whom they profess to love, of an awakened, autonomous, memory-present other.

- 1998 is the year that I rewrite my book. I get the final draft to the publisher on the final day of the year. And then write poems for my kids:

I ask myself (*a poem for Devin, Christmas 98*)

I ask myself what will happen
If the poems run out,
that is ~ *when* the poems run out.

But then I remind myself that I know that poems never run out,
although some people run out of poems,
And some forget that they ever had any.

And so I resolve that my last thought will be another poem.

I ask myself if winter, after all,
is not more honest than spring,
Since it promises nothing.

But then I remind myself that spring promises nothing either,
It merely awakes us to what we have promised ourselves
and perhaps forgot,
or merely stored away someplace
While we were waiting for something to happen.

And I resolve to warm myself through the long winter

keeping the promises I made in springtime.

I ask myself when, and where, and why,
And whether I would do it all over again.

But then I remind myself that I haven't finished doing it yet
the first time,
And that when is now, and where is here,
and the answer to why ~
if there is one ~
Isn't in the past, but in the future.

And I resolve to create the answer in what I do.

2000

A magical lake in July. I read *Fugitive Pieces* by Anne Michaels, and find it lyrical, even in its imperfection. Some insights from the novel (the italics are mine):

- The shadow past is shaped by everything that never happened...*a biography of longing*...I did not witness the most important events of my life. (17)
- Important lessons: look carefully, record what you see. Find a way to make beauty necessary; find a way to make necessity beautiful. (44)
- The grief we carry, anybody's grief, Zedena thought, is exactly the weight of a sleeping child. (158)
- What is the true value of knowledge? That it makes our ignorance more precise. (p. 210)

June, 2001

Dear Brother and Sisters,

After a few weeks of sadness and a confusion of thoughts, I recognize in my grief that I also am angry. And I realize that the expression of my sorrow is necessary, but so too is the expression of anger. So I will start there.

....

I am angry about what all of us endured. I am angry at my father who was mean, and my mother who was both his nemesis and his accomplice. I am angry at Dad's father who left him alone and his mother who sucked him dry. I am angry at Mom's father who molested her and her mother who left her cold. I am angry at the families and the society that left these two immature and incompetent souls who were our parents so long to their own devices.

I am angry that these things continue. I am angry that we are surrounded by the silent scream of tortured children and tormented adults (victims *and* perpetrators: in this

terrible cycle they are often the same), and that as a society we embrace the silence, while condemning the maimed to drugs and the demented Twelve Steps.

I am angry... And sad...

But, that is not all. No, I'm *much* more than that. I'm also grateful, and full of love. I am full of love for Danny, as a brave man and a dear brother fallen in a cruel, cruel war.

...

I am also full of love for a tragic, cruel father, and a willful mother who somehow saved herself and (at least parts of) us with her.

I don't know why I love, but I do. And perhaps *that* is the final root of the pain — the simple love of a child, and the perpetual “why?” that we live with and will be with us until we die.

And, as I think each of you have discovered at times along our path, I am full of love for each of you.

I'm also demented in my own way, and I'm not done yet, not ever. I remember joy among the pain, and I have seen the fist and the dance of resistance and transcendence, and I won't give in to anger, or sadness or sorrow, or to Danny's final courage.

So....my brother and my sisters.....that's just by way of introduction for those who wonder where I am five weeks down the road from a suicide I never for a moment thought would happen....

And here we all are.

Does this mean that the last one standing wins?

Well, no, I guess not. But the fact is, we will have to go through this seven more times (well, only the “last one standing” actually will get to do seven of us, and will herself be the eighth) and that doesn't count all the others that we love so deeply who may die before us. We will be doing death together for the rest of our lives, so I guess that we ought to do life together too. For it is our lives that will give each death its meaning and redemption.

For my part, I am so tired of seeking meaning in the dark shadows of the past and the residue of terror, in the accumulated grime of resentment, the stains of abuse and betrayal, in vague secret knowledge and the lingering weight of solitary anger and sorrow.

In reflecting on the trajectory of Danny's life and (inevitable?) self-execution, I have thought a lot about what I have learned in my work with the victims of war, tyranny, torture, and sustained violence. I know that what we experienced as children is little different than what I see in my work. We are the survivors of a war. We are survivors of

tyranny, torture, and sustained violence. We carry that violence with us today, privately and often only half-consciously. To honour our escape from the clutches of cruelty, we focus on our survival and those we love, not on the fact that we have been maimed; we attend the good fortune we have, and those who love us, rather than the wounds that we still carry, scarred-over but not healed.

There is a wisdom in this, but the essential private nature of our pain — the secrecy, the invisible shame — is killing us. If we wish to reconcile ourselves with the crimes committed in our family, we have to acknowledge them. (These were crimes, not “sins”; crimes are committed against people, while sin is a private matter whose social function is to let everyone off the hook except the victim...).

In my work I have learned the necessity of the commission of truth. After the end of the tyranny and the torture of any regime, to rebuild society it is necessary to acknowledge in the public realm what has been (officially) secret. In Chile, in Argentina, in El Salvador, in Guatemala, in South Africa, reconciliation has been possible only through the commission of truth: the acknowledgement that criminal things were done (not that they “happened”, with no agent, but that they were done by living people to other people) and that together we repudiate these crimes (not the criminals, who are an easy target and largely irrelevant — and often victims too — *but the crimes themselves*).

....

In the novel, *The Prince of Tides*, there is a sentence: “In families, there are no crimes past forgiveness...”. When I first read this, my instinct was that this was not true, but I was confused and I had to think about it more. I think that it is not true. Crimes of the family are the most unforgivable. There is no forgiveness possible because the innocence from which forgiveness springs has been destroyed. The myth that the bond of families transcends all, is a myth created within families and society to protect and preserve themselves.

We have a right to release ourselves from this myth by creating new narratives, as each of us has valiantly tried to do in our love of our own children. That we have been able to survive this history, and still have the possibility to create a safe circle of family capable of holding each of us — as we have experienced in these recent deaths, of Mom, of Colin, and now of Dan — is a miracle which gives me hope. That is the heroism which redeems the crime. It is a reality that finally makes forgiveness possible: not because it is family, but because we are blessed, and some of our innocence is restored to us in our own children, and in the flowering of our own love for each other.

The past and the future look at each other
and the two shores suddenly become one.
The path of return continues the journey

So tells us Thich Nhat Hanh: *the path of return continues the journey...*

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