LOOKING BACK TO TOMORROW

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TD 499
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One might be tempted to question the significance of someone else's subjective reflections in the context of his life. While it is true that I will follow a unique path, as does every person who attempts to see himself, this process does not totally alienate me from my fellow human beings. They will not walk on the same roads, at the same time as myself; they might not recognize any of the superficial circumstances under which this journal was inspired. At some time during their lives, however, they will arrive at some of the same crossroads at which I have stood and have described. The questions all must face are the same in the end.

Somehow thinking alone does not allow me to benefit from experiences in the same manner as writing does. The synthesis of abstract feelings is a meticulous process that aids greatly in one's understanding of life's experiences. I do not truly arrive at definite conclusions until I am able to express them in words. It is too easy to live not reaching out, using the excuse that "no one understand me." This is an attempt to explain my thoughts and actions for myself, for my friends, for those who take time to read of my world. Although I do not purport to possess the gift for this type of writing that some of my literary ancestors have, I acknowledge the same need that drove Thoreau and Eiseley to put pen to paper. I share with them an inquisitive nature that seeks to accept and explain actions of self within the context of being--Mandino's human becoming. Their works are universal, touching hearts and souls joined to them only by the bond of humanity. I am hopeful that my efforts to capture my own experience might prove to be somewhat universal, that my readers might relate to what I write.
I draw from many experiences and writers, both formal and informal. Jim Bouton would be surprised to see his name in a bibliography alongside Fitzgerald or Faulkner. The central issue is how I relate to the American Dream, an ideal which once was a statement of hope, but now dictates the proper way to attain the peace and fulfillment that it has prescribed for all peoples. Gatsby reminds us of the Dream that calls us to live in the rut of unexamined experience.

The first chapter is of a preparatory nature. Tolstoy's character, Ivan Illych, is introduced as a prime example of the unexamined life that I see as undesirable for me. Some of the Dream's thought patterns are introduced also, along with suggestion by Powell and Kierkegaard which tell us to become more alive, less mechanical. Kierkegaard speaks of living a life of absurdity, dictated not by reason, but by an embracing of the world and an acceptance of what it offers. The resulting being is the knight of faith, a hero to all that walk in uncertainty. The Dream would prefer we ignore uncertainty and believe in false security. Eiseley suggests that security is more a cage than a protective device for those like him—the hunted, the outcast.

Chapter Two deals with labels and specialization, attitudes fostered by the Dream. Labels keep people where they belong, in their places, on the right side of the tracks. In the time of Moses, persons with skin disease were labelled unclean and forced out of society. Today such practices continue as leprous topics such as social injustice are shelved where they can do no damage to a "progressive" society. A by-product of progress is the specialization which results in experts who cannot communicate their expertise.

The preparation is over as Chapter Three focuses on me. It tells of where I've been, where I am, and where I wish to go. The American Dream is portrayed
as a ferocious beast that taunts me during the night. Eiseley speaks of menacing shadows that follow him wherever he goes. Look closely around your bedroom tonight and you will meet yours, the creatures of the night country. Chapter Four unites myself with all those who play or enjoy athletics. It is here where Jim Bouton's influence is felt along with the nostalgic rose-colored lenses of which Puzo speaks. A digression stresses the importance of being sad using the words of Powell. The fully-alive human being will not pursue only pleasure, for pleasure is not the whole experience of life. People turn into the cattle of Nietzsche's herd if it is not for the broad spectrum of human emotion. Another section reinforces my contention that the sports world is a microcosm of the society in which we live and the last section explores the Dream's effects on sports. Again we see the worm's effects on the inside of an appetizing-looking apple.

When we speak of relating to other people, love becomes inevitable. Chapter Five deals with my experiences of love. Explaining this section as I did the others would be unfair, I think. Suffice it to say that the Dream pervades love as it attempts to grip all things of beauty. An allusion to Plato's world of ideals is included. This theory states that all we experience on earth is a model, an imperfect attempt at capturing the essence of objects or feelings, of the real flawless experience that exists in a world where all spirits go after death. In the end, love reflects its Creator, God, the means by which love was given to all the universe.

The last chapter explores the search for life's meaning that all men undertake and some of the directions in which I have set out in hopes of finding the answers. "My God" is my personal manifestation of God; He can be the same as someone else's ultimately, yet I see one facet of Him, just as another perceives a different side. James Kavanaugh, an ex-priest, talks
of a search in emptiness as if someone were filling a hole. The hole that
must be filled instantly may be filled with gold or mud. He stresses that
a fulfilled person can take the time to search for gold instead of using a
less valuable filler to plug a gap. The stories in this section are among
my most special ones. They may not be the greatest stories ever told, but
they are me, all I have to offer.

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February, 1979
Chapter I
Are There Only Questions?

I

As I sit to write the first of many ramblings of an atypical actuarial student, I do not know quite where to begin. This is to be a project of me, for me, by me, which will someday aspire to become an ID 499 thesis. If it does not meet the criteria for ID 499, then it is my contribution to a personal evaluation of self; where I am in the universe after 22 years. I feel badly that I have waited so long to undertake this task because of the many things I have learned about myself while only in the planning stages.

It has been very frightening in a way. I know that I may be asked to break away from the chains that the typical American Dream binds to nearly everyone. An example of this in my own life is security. We are pushed towards longing for security, a "piece of the Rock" in many areas of modern living. Only the "unacceptables" will tell us that security is what makes for the unexamined life. Tolstoy tells us that Ivan Ilych's secure life is very terrible, yet he is drowned out by the almighty Dream. And yes, it is so easy to pass through life with a bubble securely protecting one from experiencing the fullness and beauty of life. This cannot be for the knight of faith. Security must be sacrificed for the hope of something more fulfilling. Not exploring the possibilities outside the secure life is perhaps an unforgivable (subjectively) sin. After all, if one finds the "fear and trembling" unfulfilling, he or she may return to the "normal" human condition without much difficulty.

What motivation powers this search of self? I am nearing graduation from college, and reality begins to beckon that I come forth from the
shelter of getting an education. The fall of 1977 produced a real awakening in the depth and breadth of my perception of the human experience. Emotionally, I reached the lowest and highest points of my young life. Truly the experience of deep rejection and depression was beneficial in that it enabled me to enjoy the exhilarating moments all the more. It is strange indeed; a paradox. One must know the most ignominious defeat in order to recognize the greatest victory. These experiences, coupled with a close relationship that has developed between myself and a friend, have initiated a search for me so that I might see what I am and what I want to be. When this becomes more clear then I will be able to work toward becoming the person I truly want to be, instead of who I am supposed to be or who I think I want to be. As one might guess, interpersonal relationships play a large part in the search. I look back at what I once strove for and shudder at my blind acceptance of the American Dream relationship, not so much because of what it started out as, but because of what it has grown into. In the past people were allowed to grow into love and adjust their lives along the way as a result of the growth of the relationship not as a means to promote growth. The present situation calls for instant food and instant relationships. From the start one must give up all things for the sake of the relationship. This translates into a virtual breakaway from all friends of either sex that are extraneous to the relationship and a compromise of lifestyle, goals, and dreams. I have accepted this notion for too long. I did things because "that's the way it's supposed to be done," without questioning if I really wanted to do them. I strove to possess and be possessed by another person. I never looked at love as a freeing experience; I thought that it tied people down. Perhaps the worst aspect is that I believed that the Dream was what I desired. I longed so
badly for the Dream relationship, the worthless pile of Gatsby's dust.

Gatsby strove for the Dream, a wonderful experience, which was turned sour by guilding and glamour. It was the Dream or the idea that he could still find fulfillment in the Dream that destroyed him. I must not let it destroy me also.

What makes a man strive for things that he knows deep within himself will not satisfy him? Could it be another popular extension of Society—the thrill of the hunt? We fix a goal and work diligently toward reaching it until we are at the threshold of obtaining our goal and then it seems that the goal is no longer desirable to us. We are hunters who stalk our prey for days only to leave it rotting in the forest after shooting it. Each of us contains a part of the student who studies for years only to shoot himself on the night before he graduates with honors. It is me, wanting to be loved so badly until someone tells me "I love you." I then retreat knowing that those three words have decreed the end of a relationship. Perhaps I fear the increased commitment and responsibility which would take away from the freedom or pseudo-freedom I desire. This does not make much sense. On one hand I strive for the Dream, yet I reject it on the other. This is possible for many reasons. There are many desirable aspects in life which can become spoiled by the Dream if one's attitude is not sincere and loving. Many times the attitude of the heart must be examined before one can discern between genuine love and the American Dream Relationship.

The Dream has become imbedded in our society. I know that I probably would not be happy with the American Dream Relationship yet I have never experienced the pains of a shattered dream relationship. I therefore contemplate, wanting the glitter and promises of the very thing that could hunt me. It calls to me as I lie awake in bed, taunting my decision to
try the life of no security, no guarantees. It lives in the lives of
friends who wonder what went wrong when I do not see Suzie Q every day or
go out with her every weekend. It lives in me as I wonder if my friend is
becoming "serious" with his girlfriend (maybe a banner on their backs pro-
claiming "we are serious" will appear!). There must be something better
than this parody of human existence. I must try to find it.

The commitment to freedom brings much fear. It is hard to find
meaning in efforts which produce no visible returns, when tomorrow might
well bring emptiness to surround me. I must realize that the benefits are
not in what I receive, but in what I become. Powell states that each day
should bring one toward being more fully human. My search must be in
fullness not filling voids with whatever lies in the road, but searching
for another unique part of myself that will add a new dimension to what I
am. I should guard against searching in emptiness for, as Kavanough warns,
what is found from such a search is easily replaceable. I seek the unique,
the irreplaceable, that which lasts.

I can live with the fear, it will surely follow me as it should.
Kierkegaard's life of absurdity brings fear and trembling to his knights
of faith. Can I ever find the love and understanding I desire by giving
up my ideas about love and understanding? By giving up everything, I will
have everything, is that the way it goes? Kierkegaard says it and also a
fellow by the name of Jesus, who says that whoever wants life shall give it
up. Going a step further, by giving up everything, not as a means of
procuring everything, but for the sole reason that it is the good faith
decision, we will have everything. If I should relinquish my American
Dream notions of love because I feel that the act will bring love to me,
I lose. My expectations will never be fulfilled.
Expectations are like that, no good arises from them. Why? If the event occurs then there is no cause for joy—it was expected. If the event does not occur, however, disappointment is inevitable. Expectations bring goals to reach; goals that are accepted automatically without the true commitment that results, as Powell says, from exploring the alternate possibility of rejecting the goal. Perhaps that is why I never truly accepted the love of others; I assured that I wanted it when I should have asked myself if I actually did.

Alas, I have rambled far and wide on this initial venture. This is but a glimpse of me; for me, yet for you also. I sincerely hope that my limited readership benefits from this as much as I hope to, for it sounds quite cold to do things only for oneself. Please try to receive what I offer before deciding that I am cold and distant. I heard someone comment about actors who receive by giving to audiences who give by receiving the performance. My friends, I can only receive from this to the extent that I give of myself toward its completion. Dare you give by receiving it?

II

Eiseley states that he is a fugitive, hunted and tormented mentally by other men. He is born to flee from those who are born to hunt. This leads me to wonder which end I am on. I certainly am not hunted at all times nor do I always flee. Perhaps there is a great gray area of existence between those that hunt and those that are hunted. These areas are not readily discernable for not many look upon man’s dealings with man in this light. Eiseley is correct, however, there are hunters and prey. I see this in the eyes of the hunted; dark, desolate, alone. I know that I will never be a hunter yet I am not hunted either. Why am I not anything?
I sit like the animal in a cage, no real threat to those that hunt. Perhaps I should be hunted yet I am complacent, satisfied with the existence that someone else has given to me. The cage door swings open now and the eyes of the hunters are upon me. I have a choice: action or no action. Each moment might bring the door swinging shut in my face, the time to act is now. There are no guarantees outside the cage yet there is no life within it.

I must aspire to join the other fugitives who derive fullness of life from their fleeing from the hunters. Their steps are away from the life of Ivan Ilych as they move toward experiencing all life has to offer. The search continues in the hiding places that are as quickly inhabited as they are deserted. Someday I will join the hunted of my childhood, I will be one with those whom I hunted.

He was different. He looked differently, he acted differently. He was truly human but was not given the chance to express his humanity. I joined the others hunting him for three years before realizing that the hunted should support rather than hunt each other. We were dissimilar in everything except nonacceptance. He was not fond of studying, nor was he overweight, but he was hunted. He stood at the opposite end of the spectrum from me. He was a problem for teachers, a fact which made him as scorned as myself, the well-behaved student. He was often punished for fighting because his clothing showed telltale signs after recess—a ripped collar, a torn sleeve. He was not allowed to relate the side of the story that convicted the rest of the children of mass mugging back among the dirt piles near school. Nor would he accept the notion of "fighting the right way" meaning at the right time, in the right place, hidden from adults; so he fought in the open to avenge the beatings administered to him in secret.
Then there were the classroom trials by well-meaning teachers who disciplined by cracking the hands with a large ruler. I still shudder as I recall the crack of wood on flesh, a warning to others who might be tempted to turn from the path of good behavior. He was a public scapegoat, victim of a practice instituted in puritanical times. Public lashings and the like served as an outlet for the frustrations of early Americans that is paralleled in today's society by sporting events and exhibitions of discipline in private schools. I faced the ruler only once, and I deftly dodged it until sensing that the teacher would become more angry (hit longer and harder) the more I dodged.

I sometimes wonder how much freedom and creativity has been pressed out of people under the auspices of a healthy learning environment. I think back to the days of the ruler and the uniforms I wore in grade school. I was taught how to write "correctly", that is with the right hand. How many people are no longer people because of such practices? How many cages exist and are those that escape them the only ones that live? A life outside the cage provides only wilderness in which to run.

I still see him running along the edge of the playground with those hunted eyes that could trust no one, glancing to and fro. He never stopped for fear that something might attack from an unguarded side. It is better to remember him like this because that is the way of the hunted. Perhaps I shall see myself running toward freedom someday. I shan't look back on that day because I know that the hunters will be there—to save me from being free. They know what is good for me. Faster, must go faster.
Chapter II
The Dream World

If it were not for labels, I would never know what soup I would be eating until after I had opened the can. I would not know which was Brand X and which was the one that looks and smells more like fresh peanuts. Labels serve a very useful purpose when dealing with commodities. When people are involved, however, labels serve to hide the uniqueness and beauty in each person. The process by which people label people is exemplified by the citizens-band radio fad that has taken over the nation's highways. One of the first questions that is asked in their form of communication is "What is your handle?", a term that suggests that the name is the means by which someone may grab hold of another, much as a handle is the means by which one grabs hold of a suitcase. Knowing one another's handle is the deepest level of relationship on the CB. The obvious lack of depth is also exhibited by many of those who do not have a CB. They need a handle or label to describe another person. Once the label is affixed, the person ceases to be human, but exists as a can of soup. It is a convenient way to refer to someone; one does not need to know the person well for the label will explain. I was in grade school when I experienced my first lesson about the dangers of labelling humans.

My family and relatives were vacationing in Canada. We stayed at a small vacation village run by a friendly couple. There were fifteen cottages on the shores of a picturesque lake. My grandmother often remarked during the week that we were paying them money to live in these huts when she could have remained in her "palace" without paying any money. It was a wonderful place though. The air was clean, the water also to the point that
one could see the rocky lake bottom at depths of fifteen feet or more. With my sister and my cousins along, there were many things to do and many people with which to do them.

The village enjoyed a lack of notoriety, allowing visitors much privacy and calmness. There was no commercialism and few patrons, a point which was more appreciated by those visiting than by those who earned a living from it. Three years later I would return to find that the quiet, restful village had grown into an enterprising tourist-filled metropolis of sorts. There is a saying that states that each moment is special because it will never happen again. One never seems to realize how true that is; that returning to the same place with the same people is not the same. Unfortunately, one often fails to grasp this truth until it is too late—at the moment of realization that indeed it is not, and never will be, like it was before. If one only could perceive this at the time of the initial experience.

After many unsuccessful fishing expeditions at home, it was an exciting turnabout to catch a fish. We learned that the fish did not appreciate artificial lures but were very partial to live frogs. In the early evening hours, one could stand at the edge of the dock and see fish swimming near the bottom of the lake. If one was skillful, he could pick which fish he wanted to catch by pulling on his line whenever a small fish drew a bend on the cute little frog at the end of the line. It was a special thrill for the elderly to catch a fish, something that they did not expect to try.

The manager offered to clean, filet, and freeze the fish, saving them so that the guests departed with solid evidence to substantiate any fish stories that were going to be told. I enjoyed watching this process so many times I was an eager volunteer when it came time to take the day’s catch to the lodge for cleaning. I was very interested in how smart each
fish was, a fact easily measured by the number of frogs in the creature's belly. A smart fish would have two or more, signifying that it was clever enough to get a good-sized dinner and that its decision to have dessert was a fatal move. I would tell these things to the manager; perhaps he was amused at my estimation of fish brainpower. He would often remark about the large quantities of fish that we were preparing to bring home with us. I told him of the many friends and relatives who were to receive the tasty souvenirs of our trip. One night I mentioned my grandfather to him. "Oh yes," he said, "he's an invalid, isn't he?" I do not recall my response, only my reaction. Invalid, I had learned the word in school; it was on the spelling list one week. I knew the definition; I knew my grandfather's condition, yet my grandfather would never be an invalid to me, even if he fit the definition precisely. He was my grandfather, and I was hurt to think of him in any other way or as anything other than my grandfather. It is not possible for invalid or any other word to fully describe anyone, yet often myself and others persist in simplifying the complexity and beauty of a person into a single inflexible, indelible word solidly affixed upon him.

It is so very easy to do. Dealing with entities is easier than dealing with people. The goods never change so the label is useful forever; a branding that brings more pain than the searing of flesh caused by history's branding irons. It comes naturally, hardly recognizable until it has engulfed its victim. Yes, it is like the Dream, forcing itself on people before they have an opportunity to question its validity or consequences.
II

It is a fortunate person who perceives the broad, endless spectrum of life's experience that exists outside one's particular area of specialization. It frightens many people to think of stepping out into a territory outside their area of concentration, an area where they are not the expert. For me, there is life beyond the mortality tables and statistical analyses. Many times, however, I do not acknowledge this point as I am tempted to feel that experiences unrelated to the major thrust of my studies are better left unexplored. Perhaps it is the long days and short nights of an actuarial student that nurtures this attitude, when an extra hour of sleep is a luxury not often available and even seven hours of sleep are unheard of. My colleagues feel this way, those coffee and tea drinkers who try to persuade me to become habitually dependent on caffeine in order to be able to stay awake.

We gather together at nine a.m. four days a week to (hopefully) learn about insurance. This is not always the case, however, as the professor often finds interesting, controversial topics with which to pass the hour, and insurance is not mentioned one time on some days. It is then that I hear many people lament for the hour that would have been better spent lying on a mattress instead of sitting at a desk. Someone who may have done just that will ask me later in the day if they missed anything. I do not know, I should say, it depends on your opinion of anything. If you mean anything that will be on the next test, no. I need not ask that question because anything that is not covered on the next test is nonexistent to the majority of students. However, one should learn from the anythings. In the end it is knowledge of people and life that allows one to make use of any specialized training. More and more in this age is seen a sacrifice
of the former for the latter. The result is an army of ivory-tower spe-
cialists who have much difficulty relating their experimental results to
real-world situations.

They are uncomfortable in anything other than experimental simulation
of the real world. Specialization has worked upon their minds as blinders
on a race horse. It becomes painful to step out into the light without
blinders and capture the whole picture of existence; something which is
essential if progress and betterment are to be realized.

III

I was fortunate to be invited to observe a meeting of the actuarial
committee of a state rate-making bureau. I was afforded much insight con-
cerning the question of specialization while attending the meeting. There
were gathered ten actuaries representing various companies, along with a
handful of officers from member companies.

Actuaries fall loosely into three categories. The student, who has
yet to pass many exams, the associate, who has passed at least five, and
the fellow, who has passed all ten. Externally, the meeting dealt with
setting automobile rates, but what really occurred was a showdown between
two young associates and two older gentlemen, an associate and a fellow.
The younger actuaries, having recently graduated from college, could not
draw from much real world insurance experience. They did possess, however,
a very good theoretical background on which to base their conclusions.
Between them, the older gentlemen had close to sixty years experience in
the insurance profession. They knew what it is like to try to market an
insurance product.
I shall not attempt to explain, from a mathematical standpoint, the issues, for I am, after all, discussing the wealth of knowledge outside one's area of expertise. Falling into a trap I myself have set is deflating, especially when others are looking on. Suffice it to say that the correct mathematical considerations brought forth many drastic changes in the rate schedule, some as severe as a seventy percent increase in premiums.

To the young actuaries, the answers were clear as if set in stone. What the computations showed was what the new rates must be. Any other pertinent information was extraneous. The older actuaries looked at things differently. They saw theoretical computations as part, not all, of the information to be used to arrive at a new rate. Other considerations, such as continuity, marketability, and trending were important also.

The figures were not in error, yet those that accept only the figures are more apt to fail because laboratory situations cannot be found anywhere upon the earth. We live among people, not machines, and the laboratory practice of holding even a single variable constant is not applicable to real life.

The young actuaries failed to look outside their areas of concentrated study. They were blinded by their knowledge in one area and could not communicate this knowledge by interfacing it into the bigger picture of life itself. We often express our dismay that some poor, unfortunate people cannot obtain education. It is a waste of human potential we say. How much greater a waste is there in educated persons who cannot communicate outside their field? Not only is the potential wasted, but there is the cost of putting the knowledge into a brain, only to have it stagnate and remain unused.
It was fitting then, on one winter morning for the subject of our university's predicament concerning presidential leadership to be brought up in insurance class. The now-familiar statement, "We can't talk about insurance today.", sent some students heading out the door. My friends and I, sitting in the second row, knew that we were trapped for an hour. I needed sleep and one more hour would have helped. This was a trap, but a trap that set one free. The topic of discussion was what caused all the trouble in my professor's opinion. He said it was communication, or lack thereof. He said that wherever we go, we would be much better off if we learned to communicate, to tell others what is going on. That is a wonderful place to start. A fine trap indeed.
Who am I at this moment? A man with a spirit free to travel anywhere, experiencing the fullness of living the absurd life which promises nothing but contains everything. Yet I do not live this life totally; most days I choose security. Part of me is in chains, struggling to free itself from the grips of the way it should be, the Dream. I am suspended like a bird flying into a gale-force wind. The rapidly beating wings only serve to keep the bird from being blown in the opposite direction.

It would be so easy to turn back, to give in to the secure world of the Dream, to swim with the current, to fly the way one should fly. There is no guarantee that tomorrow will bring the bird any closer to wherever he is going, but the bird has no destination, only direction. The wind will die down, the chains will break one by one. (The hope that this will happen must not die!) The suspended soul is not a static one. The bird does not move forward necessarily, yet his wings are constantly beating. Stagnation is death to the mind. Having all I desire is having nothing.

Perfection cannot be improved upon. The champion of the world can reach no higher. When I feel I have attained the best, I lose any possibility of further growth. From the peaks of a mountain, one can only travel downward. The highest achievements, then, must be sought after yet never attained because doing so, if only in my mind, precludes further growth and necessitates losing all that comes with growth. So I search and evaluate, knowing perfection is but a direction to work toward.
II

I am a man of faith; faith in a real God, one whom I cannot hope to comprehend totally. It is He who brings comfort to thoughts of living as Frederich Jackson Turner's rugged individual. He will provide companionship and direction. I have no guarantee that both of us point in the same direction at all times, but I know my God calls me to a freedom from the Dream. I am not of this world save for the chains that bind me to it.

I have faith in people, often unjustifiably. I once became angry with people; now I become disappointed. My God and I are bigger than anyone who comes my way. I forget this sometimes and am deflated by actions or words of others—because I am human. I find it odd that I trust strangers yet upon those who deserve my trust I continually test, making them prove time and time again that they are worthy of it. Why must it be told to me continually? Do I need this proof? The secret lies in words.

It is words that allow us to communicate our innermost thoughts and feelings to others in a manner which no other creatures on this earth can. Other animals may communicate instinctive external feelings but they do not possess the choice of many varied patterns of thought, action or communication. Words set man apart and therefore become very meaningful. Actions can be misinterpreted; the same curt smile can mean polite reluctant acceptance, or inhibited joy and happiness. A word might involve different interpretations in different people but the idea or abstraction that the person wishes to convey is the same. My conception of love is different than another person's yet when I hear someone say love I (get scared) know what feeling is being conveyed. I see actions that tell me to trust others but I want to hear it. Why?
Long ago and far away was a world filled with crew cuts and being an overweight child. It was a time when having any subtle, minute difference was rewarded with prejudiced ridicule. Unique had terrible connotations. Conforming (or perhaps non-conforming in the same way as everyone else) was the word. Getting good grades was bad as was being a crew-cut, overweight kid.

I treasure those years because I learned that I was different from all other people. I was able to accept this difference because I had no choice. This is better than being one who could choose to accept his uniqueness or conform to society and ultimately chose the latter because of peer pressure. At that time, however, I wanted so badly to be wanted, to be accepted. It was a time when being chosen first for keep away or having long hair was important. I remember calling the "coolest" guy in my class to tell him that I had not cut my hair for two months, figuring that my "new-look" haircut would take me out of the group of second-class citizens in which I resided. The same faulty reasoning would lead me to new clothes or a different aftershave—the search for the Grail. Of course those things were only external signs of the elite, not the inner part of the select group. I could never become one of them. I should have seen that being "in" would be out for me. I did not question whether I should conform or not; I had to. Everyone is supposed to. Enter the American Dream.

I developed a comical wit, partly because I had nothing to lose by making people laugh; they laughed anyway. I perceived acceptance in the stifled laughter of the classroom; my humor was funny to them despite the source. This acceptance had to be tested repeatedly to reassure me that
I was indeed wanted for something. They never told me though. I never knew for sure that the next joke would produce acceptance. The tests made up for the lack of words.

Later, as I slowly and painfully matured, another part of me was formed. This part longed to be told that it was loved. Why did it have to know?

I was what they might call a late bloomer with girls. I remember that I admired someone in sixth grade, but never told anyone. In eighth and ninth grades, there were humorous escapades, but no significant "moves" on my part. In tenth grade came my first high-school romance. I was very naive, caught up in the American-Dream Relationship (2.3 kids?). I worried about every little detail of the relationship. Things could not just happen. This cage that I built around myself would remain for almost five years. It was a time of "this is the real thing," ID bracelets, wearing her ring, and, of course, "tell me that you love me." She never did. I longed to hear "Vince, I love you" when neither of us had the faintest idea what love was. The American-Dream Relationship decrees that the parties are forever telling each other that they love each other. It grieves me to think that for five years I hungered and cried for someone to say I love you, even if she did not mean it, because it was supposed to happen.

I might have escaped the dream if not for the next episode in my social emergence. Still smarting from the loss of something that I probably did not want, I played "I'm not jealous" and other games to make it clear that I was not hurt when, in fact, I wished I was still seeing her. All the plans I made out of my naive notions of the Dream had to be scrapped. I once said to her: "If you have to leave in five years, what will we do then?" It is strange the stupid things one says when infatuated. The plans disappeared, leaving a void that had to be filled. I had to go out
every week or I would not be "in." Again there was no time to stop and decide if that was what I honestly wanted.

But this one is different, I said. How many times have I echoed that statement since then? She was intelligent and beautiful, more beautiful than I deserved I always said. She lived far away on the other side of town, but sacrifices had to be made says the Dream. I saw her once or twice a week for about three months and I felt wanted. I did not need to hear it because her actions showed it. She kissed me good night on the first date and put her arm around me. What security! (or, more correctly, what security?) Perhaps I would never have had to be told again but for her one month vacation after which came the most crushing day of my then sixteen-year-old life.

Security is a puzzling creature. At times I wonder if it is only a creation of men's minds. Is its existence justified by the peace of mind that it provides or are we forcing the issue? I fear the insecurity of the future, yet I am at a loss to provide evidence that I possessed security at any time, at one time, in a fleeting moment. Can I be secure because of someone else? God provides security but only to the degree which my faith allows for my recognition of Him.

I lost something that I never had on that day. I remember the postcards from Europe that made up for the great distance between us. I anticipated her return and expected much growth for our relationship although I feared that it "would not be the same" after she returned. Justifiable were my fears; the night I called her is etched in my mind to this day.

I inferred from her voice that she was not overly excited about talking with me. I have inferred disastrous things ever since that night, a bad habit to fall into. The mind is its own worst enemy sometimes. Then
another voice interrupted--foul, coarse, the kind of voice that reminded me of a street punk. Hiding under a cloak of anonymity, he taunted and threatened my unbelieving ears, providing more than enough proof that one should fear the unexpected as the seemingly endless lashing was the last thing I had anticipated.

I heard him say not to call again, she hates you, and other things that did not register in my brain, bouncing about my mind without lighting anywhere.

The ambush took the mercenary by surprise, I fought back with a few jumbled lines that I do not recall. Then it was over, yet the great game of the mind had just begun.

How? Why? What happened? I tried to piece together a puzzle that did not fit together. I know not all the conclusions that were etched into my person as a result of that night, I will never know that thank goodness. I do know the pain that comes with trying to extract them one by one as the process of cutting chains goes on. It is a terrible process sometimes because after much time the chains become imbedded deep within me and cutting them cuts part of me also. The agony that comes with extracting a chain too far imbedded to come out easily. The gnawing feeling that comes when I am alone, late at night. It is as if the Dream is a huge taunting monster who will not relinquish his onslaught as if I were the last stronghold he has on the planet. How I long to be rid of him if only for one night yet his absence would lead to stagnation on my part.

Some things, like Eiseley's menacing shadow, will never leave. Nor should they. A stronger man might affirm that it is better he stays but I sometimes question that assertion although I am inclined to believe it.
So it continues as I live, telling me how to do this and that, what to say, how to feel, what I should be. I respect his power yet run from his directives.

Return to the present. I am complex yet simple. I sometimes turn easy things into difficult things yet the opposite is true also. I out-guess myself, confuse others as to what I really am. Sometimes I wonder what I really think as if I were outside myself looking in.
Chapter IV
Nice Guys Finish Last

I

Sports are a microcosm of the world. Sports afford a person the luxury of remaining as a child for many years and sometimes expect childlike responses from their participants. The parallel with society might be hard to imagine for one who has never experienced the competitive environment that has been shoved down the throats of many children without asking the child's feelings concerning competition. Parents at little-league baseball games and high-school basketball contests come to mind. The gifted athletes are accorded worship, while those who are playing for fun or those who lack skill or desire are often ridiculed to the point of tears and severe mental anguish.

The athlete has a peculiar place in society. He or she is known to many people. The praise and laud has a price, however. Lack of privacy, great expectations, and the feeling that my friends are my friends because I hit thirty home runs last year are but a few examples of this process. I dreamed of becoming a superstar athlete; I guess most kids do.

Today I see my faded dream through fond yet bitter eyes. Realistically, one probably would say that the only way I would ever get into a major-league ball park is by paying for a ticket yet I do not have to see only that. I live in the days of a powerful swing that once terrorized many pitchers; batting averages in the .500's, and leading the team in game-winning hits. I still enjoy a yearbook photo that depicts a graceful legendary stance which undoubtedly belongs to the hall-of-famer next door. I smile at the thought that a better throwing arm and a step or two in the forty yard dash would have made me a "can't miss" prospect, one of many
only a handful of which reach their potential. Unlimited potential. It is very easy to forget the days I got no hits or the erratic throws that could have cost the team another game. Mario Puzo calls it retrospective falsification, remembering only the highlights. I am not alone in employing this wonderfully nostalgic thought process, and I often see myself in this light.

When I think of interpersonal interactions, however, I see things differently, almost oppositely. I finished dusting the top of the dresser and started to clean out some of the drawers. A large orange notebook peeked out at me from the bottom of the drawer, the words "VG and nobody never" scrawled across the cover. I recalled the events that caused a young man of sixteen to despair upon his chances of love. A sobbing phone conversation and consoling a friend who needed someone, those too I remember. Powell states that it is easy to forget those with whom you laugh but not those with whom you cry. I see this; I remember them perhaps because there are no good and bad, only growing experiences.

Interesting parallels can be drawn between sports and society. Freedom to be whoever one chooses to be is accorded in varying degrees in both worlds. Success seems to be the basis for this freedom; the more valuable or successful one is, the more freedom he is allowed. In administrative areas, "company men" usually move up while the eccentrics are left behind. Jim Bouton, ex-player and real person, acknowledges that most of baseball's managers and coaches are people who could easily blend into a crowd, members of Nietzsche's herd. Society's values are the same for the most part.

I walked into the office somewhat apprehensively. The rules had been broken; unwritten rules, enforced by all yet enumerated by no one. I stroked my beard a few times to make sure that it had not fallen off.
Does the greatest actuary in the world have a beard? Does it matter? I heard that beards were frowned upon in the office and sometimes wondered if progress was similarly frowned upon. The needlepoint in my hand, a Christmas gift, would not help matters, and I secretly hoped that I would not have it with me when I was discovered by those in authority.

Such things are not permissible in real life. As I walked down the hall I was confronted by the president and a few vice-presidents of the firm. There was a sharp underlying sting in his greeting as he tried to cover up the rules with some humor.

"You can't work here with that," he laughed. I hoped he was referring to my needlepoint, but he had not seen it yet. He gently turned my arm to capture the full beauty of the sunset sailboat pattern and then loosened his grip. I smiled, he said nothing. No communication. He could have told me the policy but would not do so. Lack of communication brings unrest. What could I do—was he serious? Pressure, invisible as it was real, enveloped my being. Long after the confrontation came the repercussions. People wanted to know what was said and if I had to shave. I had reached the part of everyone, however repressed, that says I want to be unique. I was a hero of sorts, envied for my individuality or my freedom to be unique. Why is this spirit repressed in many of my neighbors? It is a Dream society which pervades our world and the governing bodies of sport.

The world of sports, however, allows for more individuality in the rank and file than does society. In many cases it matters not if a player has long hair, a beard, sideburns, or pigtails provided he performs well on the field. It is interesting to note that those eccentric individuals who fail to play in a superior fashion consistently are not tolerated.
very long. This happens in society but not to the same degree as in the sports world; ask the football coach who had to perform more than disgustingly, more than once before being fired. Personally, I am thankful for this extra margin of tolerance afforded the athlete. It is truly wonderful to be accepted once in a while if only for a short time; deep within is a need to be accepted to some degree.

Popularity was not mine during high school, although I tried. I was fortunate that I did not need to study diligently in order to succeed scholastically. Thus many empty hours could be filled with athletics. My physical attributes are not such to allow one to confuse me with the majority of athletes. I am an athlete by choice, not by birthright. I had to practice diligently to sharpen what skills I was given naturally in order to be competitive. Then again, perhaps I should have been a wrestler instead of a swimmer or a rugby player instead of a soccer player. I used to get upset when I saw someone who had all the physical tools to be a star loafing or goofing off. For such a person it must not be worth it when there is no excuse for failure; after all they have to succeed—they have all the tools.

I am an avid jogger and my performances fit in the category labelled "best of the worst;" not good enough to run with the superstars, yet leading the mass of mediocrity. I anger friends who practice tennis for weeks only to be beaten by a fat kid with cobwebs hanging on his raquet. When all is said and done, the proficient players usually defeat me. So it goes for the best of the worst.

I fare well in the skill sports, baseball, for instance. Baseball has provided many of the experiences which allow me to find the Dream in sports. My skills and abilities put me in the upper echelon of players on most of
the teams with which I played. I was able to appreciate many of the values in the baseball society. I was judged more by performance than by personal beliefs or looks. Athletes are often ridiculed as being unintelligent, animalistic people yet I consider it a privilege to work together with other individuals of varying backgrounds and personalities toward a common goal. I will be thankful for this long after the memories of my batting averages have faded. It was a wonderful experience.

The Dream, however, has eroded this situation when one looks at Major League sports as it has eroded the fiber of modern individualism. Sports are a business today, nothing more. Baseball is a prime example. Where there once was the rugged individual, who respected individualism in each person, there now is the malcontent individual who is concerned with only himself. Team unity gave way to petty squabbles and then serious fighting. Players sought more money and owners unrolled the bankrolls, the bidding wars for superior talent had begun. Competitive balance was upset as richer owners bought players who were developed by other teams to the point where the former owners could not afford to pay the outlandish salary demands of the athlete. The loser in this situation is the fan (from fanatic) who indirectly pays the players salary by purchasing higher and higher priced tickets.

I do not mean to be a prophet of doom by painting such a sad picture. The Dream can be defeated in baseball and in society. It is people who must choose wisely what they desire. There must be hope that someday the Dream will return to the desirable thing that it once was.

II

To be one of those that never crawl out from under adversity's grip; I wonder how many Joe Lis' or Joe Caldwell's there are in the world of
Joe Lis is a journeyman player, the twenty-sixth man on a twenty-five man roster, perhaps the highest rung that a diligent best-of-the-worst might attain. He receives few of the privileges of an athlete, no autograph seekers, no commercial endorsements, no fat paychecks; yet since he is a ballplayer, it is assumed he "has it made." He toils in the minor leagues for three quarters or more of his career. It is the journeymen whose trading cards must be grouped in fives to barter for a superstar's card. The journeyman is traded many times and has no hopes of settling down in any spot for long. Moving costs are an added expense. Why does he do what he does? Is it that he loves wearing many different uniforms or living all over the country? No, the game is in his blood, he would play for nothing and often does just that. He is a baseball person in all respects except for the limitations in talent that force his obscurity. Perhaps only he can appreciate his lot in life and realize that his love for the game would not be quite the same if he were rich and famous. For some it is too high a price to pay but despite the adversities the knight of faith would have it no other way.

Joe Caldwell is a superstar (or was a superstar until he met his match). He is an example of the scapegoat of the sports world, a multi-talented individual who was not allowed to be an individual. His sad story remains as a warning for other such individuals who threaten to step out of line. He is the embodiment of what can happen when one stands up for what he feels is correct. Although the breed is disappearing, the story of the abused star is included here to honor those who respond to the call that character is more valuable than material success. He is characterized by many things. He is talented enough to be the best of the best. He has a genuine concern for others which differentiates him from those who look only after themselves.
Somehow, while extending a helping hand, he steps on the toes of someone at an administrative level and the end is not difficult to prognosticate. He will not star again because of suspension, blackball, or other means by which his livelihood is taken away.

Joe Caldwell was concerned about one of his teammates, a young, confused man. He counselled the young player who subsequently jumped the team to join another and was accused of tampering by the owner. This initiated a struggle that Caldwell gamely confronts even today. He has no money, only memories and faded clippings from the days when he was the best of the best. He can never be repaid for an athlete has but a short time when his skills are at a peak. Taking the last four years away from him has caused time to pass him by.

Joe Lis, Joe Caldwell, they do not play the same game. One was a star the other an also-ran. These things are not important. It is important that both have given their best shot and have failed, if only by society's definitions. They have truly won on the higher plane. They exhibit the strong character that only the examined life can produce. They are fortunate, moreso than can be ascertained at a superficial glance.
Chapter V
All Is Fair

I

People caring for other people is an unexplainable phenomenon. Why do they do it? It was a brisk, cold day; not terrible, but better suited for polar bears than people. The sun was shining and the sky was a clear blue. I enjoyed venturing out along the paths cut through snow drifts despite the fact that walking fifty yards felt like walking a mile. I walked toward the gym to assist in freeing a van from the snowy prison that engulfed it. As I joined the rescue team, someone remarked that I had finally arrived. Yes, I had, not walking with the rest of them, but traversing alone for whatever reason that sometimes drives me to be alone. We pushed the van along for twenty minutes or so and then it ran out of gas, wasting many good efforts. This futility set the tone for the rest of the afternoon.

Nothing was wrong even then, but I failed to see anything that was right. I was buried by this sense of void much worse than the many cars which sat buried in their garages of snow. I called a friend who had wanted to study with me. She was a perceptive individual; not one to follow the crowd. I was further frustrated by her noncommittal attitude about where we should study. Not a big thing, but on this day, big enough. After much deliberation, we trudged off to a big round building in the cold, clear, winter air.

Some friends of mine were in adjoining classrooms, studying their material. I could not study. She sensed my mood and asked me where the "real Vince" was. I told her that other people should let me decide who the real Vince was. This surprised her although she did not appear hurt by my snappy remark.
I anticipated that she would not stay too long because of her independent spirit and my attitude that pushed people away from me, mentally and verbally. One of my friends came in to ask a question, and I answered him abruptly. We often did this to each other, realizing that our friendship was such that if we did not stick to business, we would end up talking instead of studying. He left after a short time, she and I were alone once again. I stared at anything but my books or her. I did not want my lack of concentration to cause her to lose study time. I finally looked up and saw a tear falling from her cheek.

She thought that I was angry with her and was hurt that my friend had to bear the blow. I tried to explain that we often used that manner when studying together. I still could not put my mind on the books so I walked over to a table and sat on the edge, staring at nothing in particular. I felt her sit beside me as she whispered that we could sit there together all day if I liked. She did not leave, the stubborn fool. I did not understand; she was not supposed to care for me. I did not expect her to be satisfied giving over and over again when I would not or could not give anything in return. Then I became frightened, scared that someone actually cared for me. Someone was willing to reach out to me when I refused to reach out myself. As I became more aware of this fear, I became more cold, not being able to love her back. I taunted her efforts to cheer me up even though I wanted very badly to give her something, to share a part of me. She did not have to stay, she wanted to. That does not make sense, and, at the same time, it makes so much sense. What does not make sense was my cold exterior, a throwback to the days of the unscrupulous sportsman and the American Way of refusing that which you desire when it is finally obtained.
She was free to care in selflessness, not in false compassion that is here today and gone tomorrow. I was unable to accept her genuine, free love; I was in chains. I only have faith to lean on for the manifestations of her love are now gone; her love is no more. I believe in myself and my God, and I hope that someday I might respond in love to someone who loves me—not because I am supposed to, because I want to. I have faith that I might reach out and join the other star-throwers who treasure life and seek to honor all that lives. I am a human becoming, one bite at a time.

II

A chain has been removed. You see no chains, you say. Look closely and see the gash that is left. I know, I am weird, there is no mark where I point. Yes the best way to solve a problem is to pretend it does not exist. Does anyone but I wonder how long the problems remain even though they are forgotten? A long time perhaps? Longer than I ever imagined they would.

A part of the Dream states that one’s birthday should be known by those who are close without you having told them. I hoped that my first relationship would be strong at the Holiday season or at the time of each of our birthdays. There is something special about sharing those occasions with people who are not required to care about you; who are in touch with you because they desire to be, not because of blood ties.

The calendar pierced me with a blank stare. It is February 5: for me another year, for anyone else another Monday. I knew in my heart that she had no way of knowing that this day was my birthday nor did I have any right to expect her to know—but I did. To say someone does not care because they did not realize that a certain day was a good day for my birthday
shows ignorance of anything but the social customs which make the Dream what it is today. I fought the urge to tell her all day long. I thought I could accept her not knowing more easily than the reality of the day proved. I hurt, I knew yet it hurt so badly. These were deeply imbedded chains. I tried to reason away the pain, not understanding why it hurt so badly. Perhaps the pain was a necessary part of the freeing experience. Today I no longer see the chains and the pain is gone. I am not totally free yet; I am more so than I once was and I long to become more free than I am.

III

People so seldom say I love you
And then it's too late,
Or love goes . . .
So when I tell you I love you
It doesn't mean I know that you'll never go
Only that I wish you didn't have to Thayer

A nice sentiment is expressed in these lines, but one that was ruined by the Dream. I looked upon those lines every day as they hung above my bed; I even believed that it was truthful in my heart. The truth of love has been bent by the Dream into a commonplace occurrence. The Dream dictates, not that people express love too seldom, but that people say I love you too often without meaning it. Someone told me that love is a misused word today. I love your shirt; I love that car— I love you, really I do. If you really loved me . . .

There are many degrees of love, many stages in the reality of love. The Dream does not allow such variability. It is black or white, all or nothing in the Dream.

I have used the word once in the last five years as an expression of my inner feelings. It took a great deal of time after my adolescent experiences with "love" before I let myself say it again. I was waiting until
I was sure that love is what I was feeling, not another case of "the real thing" which ultimately proves more about what love is not. As I debated within myself, an interesting thought surfaced. To know for certain that I love her is not the culmination of love, but the beginning of love's destruction. Love is perfection, far off in Plato's world of ideals. If I believe that I have reached that world, I have taken the first step toward losing everything. To stagnate is to die. How is one to have faith in his love while knowing for certain that it is love? Faith does not co-exist with knowledge; it supercedes it.

I therefore went out on a limb armed with faith that told me that I was experiencing love. My acknowledgement was not the most confident statement. I stuttered, almost afraid to say the next word, "I think I really do love you somewhat." I do not think I would have it any other way now. It was from the heart, as sincere as it was clumsy. It did not destroy the possibilities of further growth. It was unlike the love of the Dream, a love that leads to manipulation, sacrifice, and bondage. People tend to want to possess other people. If they could realize that the tighter one grips, the more easily things slip away. Those in the Dream will be happy with their love or at least make themselves happy with it. It is the way it is supposed to be; one must take others for granted or sacrifice his life for another before one is prepared to do so. I am in love, yet free to run also. I will stay in love as long as we run in the same direction freely, without bonds that force our union.

IV

And they lived happily ever after ... Sorry, but dreams do not always come true. Nothing needs to be said. Love is not destroyed because one
party rejects the love of another. It cannot be. Love is not meant for only one person per lifetime; my God wishes that I love all those I meet. I am thankful that I have loved, for anyone who has loved has not lost. If I have lost then I had not love, but was desirous of owning someone. Love is forever; God is forever--God is love.
Chapter VI
Heard But Not Seen

I

People are searching; sometimes I wonder if they know what they are looking for. The elderly question their many accomplishments, the middle-aged person knows not why he strives to climb the ladder of success. The most evident of the searching are the youth, those with many roads from which to choose. Many roads are ruts, such that once chosen will not allow one to escape from the commonplace existence. It is a strange and bitterly ironic fate that awaits many a searching soul. Most are willing to give up great amounts of material wealth to purchase an answer book which contains the key to happiness and fulfillment. They cannot see that it is much simpler than that. Paradoxically, it is the simplicity that makes it impossible to attain for many. It is easy to be caught up in "the way it's supposed to be" as I and others will surely attest. Unfortunately, one cannot find a subjective truth while searching in an objective manner.

I still search, day after day. It is not because I do not know where truth lies that I search but that my humanity causes me to lose sight of it and stumble. I once searched in Kavanaugh's emptiness, as many of my peers do. It is a search that seeks to fill a void without discriminating as to what is used as filler. There are few socially acceptable methods by which one may transcend the reality of life and search for inner peace.

It was a small Midwestern town built upon rolling hills. No large shopping malls were present so uptown, as it was called, was the center of business. At first glance one might not guess that the lifeblood of the town was the thousands of college students who called it home nine months out of the year. Only when one traveled the well-worn streets could he
realize this by the many signs which proclaimed what band was playing and when "happy hour" started for each of the many bars along Main Street. If one arrived at precisely the right time, the streets would be full of students making the rounds.

We arrived in the early evening, coming from a smaller town fifteen miles to the north where we had visited a friend at a small community college. He had come with us on this trip to the "big city" and we picked up more friends in town who were attending school there. With everyone gathered together in one place, it was decided where we would go. Oddly enough, a bar which was thought of as a gay hangout by the community college students was chosen because a popular band was appearing there.

We proceeded uptown and, after a lengthy search, found a place to park. It was very chilly that night but the sidewalks were jammed with people. We arrived at our destination and everyone except myself and a friend filed to the end of the long line at the entrance. We had spotted an ice cream parlor and decided that a milkshake would do nicely despite the cold spring air.

This was quite fitting as we were best of friends until college separated us and if for no other reason than to prove our lasting insanity to each other we impulsively strode toward the 31 flavors sign. It was a special time as we had much to say to each other yet the constant company of other friends would not allow for the form of communication which we sought. I am thankful for the few with whom I am able to speak on a deeper level than that of an acquaintance. There is no one to blame for the fact that people do not share deeply with all with whom they come in contact for that is the way it is and perhaps the way it should be. Thus those that are special are all the more appreciated.
We talked and joked as we walked, rekindling the knack we have for giving advice to each other knowing full well that neither of us would heed the other's suggestions, well thought out as they were. We then ostracized each other for not following the advice that we had left with each other the last time our paths had crossed. It did not matter that the cold milkshakes only added to the uncomfortable air; it was us, the two geeks, united once again. Finally, we had reached the entrance to the bar.

Mercifully the line had become shorter. We argued about who was to pay for the cover charge; similar to the manner in which we quarrelled about who was to pay for the milkshakes; just as we argued when any expenditure was necessary. At the entrance was the familiar bouncer who was less than stringent about checking the identification of each patron. He seemed bored and restless as he crumpled the bills into a large stack which he carried in his right hand.

The place was wall to wall people. It was more a hallway than a room with a sign at the front that pointed out that the poolroom, the gameroom and the restrooms were downstairs. The bar itself was a long wooden shelf reminiscent of a 1920's scene partly because of the decorative stained glass lampshades which cast their dim light upon it. Warnings about using false identification proclaimed a subtle message from behind the wooden structure which seemed to serve as a great dam ready to collapse under the strain exerted by the sea of humanity pressed up against it. Announcements were posted everywhere as were prices of various beverages.

Across the hall from the bar was a row of wooden booths and tables which extended past the bar ending at the foot of a stage which was to be used by the musicians. Tables and chairs were strewn about the perimeter of the room leaving an area for dancing at the foot of the stage. There
would be no dancing on that night as people crowded everywhere and the only empty space was near the ceiling. Our friends spotted us quickly as they were near the door and we bunched together in an already overcrowded booth. The seat was hard and uncomfortable, the atmosphere not spectacular. The drinks were expensive and the band was a sad sort of country folk rock noise. I wondered to myself why anyone would want to come here. Then I saw their eyes.

A great majority had a glassy, glazed stare which protruded from an otherwise blank face. Some were high; some were drunk. Others were tripping on whatever was the popular narcotic at that time. Each seemed to be looking off in the distance, but never advancing toward the object they saw, oblivious to everything around them. People bumped each other and jostled through the crowd as if they were the only living ones in the room. I watched in alarm as a young man dragged a girl by her arm through the seas of people as if she were a lifeless rag doll.

It crossed my mind that upon being questioned about the evening many would reply as I once did, "I had a great time—I was so loaded that I can't remember what happened." There are many ironies of youth culture, the cruellest of which states: "Rebel, be unique, escape, . . . , but do it in the same manner as the others." Thus the conformity they despise is further manifested by their own rejection of it. Freedom is unknown to them as they hope to find answers that work for everyone.

I wanted to do something. I wanted to help someone yet a helpless feeling grew within me as I continued to look around. A young man moved in a never-ending semi-rythmical fashion to any noise he heard while he stood on a bench by the stage. I did not strive to be their savior or a god to them for I am no better than they, only more fortunate. I have my own God
that they might wish to know—if they would dare want to step out in faith. There was no way to reach them that night though, so I sat watching and wondering what the next moment might bring. In the following minutes I would experience one of the most vivid examples of what human existence is that I have ever encountered.

An up-and-coming musical talent who was performing on campus wandered into the bar (this happened quite frequently I was told). He agreed to perform with the local talent for a set. His music was not outstanding, yet it was a welcome change from what was played earlier. The people were really going wild now, pressing closer together and almost engulfing the stage. It was total chaos and I half-expected to hear the screams of someone being trampled upon. The strains of the last song echoed through the bar. It was, to my utter astonishment, an old spiritual. From this mass confusion, many of its components being completely out of touch with reality, came forth a call to the Lord. "Will the circle be unbroken?" They knew not what they were singing; most would not acknowledge the existence of any God. This is another problem of youth—what is spoken is not believed. "By and by, Lord, by and by." It was a bittersweet moment for me emotionally as I tried to sing along. "There's a better place awaitin'." In what did they believe? It is unexplainable and perhaps understandable only to each person.

The irony is complete. On one hand, they do not believe what they say, and on the other, what they do believe cannot be expressed to others. "In the sky, Lord, in the sky." It is their way, the best way for them until they find something. When they do find something they will still search, but in a fullness and completeness that brings much fulfillment. Pity those who search not or search in the way people are supposed to search for when
one searches in the same manner as others he cannot find the answers that are right for him.

II

Relative point of view is something that everyone needs to understand more fully. It is terribly difficult for the human brain, marvelous as it is, to comprehend the relative position of another being and understand the relevance of that person's viewpoint in relation to its own. We look at the problems of others through eyes that have experienced our own unique lives and are therefore unqualified to render the many judgments that we pass upon others. It is difficult to put ourselves in our brother's moccasins as the ancient Indian prayer asks. How bland it would be if all people looked at things in the same way.

Even God is not exempt from this exercise in limitation. I am tempted to tell you that my God should be your God also. It is a wonder that people appreciate Him at all given the poor advertising He has received. How can anyone expect people to turn to God when His Church on earth is divided into many denominations, many asserting that their representation of God is the only correct one. It seems that many churches choose to build barriers instead of breaking them down. I cannot fault the so-called unbelievers for rejecting such an unappealing image. It makes no sense to submit to something that is perceived as negative. To each person there is a different facet shown; no two people will perceive God in exactly the same manner. It is not feasible to have a church for every individual seeker of God, yet I sometimes wonder how many real churches exist in today's world. There are many buildings with crosses and the like, but a steeple alone does not turn a building into a church. Ordinary people are church.
Let us start with the individual. I could wade through volumes of rules and regulations of various teachings which turn a relationship with God into a mechanical process, but I will not. I often turn to the fourth chapter of Luke when handling a Bible for the first time. "The Spirit of the Lord has come upon me and has freed me . . ." God calls me to be free from the mechanical relationship as well as giving a freedom from death and despair. This goes directly against the grain of the world, freeing one to transcend the world's ridicule and rejection. Many people are willing to pay extraordinary sums of money for this freedom—something that cannot be bought and sold. It is a gift to be held in high esteem.

Another important aspect of freedom is freedom to respect another's freedom. I do not believe exactly as you do, yet I will support your search for the truth and, hopefully, you will support mine. There is no questioning as to why everyone does not believe in the same manner. When this freedom is evident within a closely-knit group of people, then and only then does the word church take on meaning and life. Near the end of the second chapter of Acts of the Apostles, the early church is presented. It is people helping people. Whenever I develop the feeling that people are not to be trusted, I think of this because it is people that must bring the answers to the problems of people. Dogs, cats, and any other animals are not equipped to improve the quality of people's lives.

In their plays, the Greeks used a Deus ex machina, God in a machine, to solve the problems, but my God uses people. It would be far too easy to wait for a savior to appear out of the clouds and save the day each time I have a problem. My Savior came once and will come again. In the meantime, He says that He will never leave me. Isn't that enough?
Without freedom, there is no choice. Without choice, there is no true commitment of the heart. Lack of freedom prevents many of my peers from moving towards the answers to their many questions. There are rules that will not permit one to search alone in the wilderness. A game with too many rules is not worth playing. I once played such games, caught up with the mechanical movements of trying to live someone else's vision. I was rigid in my beliefs and saw no reason why others should not see things the way they were supposed to be seen. Ever so slowly I was brought to the realization that my version was not the only good one even though it might be a good one for me. In order to interact successfully with others, my version should be compatible to others' lifestyles. I look to specific instances to gauge my progress in this area. I lived on a very unique floor in the dormitory one year. The same people thrown together at any other time would produce a different atmosphere than that of the specific year in question. The floor had once been the buckle of the Bible Belt in the dormitory, housing the quieter individuals who appreciated a toned-down existence at normal volume levels. Slowly, a group of people with a taste for loud, hard rock and roll music played at any hour of the day or night was moved in. If I was to return today, it would be anyone's guess as to what the floor is like. It might be quiet, as it once was, or loud, the direction in which it was moving when I left. It will never again be as it was during the transition. I wonder if that fact will be appreciated by those who lived there. It is there where I learned the importance of being a person instead of a machine, a sinner instead of a saint.

There were some who were members of a right-wing religious organization to which I had once belonged. They were good friends despite my leaving
their organization. Often I would discuss and debate my views with them until an impasse was reached. I had left the organization because I became too self-righteous under their system of training and I felt that it would be best for me to search elsewhere for direction. My friends in the organization, however, did not exhibit the elitist attitudes. They were content to live under the authority of the group's leaders and to submit to the pressure that was exerted upon them.

I had seen the effects of this pressure during the previous year when one of my friends started a Bible study in response to the urging of others in the group who convinced him that something was amiss if he was not leading a study. Through no fault of his own, the study produced the exact opposite of what one would expect. People began exhibiting outward signs of disrespect and selfishness that were never before present in their lives. I had presumed that poor timing might produce a few difficulties, but I never imagined such a radical change in a negative direction. The saddest character in this tragedy was my friend, who after knocking himself out to do what he was supposed to do, fell victim to a cruel turn of events. How he suffered for that in which he believed. I wonder what lesson he learned from his ordeal.

That episode spoke to me in a very real sense. I thought of each individual on the floor, how each was unique. Each has his own needs, wants, and goals. Each would relate to God in a different manner. It made sense to me that I should attempt to learn about their goals and needs if I wanted to help them. I had to know them, not on a superficial level, but as a friend. Timing was also important for it is unwise to assist the unquestioning, those who seek no answer. They must be searching for fulfillment and acknowledge the fact. I kept all these things in mind hoping that I might profit from what I perceived as a mistake.
As the year went by I questioned my decision to leave the group. I wondered on many occasions if anyone noticed the "little things." Was it worthwhile to hold my anger in check or should I have let whomever have it? Did my roommate take advantage of my cleaning the room since I never complained that he seldom helped? Little things should not bother me, perhaps, but they do.

IV

The spring is a time for the renewal of nature and the answers to many a question. A horror film with many biblical allusions was playing on campus. The plot centered around the antichrist, an important figure in the book of Revelation. I was in my room late at night, studying for an actuarial exam, when I heard the voices of my neighbors in the hallway. I did not think too much of it since I had heard people come and go many times as I studied. The walls in a dormitory are not particularly sound insulating. One will often attest to this fact at three or four in the morning when the residents next door are playing "How loud does it go?" or other stimulating and, of course, loud stereo games.

As I peered into my book once again, there came a knock upon my door. It was my friends, the men of my floor. They had seen the movie together and, upon arriving home, piled into the room in a mob. It was standing room only as all available seating was quickly occupied. They did not come empty-handed as each clutched a good-sized, dignified-looking book. Bibles. They had brought Bibles. Some were dusty from sitting unattended upon a shelf; some were borrowed; all were eager to be read. Those who carried them were just as eager, ready to search and to learn.
The topic of discussion is of no consequence to the greater, more wonderful insight that I received that night. There were others on the floor who were more knowledgeable than I concerning the Bible, yet my friends came to me when they wanted assistance in searching the Scriptures. Perhaps they knew that I would try to accept them without preaching conformity to a lifestyle that I felt was right for me. Maybe I was the only "religiously-oriented" person who had expressed a desire to know each of them to the point where they felt comfortable around me, even when ridiculing some of my beliefs and practices. Whatever the reasons, I was joyful as I laid awake in bed that night because I was beginning to see that I had made the correct decision for my life. I was helping others to see a little bit more of the real God, instead of my limited vision of Him. Oh yes, my roommate was one of those in the room.

Sometimes the things I perceive as insignificant are most important. Had I only known . . . I failed to realize the importance of my roommate's inclusion in the group of movie goers. He lived with me; therefore he was the best indicator as to the kind of influence I exerted upon others. We had decided to room together at the last moment after living on separate floors for a year. We had met as freshmen, living on the fourth floor of the residence hall. Even then we shared little in common, an unfulfilled existence and the question about what one must do to obtain happiness. We had gone to parties together before and he probably expected that we would attend more this year, trying to find happiness through intoxicants or one-night stands. Both of us were chained, but I was slowly breaking free.

The party myth is strong though; many are afraid to look elsewhere for something better. They wait patiently, praising the perfect party as if it
were a god who will come someday. It will never materialize, however, so I was searching for something else, and this took my roommate by surprise. He laughed when he learned that some of my social habits had changed, and he laughed harder when I tried to explain why. It was the laugh of someone who dared not follow my example but nevertheless was curious as to the outcome it would have on my well-being. My friends laugh that way also when I tell them. It is a sad sort of funny, they search with the hope of finding an answer that can be bought so that it is only money they are giving up. They do not want to hear that one must be willing to give up his life in order to gain it. They have not the courage to step out in faith as yet. Perhaps someday they will . . . I hope so.

I could relate to him though because I saw so much of what I once was in his person. I wanted to free him from his acceptance of the Dream, but I knew that each person must subjectively confront it at the time that he or she is ready. If I could raise from within him, an inquisitive nature, that would be of greater service than a lecture about why or how he should change.

It is strange how each of us listens to hours of others' experiences in a given situation only to forget that we might fall into similar traps when we are confronted by the same circumstances. If one person or a hundred people tell us that result B follows from situation A, we will not heed their advice when we find ourselves in situation A. For some reason each of us believes that it will be different for me; result B will not result. It would not be good for man to lose this hope that each situation is unique for each person. Perhaps that is why experience is the best teacher; we let it be. It still remains, however, that it is.
Throughout the school year he continued to laugh. His reactions did not hurt me because we often talked about it and I assured him that I could handle a little fun at my expense. I do not think he was serious or malicious in poking fun at my beliefs and I was used to such reactions by then. Perhaps some of my more conservative friends did not appreciate it for their God does not allow for such frivolity.

My roommate and I had a good relationship despite our differences. I stepped on his toes on occasion and he did likewise to mine. There were little annoyances, he did not like emptying wastecans, that bothered me despite their insignificance. When he called his girlfriend, he asked me to leave the room, and I was deported for as long as two hours. I never liked that too much. I decided, however, that I would try to comply with his wishes and not complain about my duties or his requests.

As the year progressed, I questioned if the little sacrifices had any effect; were they noticed by my roommate or anyone at all for that matter. It is of no use to sacrifice when there is nothing to gain. The action would result in me harboring resentment that would one day explode into anger and hate. I had read about storing treasures in heaven and thought that perhaps I was doing just that. I could not agree, however, that one should be motivated solely by the scorecard of the Almighty. What was the right decision? I thought it best to risk becoming a knight of faith, as Kierkegaard would say, until I could determine a more suitable course of action.

Thoughts of my leaving the religious group haunted me. Was I meant to leave or was I too stubborn to see the path that was best for me. I would have taken the Deus ex machina at that point, I think, but the easiest path is not always the best one from which to learn.
I did not get god in a machine, but I did get an inebriated roommate. It was his twenty-first birthday; a time for legally wasting oneself. He teased me, inviting me to come out to the bars with him (contrary to popular belief, I do know what one looks like on the inside). I was studying for the actuarial exam (again) and I knew that the night would see him searching for birthday (free) brew in many different places so I declined although I would have enjoyed having a drink with him. I hoped that he would come back in one piece as I bid the birthday boy and his crew of celebraters good night.

This presented an opportunity to study late at night in my room. Usually I studied in the basement of the dormitory complex, sharing the classrooms with discos and other activities. On a normal night my roommate would retire at a reasonable hour while I would not. Tonight was different.

I had just finished studying for the evening when I heard the happy shouts signifying his return. It seemed like a good time was had by all whom attended the celebration. The laughter quickly died down as angry residents, awakened by the revelry, informed them of the time. My roommate came into the room and gave me a rundown on the many establishments that were visited.

A strange silence enveloped the room for a few seconds. It was broken by my roommate; he was in tears. He said that I was the best roommate he had ever had, that he had grown closer to God because of rooming with me, and many other complimentary things that modesty forbids me to say. I was shocked. We hugged each other and I tried to speak, but nothing would come out. He said that he would say it all again in the morning to convince me that his alcohol level was not the motivating factor for the previous five minutes. That would not be necessary I told him.
I could not sleep for hours because of the wonderful joy I was experiencing. I did not have to change direction or shift gears; I was in the right place, doing my duty. The little things do add up eventually. I had doubted; my faith was not strong, but now I am stronger. It will take more to bring me down the next time and I know that I will not be forgotten with the herd. Most importantly, I know that my God reigns.

V

Thinking in a rational manner, I cannot deny the existence of my God. Some say that what happens during one's life is coincidence but I have experienced too many coincidences. Some say He is the product of an ever-productive imagination yet I do not imagine the feeling that I experience in His presence. The lessons that need to be learned and relearned are constantly being manifested in real life situations. When I am anxious, I am taught patience; when I am proud, I am taught humility. On the best days, I am taught things that cannot be expressed fully in a medium such as this pen and paper. The strangest circumstances are used in the most amazing way.

An actuary is an applied mathematician of sorts. I aspire to become an actuary as well as a person. To become a certified actuary one must pass a series of nine difficult examinations covering various phases of actuarial work. The governing body of actuaries learned from medieval craft guilds that the best way to increase demand is to decrease supply. The nine examinations serve this purpose extremely well as the passing ratio is anywhere from thirty-five to forty percent. I enjoy higher mathematics and consider myself fairly adept at solving mathematical problems. The first exam, however, was very extensive and I barely passed, scoring the
lowest passing grade. When preparing for part two, I felt that although
the lowest passing grade was the most efficient score, it would be wise to
aim a little higher by preparing myself more thoroughly.

That I did, averaging over thirty hours of study per week as well as
going to school "on the side." I worked over four thousand problems and
felt comfortable about the exam. This sort of mental preparation can be
dangerous if left unchecked. The mind must perceive its expertise confi-
dently which often leads to a kind of braggadocio or cockiness since one
must concentrate all mental efforts at achieving a positive outlook towards
the examination. The student must convince himself that his mind is well-
tuned and it will perform to its utmost capability. I am not the first to
fall into the trap; I will not be the last. This sort of thing happens in
sports as well as in academic settings.

I was prepared; one could see it by the way I attacked difficult prob-
lems, even those I had no immediate idea as to how to proceed. Many prob-
lems had become a thoughtless operation. I had four practice exams and I
told myself that if I did not keep up with the long hours of study, I would
bomb one of them, sending my positive mental attitude as well as my exam
chances flying to some distant horizon. When I scored well on all four, I
knew that I could do no more. Any further attempts at studying were fruit-
less. I was vulnerable; the trap was set. I almost enjoyed being over-
confident; I thought my cockiness was justifiable.

Nearly all insurance companies need actuaries. Because of the obscurity
of the field and the exams, there are more positions than people. Many
companies take on summer students in hopes of luring them into permanent
positions upon graduation. I had worked for a small insurance company for
two summers, but this year there were many options to consider. Unfortunately,
the decisions concerning summer employment were to be made during the final days before the exam, days characterized by an attitude of cockiness and overconfidence. I decided which job to take, writing a letter of acceptance and putting it into the mail slot at the desk of my residence hall.

Later that evening, I realized that I had been too hasty in drafting the letter, and I had said some things that were better off left unsaid. The desk was closed, but I knew that it would open at nine a.m., ten minutes before my first class in the morning so I retired to my room.

The desk was not open at nine as was customary. I waited a few minutes before calling the hall director, who was usually very cooperative. To my surprise, he did not come out to unlock the desk; a two-minute job since his apartment was across the hall from the desk. He assured me, however, that he would tell the desk staff to remove the letter from the outgoing mail and place it in my mailbox. I was apprehensive, but I left for classes hoping that the mail would come later than usual that day.

It did not. I rushed home after classes only to find an empty mailbox. I asked the desk staff if there was a letter set aside for me, but there was nothing. I tried not to become angry with the director or the staff, but I was fighting a losing battle.

I phoned the campus mailing service, which told me that I had to go through the U.S. Post Office in order to stop a letter. The Post Office outlined procedures which included filling out forms at the main branch. I had planned to study for the exam during the afternoon, but I realized that I would be wading through red tape thanks to the unusual turn of events. I wondered why this had to happen to me when it did. Preparing for the exam brought enough pressure and took up enough time. I did not need anything else to occupy my thoughts.
I wanted to blame the director for not opening the desk for me or the staff for not opening the desk on time. Why wasn't the letter pulled before the mail came? Then I realized that all of the blame should have been placed on me, the author of the letter, whose pride and greed caused the trouble in the first place. I thought that my God was trying to use my confusion as a means by which He could communicate to me. At least He picked an effective method to teach me the error of my ways. I thought to myself as I walked toward my car to initiate the long process of recalling the letter. I am not to become conformed to the values of this world despite my living in it. Seek ye first the kingdom of God is the challenge, and I was in danger of changing my priorities to those of greed and success. I would have put faith into the temporal world; thereby giving up my hopes and dreams. A popular song refers to humans as dust in the wind. With my faith in the gods of this world, I would have surely become the dust of which the song-writer speaks. As my God goes, so goes the hope of new life.

I unlocked the door and began entering the car, only to stop and get out again at the sight of a familiar red, white, and blue step-van out of the corner of my eye. It was the mail truck which serviced my dormitory just sitting there. Never before did it ever wait for so long after picking up the mail. I slowly walked toward it, wondering what to say since government regulations would not allow for any tampering of the mail.

The driver was in his thirties. He was finishing his lunch when I arrived: a yellow stain at the corner of his mouth indicated his preference toward mustard. When I asked if there was any way he could retrieve the letter, he played tape 77 which told how one must fill out forms at the main branch etc. I had expected this, for he was only performing his duty. I asked him why he was sitting in the parking lot of a dormitory of all places.
He told me that he liked to sit and think, exploring the far reaches of his mind. It relaxed him and helped develop his perspective of life and the modern world. He said that other people considered him weird for enjoying such an idle form of passing time. This brought a smile to my face and a renewed hope that recalling the letter might not entail all that much red tape.

He was a rare individual. He had become a mailman because his original profession, mortuary science, separated him from his family, being a twenty-four hour per day job. He took a chance because he believed in something; I admired that. I admired the way he could tell a complete stranger how much he loved his wife and children. His concern for them was unmistakably clear. He asked me why I needed the letter, and I told him that it concerned my summer employment. When he mentioned how much he valued summer jobs when he was younger, I knew that the letter would soon be in my hands. After a five-minute search of the mail, he gave me the letter.

We continued to talk, concentrating on the idea of sitting alone in a subjective sort of wilderness, from which one derives life’s meaning. I decided to share my God with him since he had cared for me when another person might have brushed me aside. If he was as open-minded as I perceived him to be, I surmised that the worst that could happen was a laughing sort of rejection. I trusted him even though I had only known him twenty minutes or so. I should not have been surprised to find that his God and mine were the same. We shared some of our individual experiences with each other until he had to get back to work. We parted, never to speak to each other on this earth.

I looked at my watch. The afternoon was half over, the same result as if I had gone downtown to the main post office. I had lost a few hours
of study time yet it was not the same though because there is a great
difference between running an errand and learning a wonderful lesson.
There is no growth in the first case. I had been punished yet punished in
a loving way which reaffirmed the faith I have in my God. The time was
not wasted, it was invested. Someday it will produce great returns.

Shall we talk about coincidences? Of all desk staffs, this one had a
class at eight o'clock which prevented her from opening the desk on time.
Of all mailmen, this one was friends with my God. Of all days, this was
the one he lingered for over an hour later than usual before leaving campus.
Not enough, you say? I have another. I discovered later that the letter
was indeed pulled in time by the desk staff, who put it in my mailbox.
The person who shares the box with me saw my letter before the mail came.
He decided that since the letter was from me and not for me, he would be
doing me a favor by dropping it in the mail chute. To this day, he does
not realize how great a favor he performed.
I had hopes of tying things together with an epilogue that reviewed all that I had written. It was impossible, however, to capture the essence of all that has flowed from this pen within a few paragraphs or pages. I will not draw conclusions for you, for I have no right to tell you how you should live as a result of experiencing my life. It is up to you to seek answers to the questions that have risen from within your being. It is questioning that insures the continuation of growth towards the fulfilled life of vibrant joy and peace.
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