Up the Mainstream: Ten Essays on the Average

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by

B. Rae Morrow

Project Director

Wade Jennings

Ball State University

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**TABLE OF CONTENTS**

- **Introduction:** After the Colon  
- **I. Education I:** The Wonderbread Years  
- **II. Education II:** Parallel Parking  
- **III. Family:** The Line  
- **IV. Death:** The Dance  
- **V. Recreation:** The Tupperware Syndrome  
- **VI. Dating:** Idiocy  
- **VII. Religion:** Winning the Bible  
- **VIII. Work:** A Philosophy for Life  
- **IX. Education III:** Great Moments in Literature  
- **X. Muncie:** Entire of Itself  

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I</td>
<td>Education I: The Wonderbread Years</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II</td>
<td>Education II: Parallel Parking</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III</td>
<td>Family: The Line</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV</td>
<td>Death: The Dance</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V</td>
<td>Recreation: The Tupperware Syndrome</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VI</td>
<td>Dating: Idiocy</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VII</td>
<td>Religion: Winning the Bible</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VIII</td>
<td>Work: A Philosophy for Life</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IX</td>
<td>Education III: Great Moments in Literature</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>X</td>
<td>Muncie: Entire of Itself</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
INTRODUCTION: After the Colon

I do not care whether life begins at conception or birth, and it makes no substantial difference to me whether it ends with the heart or the brainwaves. For me, life began and ended at age three, and if at the beginning I was not brought into the world, at the end I certainly did not die.

My life began when I was fully toilet-trained. Release from diapers signaled the start of independence for a small child who had done extra time as the slave of cotton squares and duck-headed safety pins. Suddenly, I discovered that I was my own master, responsible not only for going, but also for getting there. After all, I reasoned, anyone who has undergone the humiliation of toilet-training DESERVES her independence. And at three, I was more of a symbol of independence than the Statue of Liberty. I was everything. I could walk, talk, eat, and find the bathroom by myself, and except for a few banged knees and a couple of times I forgot to lift the lid, I needed no help. There was no school to attend, no work to complain about, and no older brothers or sisters to torment me during the day. At three, I could say and do what whim dictated. At three, I was very special, very individual. Yes, three was good.

At four, the freedom was still present, but hanging directly over my head was what the taller people in the neighborhood called "school." Whatever school was (and I knew by the relief in the voices of my parents that it wasn't good), I knew that it was not playing, eating, and sleeping, and so I knew it meant the end of the bliss that was three. At age four, I had learned to worry. I subconsciously guessed that I had already passed what my grandmother called "the best years of my life." I started
school, and, not long after my fifth birthday, my family moved to Muncie, Indiana. That was the end. Although I was not dead, rigormortis had begun.

Moving to Muncie was not and never will be like moving to Indianapolis or Greensfork, so to understand the transformation I was forced to undergo when we moved here, it is important to understand what Muncie IS. Like Cleveland and Burbank, Muncie has long been the butt of a popular American joke. The television show Laugh-In used to do "It-is-so-dull-in-Muncie-that . . ." schticks, and Mad Magazine did more than one joke along the lines of "Bowling in Muncie is like eating tuna every day for a year."

The city has received such honorable attention because of the Lynd study, the second Lynd study, the Caplow study, somebody else's study, and somebody's grandmother's study. Polls are taken, articles are written, and Muncie emerges from these shallow indicators as a huge, terrifying thermometer by which society can measure its progress. In moving to Muncie, we had become a number on the thermometer. No matter what we had been before, no matter what I had been at three, we were now unavoidably among the ranks of the average.

Of course, at five, I did not know what I had walked into, although I shortly learned that life was just not going to be the same. In Muncie, there were no more neighborhood gangs, no more blocks which magically transformed into raceways, kingdoms, and battlefields. The fun was still fun, but it had lost its spark. I sort of went to school, sort of played in the back yard, sort of learned right from wrong, and, sort of accidentally, reached puberty intact. While I might have done the same things elsewhere, they are only important to me now because I did them in Muncie. At the time, though, I did not express any unusual feelings for or against my city; I hardly believed it existed. My
triangle of activity, from candy store to school to home, was enough to keep my mind occupied.

In junior high, I began to hear the rumors that Muncie was the home of the average human being. Word of mouth also told me that it was, in classic junior high terms, "the armpit of America." But even though I knew these truths, I did not care. I figured that if Muncie was the armpit I would hate to see the rest of the gorilla. Still, just in case, I began to join things, thinking that if I excelled in something I could not be average. I became first-chair flute, yet chose to ignore the Americana which surrounded the junior high band.

By sixteen I knew very well what people claimed Muncie was, and I was old enough to resent the insinuations that I was average. I became a member of every organization in school, fought unusual battles with teachers, wrote, sang, composed, and literally danced my way to graduation, a full scholarship to college, and super-stardom. Nobody was going to call me average.

I was ready for college--college in Muncie, due to a scholarship which meant minimal cost to my parents if I lived at home (their reasoning, of course). My fellow high-school graduates pitied me. Poor Rae, she has to stay in the hole of hell. I pitied myself. Poor Rae, she has to live with her accountant father and office assistant mother in a two-car, dishwasher, bath-and-a-half, T.V.-set-per-person, Ball-jar-decorated, we're-proud-of-our-smart-children, middle-class home. I prayed for death.

I realized that in fighting the average Muncie's image had forced upon me, I had embraced it. I had become Muncie and all of its averages; I had found that my number on the thermometer was 98.6. Age three was--and is--gone.
The idea behind Muncie is, of course, that it is perfectly average. There are all sorts of people who would argue with this and say instead that it is not average because its values, according to the studies, have remained stable. Whichever view is taken, the fact remains that the people in Muncie are sought after for either their average or archaic opinions. What do people in Muncie think? What do they wear? Where do they work? Who are they? I, of course, know the answers.

I have lived in Muncie since I was five years old. I know where all of the grocery stores are, the fastest way to get to the mall from my house, the neighborhoods to be seen in and those to avoid, and where to buy the sort of toothpaste I need to lower my annual cavity count. And yet, for all I know about this city, none of the scientists using Muncie as a giant white rat have come to me with their questionnaires. I know what going to school here is like, what working here is like, what dating here is like. And if I know so much about Muncie, I should know as much about the average American, right? Well, that is the way the theory works, at least. Ask me, researchers!

I will never be asked, of course, so my only choice is to offer my information for the betterment of the social studies classes in the world. I have composed a series of ten essays on—modestly enough—myself within my city. These essays serve as both a recording of and commentary on select events in my post-life after three, and should also be used to serve as a warning to those who come after me.

I hope to answer some of those terribly important questions about the nature of the average (or stagnant) person by offering myself as a living sample. Of course, the fact that I am not just a person who dwells in Muncie, but a person who is partially made up of the city's self-image poses some questions not to be found on the researchers'
questionnaires. What does the average American city do to people? Why do people turn out so . . . average?

The problem ignited here is that Muncie has ceased to be a city in itself—it has become a symbol. As a name, "Muncie" does not stand alone any longer; it has an implied colon after it. What is after that colon? Muncie: Home of the Average? Muncie: Home of the Stable Family? Muncie: Home of the American Way? Muncie: Home of Me?

These essays may help me find what Muncie has stamped after that imaginary colon, and what it should have. On the other hand, these ten biographical essays may only be a description of the youth of one more person in one more city, a person who happens to resent the discovery that the thrill of being toilet-trained does not last forever.
I. EDUCATION I: The Wonderbread Years

I have come to believe that all adult neuroses can be traced to junior high, and that anything that began in junior high is somehow connected to elementary school. School is, of course, the place where all neuroses have their beginnings.

The first problem with school is that there are other children around—so many, in fact, that they are forced to stand in long lines to be counted, sorted, and classified by height, sex, intelligence, and athletic ability. The taller people sit in back, the boys go into one bathroom while the girls go into another, the bluebird reading group is better than the crow reading group, and the stronger kids always get the swings. That is life in elementary school. For me, specifically, it meant that I always had to sit in the back (but could never see), was doomed to six years of wondering what a urinal looked like, was always a bluebird, and never got a swing. I found it difficult to adjust to these classifications, but gradually learned to depend on them. Staying a bluebird was very important to my ego.

Elementary school was not one big playground. Although my memory of the first years is weak, I recall the few traumatic events and, well, those times I was not on my best behavior. I remember crying terribly on my first day of school in Muncie because my teacher told my mother that I was too young to be in first grade and would have to go back to finish kindergarten again. I would not and did not go back. Blocks were a bore.

Staying in the first grade meant exposing myself to the harrassment of my peers, who seemed to find my southern accent a source of constant amusement. Luckily, my accent did not inhibit my vocabulary or my
ingenuity. One little girl made the mistake of mimicking me when she was on the high end of our shared teeter-totter. I called her a pig and slipped purposefully off my earth-bound end, leaving her to bang painfully down to the dirt ground. A few years later, during my "moral watchdog" phase, I would have walked over to where she lay sprawled and crying in the dirt and said, quite pointedly, "Think about it." Even without my advice, she never made fun of my differences again, and I quickly lost the accent in favor of a more acceptable, refined Hoosier twang.

With my new accent in tow, I entered second grade and was flattered when I was selected for the role of narrator in the all-second-grade play, "The Three Billy Goats Gruff." (I was picked, I am sure, because I was the only kid in the second grade who had enough teeth to make a decent "s.") I was professionally outfitted with the standard costume: a decorated paper sack. Each character in the play, including the chorus, the goats, the trolls, and the narrator was allowed to cut out the two eye-holes and then to decorate his "mask."

I had the misfortune, however, of suddenly catching the family disease—nearsightedness—just one month before the big night, and my new, pointed, blue glasses with silver triangles enhancing each corner made their debut only one day in advance of "The Goats." There were no bags in the second grade big enough to cover a scrawny head with enormous, pointed, blue glasses. The show went on as scheduled, and I performed in shame, the only second grader at North View Elementary School without a paper bag over her head. I was so humiliated that I inwardly swore that I would never stand out from the crowd again.

I decided that I would try writing. Inspired by "The Three Billy Goats Gruff" (the story, not the experience), I knew I could hardly
fail to end up being as famous as, say, Dr. Seuss. In third grade, I attempted my first poems. My work at this early age reflected the typical traumas faced by the contemporary child; they showed the keen insight I had into the "real" child, the sub-conscious being. I faithfully preserved my early efforts, and am able to reproduce here a few of the fifty or more poems which emerged from the inner-reflections of a Muncie third-grader. Because the sensitive ear of the poet hears both meaning and music in language, I have left spelling and punctuation intact.

Don't Sing at School
Don't sing at school
For that is a rule
And also if the teacher comes
She will truly hear your hums
So don't sing at school, no please don't
For you will get something, then you won't.

School
School is fun and it is not
You work and you work and you work a lot
I like recess a lot I do
For I play with people like you and you
You have fun and you do not
You play and you work and you do it a lot.

Reading, Writing, 'Rithmatic
Reading, Writing, 'Rithmatic
Some of those subjects make me sick
I write so awful my writing you can't miss
And my arithmatic, mine is obvies
But Readings the subject I have won
When it comes to readin, I can read a ton.
So writting and Arithmetic I can't master
But in Reading I can always go faster.

Shoes
There's one thing about shoes
That makes me snooze
It's that brand new smell
Of those brand new shoes.
Of course, these are some of the better works. I have omitted the best poem, "Hillbillys in Hollywood," because I suspect that the idea was stolen, and I have also left out the deeper, more personal poems, such as "Later" ("May I go to the movie I ask. / 'Later, not now, later'").

My writing phase continued, and by fifth grade I had ventured into short stories such as "The Bow-Legged Mosquito," featuring Uncle Flea and Doctor Roach, and "The Mystery of the Missing Rummage." I wrote my first play the same year, which featured sisters named April and May, who curiously resembled my own sisters, and their younger sibling June, an innocent tormented by her hateful older sisters. The play was performed by a select cast for the other fifth-grade class, and I was inspired to write a sequel. The sequel was not as easy to cast, since no one who acted in the first seemed willing to repeat his role. When I attempted to cast the third play about the unhappy trio, I found the only copy of the script torn into shreds and stuffed into my coat sleeve. The girl who had destroyed my treasure was assigned to help me glue it back together, but she invited me to her house to see her dog instead. I went, and my career as an author was ended.

Playwrights were unpopular in the fifth grade, and I knew that it was unsafe to be unpopular. It was also very easy. All I had to do to lose my closest friend was to stay out of the four-square game for a day, or mention that I wished math class had gone on longer. Popularity then depended only upon joining the right dodge-ball team.

I never did get on the right dodge-ball team, by the way. In sixth grade our school had what was loosely termed "girls' activity night." On Tuesdays and Thursdays in the winter, we "played sports," as it was called, from three until five. Competition was supposed to help us learn to interact with others and make us understand the rules of
good sportsmanship. All we ever tried to do was beat the hell out of each other so that our team could get the blue ribbon.

At the beginning of each Tuesday and Thursday we had fifteen minutes to "play sports" individually, so most of the ladies pulled out the small "skooters" (which were merely pieces of wood a foot square propped on four wheels), slapped their stomachs on the centers, and crawled along like crabs trying to role over somebody else's fingers. When this individual period was over, the skooters and other equipment were to be returned to the equipment room. Woe to the people in that small room when the skooters started sailing through the door without owners attached. I, of course, happened to be putting away a ball when I noted that I was in a dangerous position: the skooters were coming. A girl similarly trapped in the room jumped gracefully over one of the wheeled blocks as it flew toward her feet. Thinking I could do the same, I leapt into the air. Of course, I had forgotten that I was 5'8" tall in the sixth grade and lacked the coordination of a marionette. Landing directly on the skooter, I flew backwards onto the cement floor, spraining my ankle for the first of seven times and putting me permanently out of the dodge-ball season. I was doomed, by this instant, to be unpopular.

I left the sixth grade a nervous wreck. I wanted to be just like everyone else--popular--but that seemed physically impossible. When I went the other way and tried to do something different, my efforts were torn up and stuffed into my coat (although this was also due to the miserable quality of the plays). Like the child in the Wonderbread commercials, I had kept growing and growing, but my form had not yet taken its final shape. I felt hounded by the thought that I was still standing in front of the elementary school population with pointed
glasses and no bag over my face. I suppose that the most important thing to me at the end of sixth grade was finding my own paper sack. As I said, neuroses begin in elementary school, and I was certainly neurotic then. I knew only one thing for sure, a truth I had known since third grade: "School is fun and it is not/You work and you work and you work alot."
II. EDUCATION II: Parallel Parking

Hoosiers, I have noticed, have a problem with nouns. Cows, chairs, cars, and people take on interesting new meanings when converted Hoosier-style into big brown thingamajiggers, watchamacallits, youknows, and whozefritzes. When asked to point out a specific person in a crowd, I am more likely to say that "whatshisface is the whozefritz standing by the thingamabob" than "Frank is the man standing by the Mustang." Nouns are, after all, persons, places, and things, and if I take the rule more literally than it was intended, I am only demonstrating that my education taught me the classifications but not how to classify.

As a matter of fact, the classification lesson is the primary focus of junior high school. The junior high years are choked with terminology. Theoretically, I suppose, junior high is intended to prepare the student for high school, and one cannot begin freshman algebra without knowing what a formula is, just as one should not be able to start American literature or creative writing without understanding paragraphs, conclusions, short stories, and participial phrases. I wish I could note that much of what is learned in junior high was learned six times in elementary school, and that much more of the material should have been learned earlier, but having spent only seventeen years within "the system," I do not feel that it is my place to comment on the lack of coordination—or rather continuity—in education. I will say, however, that teachers cannot trust other teachers (who have, after all, spent their formative years in the same disjointed school systems as themselves) and must therefore spend most of their teaching time reteaching. In other words, I spent so much time preparing to work algebra problems that I finally did very few. Having got that out of the way and feeling
much better for the effort, I will route myself back onto the subject: terminology.

Everything learned in junior high is a label. Diagramming sentences, learning to make skirts and shoehorns, dissecting frogs, and jumping on trampolines are all activities laden with hours of learning names of parts, methods, and positions. Very little time is spent learning what those parts do and how they function with other parts to form the working machine; that comes later, at least in theory. Junior high students begin to think that life consists of persons, places, or things, but not of verbs and coordinating conjunctions.

We became, in seventh and eighth grade, a classified society modeled on the systems we were learning in school. We were certain persons who came from certain places who focused our lives on certain things. Each person seen in a hallway between classes could be pointed to and classified as a whore, a rich kid, a nerd, an athlete, a bandmember, a homosexual, a tattletale, a seducer-of-women, a bedwetter, or a nobody-worth-discussing. We all knew what we were and what everyone else was, and we were all very aware that we would never be able to become anything else. The boundaries between groups were very, very rarely crossed. There were people one simply didn't speak to, which was just as well because they wouldn't speak back.

I spent junior high as a member of the band. I never walked outside of my group of friends, who of course were also members of the band, for any purpose. We took classes together, ate lunch together, went to basketball games together, and walked home together. I had only one friend almost outside of the clique, an orchestra person who happened to be known as a tattletale. Of course, I did not find this out until a few years later; if I had known it at the time I would never have allowed myself to be seen with her.
Hating junior high became an obsession that stays with me even now. I hated the people who were not in my clique, a few of those who were, and as often as not, I hated myself. I hated school, I hated homework, and I hated Mondays. I was no great delight to be around at that age. I spent much of my time in private, writing what I can now admit were probably the worst short stories ever blessed by being put to paper. (I also co-authored a novel, a mystery called "Curse of the Giant Red Kidney Worm.")

If I had been neurotic when I got out of elementary school, I was ready to be institutionalized by the end of junior high. Our school fed into a high school which had a reputation for being a continuation of the classification syndrome on a larger scale, and I dreaded it. Yet when I was given the chance to go to a much smaller, state-run school I was curiously drawn to continue my path in the public school system. For all of its destructiveness, it had a security I was afraid to leave. My final choice was made as most of my final choices have always been made, for the sake of getting the decision out of the way. I decided to get out of the system. Once I had gone against the public school (whether it had deserved its reputation or not), I went against myself as I had been in junior high, and it was a violently abrupt change. On the first day of high school, at the first moment I was asked my name, I gave them my middle name instead of the first name I had used since, well, since birth. The change had been unplanned and surprised even me (not to mention my parents), but it could not be reversed.

With my new name I became a new person. I stayed with the band idea, since music was the only thing at which I had an acceptable amount of skill, but I expanded my range and joined the orchestra, the choir, the madrigal group, and the girls' ensemble. I joined the newspaper
staff and the service organizations, and I began acting in plays, trying to run the show in general. I loved high school with the same intensity I had hated junior high. I was so busy, so involved, that the time left for classes was minimal. Grades were not as important to me as were my activities, primarily because I was the only person other than my parents who saw my report cards. Still, there were things I missed in high school.

I took the physical education classes required of me, for example, but as I refused to participate in anything more dangerous than walking around the gym (because I knew that I would hurt myself and I still do not doubt that I would have), I remained a very physically uneducated person. I took no American history or government, which, combined with my failure to learn states and capitals in elementary school, left me void of information in those important areas, and the grammar I relearned from junior high was randomly taught—here a verb, there an adverb.

I took, as most people did, driver's education, and due to a very nice notebook I had compiled on rules of the road, I was given a waiver. This meant that I could get my driver's license without taking the actual driving test. When I walked out of the Delaware County License Branch I had a driver's license and could not drive around the block. I had never once even parallel parked a car, and yet my driver's education teacher had signed a paper saying I could have passed a test that would have been impossible for me. HE had never even tested me.

In the same manner I was given a driver's license, I was given a high school diploma. At the time I did not feel underprepared for college, but I now know that I left that school empty-headed in a number of areas. This was as much my fault as it was the school's, but I still wish
I could have said something then, maybe even shouted at the ceremony that I was unqualified to graduate. "I can't even parallel park a car!"

As it was, I spent graduation laughing, much as I laughed through high school, much as I would laugh through college. And yet, despite the fact that I felt so underprepared, I discovered that I was just as underprepared as the next guy. None of us knew that nouns were not the limitation of experience, that there were verbs and adjectives and prepositional phrases to learn, that we were more than whozits earning thingamajigs as you know watchamacallits.

There should be a flow to education. First, we should learn the classifications, then we should learn to classify, then we should learn how to apply what we have classified, and then we should learn that we can do without classifications. This last is called thinking. In junior high we learned classifications but never how to classify, and now we can barely write coherent sentences. And that second ability, how to classify, was not even learned in high school. This is still, to me, a remedial stage of thinking. While I hate to suggest that we reduce our focus in education to this one step, I wish we could at least consider doing so—temporarily. With apologies to a certain American author, I suggest the following to students unable to find the words, the thingamajigs, for which they are looking: Classify! Classify! Classify!
III. FAMILY: The Line

Generations ago, someone in my family drew a line. "On this side of the line," he or she said to a stubborn child who would not eat his liver, "everything is right. On that side, everything is wrong. Eating your liver is on the good side of the line, so I suggest you swallow." And this has become the family code: All things are either good or bad, depending upon which side of the line they fall.

Living in a two-value world was not easy, especially when I felt that we were the only family in Muncie that had a line dividing that world. Other people, I thought, were never told that biting sisters and swearing were on the bad side of the line, and that thanking neighbors and being quiet were on the good. As I grew older, I learned that most families did have lines, but that theirs were usually much wider than ours. My friends could often get whole feet directly onto their family lines, and I am sure the line of the three boys down the street was wider than a six lane highway. Their lines could be touched or crossed, but the Morrow line was made of very clear, fine thread. For a long time, it seemed as though only my parents could see it.

I discovered, for example, that playing at a friend's house during tornado-warning weather was on the bad side of the line, especially when I hadn't mentioned that I was leaving the yard. I learned that tying the back yard gate shut with a jump rope might have been on the good side of the line if the lawn mower had not been on fire in the front yard and if the hose had not been on my side of the gate. Biting sisters, as I have said, was on the bad side of the line, and drawing blood was even further into the void of badness. Telling grandparents they were loved was good; telling them to shut up was bad.
Learning the line was very difficult, especially since both of my parents knew it intimately. My father never skipped a class throughout high school or college—a bit overzealous, needless to say—and my mother's standards were no less rigid. As parents, they were firm when passing on these standards to their children.

A few words about parents are appropriate here. That parents should be seen and not heard seems a much more sensible axiom to my nature than sparing the rod and spoiling the child. Parents should be seen because, of course, they are proof of our humanness, verification that we did, indeed, issue from human beings and therefore deserve a small spot on the globe, even if it is Muncie, Indiana. Parents should be seen so that we can assure friends that our Karl Malden noses were not our own ideas, or so that we can see for ourselves how much worse we might have been. Parents come in handy when there are report cards to be signed, cookies to be bought, and (in my case) excuses to be given when we don't want to go ice skating with a stout friend ("Mom doesn't want me to go out today").

In fact, the only drawback parents have is the secret knowledge of that damned line. They know it; we don't. And just when we think we see it, they move it. There is no winning battle when parents are around. Our only hope as the children of our parents is in learning the line as quickly as possible; yet success at saving ourselves is also doom, because once the line is learned it is eternally engraved into our intestines.

In my early years, I knew that if I did something wrong, such as taking the good china into the sandbox, I would be spanked or grounded or simply yelled at. But the only way I would know if what I did was
wrong was if I suffered the misfortune of punishment. I just did things and let my parents judge the rightness or wrongness of my actions. After all, they knew the lines.

Gradually, I became aware of the line but could not see it. I knew that if I rode my bicycle onto another street my parents would probably judge the act as bad, but I did not have any personal feeling about the matter. I would not do things because of my parents' opinions rather than because of my own. For example, I had no second thoughts about carving my older sister's initials into the tops of her desk, her vanity, and her jewelry box with a pair of sharp scissors (she had been awfully selfish with her possessions, as I recall, and I reasoned that if she insisted something was hers and hers alone, then it should be appropriately marked). While I knew that my parents would declare the act on the bad side of the line, I felt no guilt about the act myself. "Don't you know any better?" they would ask. I didn't, I would explain patiently. Inwardly I sighed, knowing that I would never get the knack of being an exemplary child.

One day, when a friend and I were considering the illicit possibility of smoking a cigarette, I felt a small tug somewhere between my stomach and my intestines. It wasn't much of a pull, really, but it was enough to give me a second thought about that cigarette. My first thought had been, "I wonder what mother would say." My second thought was, "Mother would execute me." I was beginning to feel, at least, an affinity with the line. Although I did not think it could be inherited, that line had somehow lodged itself in my middle and was, like indigestion, beginning to become somewhat bothersome. On the other hand, I was pleased to have my own physical warning system telling me what my parents would or would not approve.
A tug was not the end, however. One early afternoon in high school I accompanied a friend to a nearby restaurant instead of bothering to attend biology. (I had, after all, dissected frogs once in junior high.) As soon as the suggestion came up that we cut class, the narrow line I had discovered near my intestinal tract yanked as vigorously as if it had a whale at one end. And there I was, doomed forever. Not only did I know my parents would see the action of cutting class as being on the wrong side of the line, but I knew it as well. As my luck would have it, my mother happened to be enjoying her lunch at the same restaurant we had so carefully selected, and, to make it worse, she was dining with my high school principal. When she spied me, she walked over to my table and smiled.

"Shouldn't you be in class?" she asked with what sounded like motherly concern.

"Yes," I responded brightly, "I probably should be in class."

She smiled again. "Oh. Well, I just wanted to be sure. Dr. Collins and I both thought you might have a class this hour. Enjoy your lunch." She left.

Nothing was ever said about that afternoon escape again, because it was apparent to everyone that I knew that I had crossed the line, that she knew I had crossed the line, and that I would be able to provide my own punishment. I did; I felt guilty for weeks. "Don't you know any better?" She did not have to ask. I knew better, and the line was all my own.

I have said that some lines are wider than others, and I believe this is true. Some people would never have felt even a light tug at the thought of avoiding class, while others I know would have laughed at worrying about such a stupid thing. It is my fate to have such a conservatively narrow line that I am constantly guilt-ridden
over my most insignificant crossing onto the bad side.

The line has taught me to feel guilty about everything I do, to be eternally terrified of making a mistake. This is the worst part of having a thin family line: there is never any room for a ripping good time.

My older sisters will attest to all that I have said. Like me, they are doomed to guilty consciences much as we are all doomed to nearsightedness. Both traits are inherited. Fate has brought us closer together than the fact of sisterhood ever will. I wish I could speak of family unity here, of the fights, the picnics, the holidays, the hatred, the rest of it, but the truth is that we are unified by blood and we are controlled by the line and there is no more to the matter than that.

If I knew of a time machine, and if I could make it take me anywhere I wanted to go, I would go back the generations it would take to find that one relative who told the child to eat his liver. I would firmly grasp the relative by the shoulders and shake and shake him until his teeth rolled onto the floor; I would shake him so hard that he would be unable to say another word. Then I would turn to the wide-eyed child, looking up at me over a plateful of cold liver, and I would say, as gently as possible, "You may be excused."
IV. DEATH: The Dance

Instants change attitudes. There are moments when we are walking down streets, trying only to get between two points the fastest way possible, when something we see or overhear causes us to stop suddenly and think "yes" or "no" or "how could I ever have been so blind."

That one thing we witness on, say, a twenty minute walk to school, can change our very foundations of thought. There is that instant of change, and we arrive at our destinations much different from the people who started out.

On a sort of blazing hot day where there was not a cloud to soften the sun, I began my twenty minute walk back to school after lunch. I was heading slowly but resolutely to driver's education class, where we had a guest lecturer scheduled to drone on for an hour about the benefits of car insurance. I was walking toward an intersection I crossed four times daily, an intersection which had recently been named one of the most dangerous in the city. It was nearing one o'clock, and the sun was just enough into the west to obscure the vision of drivers heading in that direction.

I was walking eastward along the right side of the street when a speeding motorcyclist passed me as it approached the intersection. The light was green, so it did not slow down; a car heading the opposite direction, toward me, was making a left-hand turn. The driver of the car did not see the motorcyclist because of the glare and turned directly in front of him, causing the motorcycle to crash into the car's side and the helmeted rider to fly into the air.

When the motorcyclist left the seat of his motorcycle and leapt skyward like an accomplished dancer, I could only see the horrible beauty of his motion. He flew slowly, turning over and over, and his
stunned noon-time audience was totally silent in appreciation of his acrobatic talents. He made a final, elegantly designed somersault and fluttered to the ground with the grace of a leaf, landing on the other side of the car which had inspired his leap. The only sounds I heard as he landed were the chimes of the breaking glass.

If there had been a spell, it was suddenly broken. Horns began honking, people started yelling and screaming, and bodies began smothering the dancer with attention to see if he had broken his neck. I ran forward suddenly, but when I realized that I could not see, I also realized that I did not want to see. I finished crossing the intersection and continued my afternoon walk to school.

When the walk ended I found myself—not at school, sitting peacefully in driver's education—but in my mother's office. She took one look at my enlarged eyes and dragged me into a private room. She asked several times what was wrong, but when I finally softly told her what I had witnessed she could only stare at me blankly. She wanted to know if the motorcyclist was bleeding or if he had been killed; I said that I did not know, that I had not seen him. She did not understand, then, why I was so upset. These things happened everyday, she said. I finally left her and returned to school, my original destination.

What she did not realize—what I did not realize—was that while I had been exposed to the idea of death before, I had never seen anything as closely connected to it as this accident. The motorcyclist was not made of steel, not even fiberglass. Flying through the air he might have been an indestructible hawk making a final arc before landing at his nest. But that landing, that Raggedy Ann flop onto his back twenty feet from his starting point, spoke to me of destruction, of the shattering of a very fragile vase.
I realized that I was as fragile, as flimsy, as that man. I had discovered something I had never considered before: I had my own physical limitations. As melodramatic as it sounded, I was going to die. I was a very sober person when I finally arrived at school that afternoon.

In all people's lives there are instants such as this one in which they realize their own destructability, in which they suddenly realize the facts of their own deaths. There is a specific moment, defined in time as one primary color is defined from another, when we know, and after that moment we will always know.
V. RECREATION: The Tupperware Syndrome

There are four things to be said about recreation in Muncie: pictures, pins, pizza, and putt-putt (or, specifically, movies, bowling, eating, and golfing). People in Muncie have been known to see a terrible movie three or four times for lack of anything better to do. But I am not knocking Muncie—I am knocking our local lack of inspiration. Surely we can think of something to do with all of our extra money. I have tried, honestly, but I am no more inspired than the rest of the population.

In high school, the thing to do was to go to basketball games. I went because I was a member of the band, not because I wanted to go, but I still found myself learning to enjoy the sport. When I was older, I thought that what worked in high school might work in college. I went to a football game, the homecoming special of my freshman year. I know it was the homecoming game because of two facts: 1) all of the sorority women had on three-piece suits with mums in the lapels, and later investigation uncovered the fact that sorority women wear suits and mums to homecoming, and 2) homecoming is free, and that was the only way I could afford to go.

Here is what I learned about the game I saw: everyone who went to the game sat on benches and looked at everyone else. When something happened on the big, green field somebody in a blue suit would sit up and say, "What happened?" And somebody in a brown suit would respond, "I dunno. Did anybody see what happened?" Somebody in a black suit would answer knowingly, "I think somebody got the ball." No one in suits ever knew what happened; no one else ever spoke. Then it rained, the mums wilted, and everyone went home. Nobody ever figured out what
happened in the game, but that was hardly the biggest mystery of the
day as far as I was concerned. Where did they ever find all those
mums?

If the football game failed to grasp my attention I could always
engage in another popular Muncie pastime--drinking. I would hate to
try to figure out why people drink, but I suspect that it has something
to do with metabolism. People can get so bored that they are willing to
drink as much alcohol as they possibly can so they will have something
to do the next day. Of course, people say they drink to have fun.
If something is fun when they are sober, it is bound to be twice as fun
when they can't see to do it. Again, I can hardly knock the thinking;
I have used it more than once.

Drinking in bars is fun, but drinking at parties is even more
fun because the drinks are almost always on the house. Woe to the
unthinking soul who agrees to have the party, however, and I have
been unthinkingly adventurous enough to do so several times. The party
loses its flavor of adventure when I am the only party left in the
morning to wash the words off of the chalkboard, the kitchen table, and
the eggs in the refrigerator; to find my mother's doilies, which have
somehow gathered themselves from all over the house and crawled under
the cushions of the couch; to pack up the spare person found sleeping in the
spare bedroom; to clean up the vomit on the back porch; and to wash thirty
or forty glasses--if I am lucky enough to find them within the first
week after the party. Drinking has its ups and downs, so to speak.

The summer doldrums are always good for one expensive trip to the
Delaware County Fair. (I made this exciting trip once with a date who had
had his wisdom teeth out the day before--he couldn't eat, go on rides,
or throw pennies at plates. I've had better afternoons.) The fair is
made fun by the barkers, who stand in front of their various freak shows and call the pedestrians names. "Hey you! The tall, fat woman! Ya wanna be in my show?" The fair is also made fun by the rides which go in clockwise circles for twenty minutes at thirty miles per hour. And the fair is made fun by the food. What could be more thrilling than cotton candy, coke, caramel corn, and a cone of flavored ice followed by short hot dogs covered with cereal and stuck on long sticks?

That people in Muncie can find so little to do is demonstrated by the fact that not long after we moved here Muncie had the highest number of television sets per household than any city in the nation. While this is not one of Muncie's "average" traits, it is certainly one of its most telling. And when there is nothing for people in Muncie to watch on television, they go to Indianapolis. Maybe the reception there is better.

When people here get really, really desperate for activities, and I mean Desperate, they fall into a state known as the Tupperware Syndrome. This only happens when the bowling, pizza, putt-putt, drinking, football, movies, county fair, television, and leaving options are gone, and it is a sad thing to see a person who has contracted the disease. These people go to parties—make-up parties, jewelry parties, household parties, underwear parties, and, of course, Tupperware parties. I say again that I am hardly criticizing these people. I have been a victim of the Tupperware Syndrome myself.

I arrived early to my first Tupperware party. Not wanting to be late (what would people say?), I left my house at seven and pulled up next to a red, white, and blue basketball goal at only ten minutes after. And because I made my early entrance, I had the experience, known only to dealers and hostesses, of watching the Tupperware woman unpack her magic Tupperware bag. She smiled throughout the entire process. I know that people whose refrigerators and cabinets
are lined with those easily sealed, water and air tight wonders of modern kitchendom will be glad to know that Tupperware dealers really are perfect: they smile even when no one is there to watch.

This smiling woman unpacked her bag. It was an average-sized piece of luggage, with the approximate dimensions of a large suitcase. But it was also a magic, Mary Poppins satchel, full of more Wondelier Bowls, Jumbo Canisters, 18 ounce tumblers (the terms, of course, not mine) than an honest person has the right to imagine.

Guests began to arrive suddenly. Better timed than me, they appeared at the door in a group, all masters of some unspoken Tupperware code of etiquette. In a frenzied minute of motion, coats disappeared from shoulders, greetings were called across the room, and seats were taken. Instantly, the Tupperware dealer began to speak. Well, almost instantly. First, she smiled.

"Hello. I would like to thank Andrea for having this Tupperware party tonight so that I might be able to show all of you our fine Tupperware products." It was a decent opening, precise and well-spoken, but it was ruined by a knock at the back door. The dealer smiled. Our hostess ushered in a woman and her ten-year-old daughter, briefly introducing them as her new neighbors, and the late arrivals were motioned to chairs beside me.

"We're glad you could make it," the dealer beamed. "As I was saying, I would like to thank Andrea for having this Tupperware party tonight so that I might be able to show all of you our fine Tupperware products. But first, let's make sure everyone knows everyone else by playing a little name game. Each person goes around the room and gives her name, where she is going, and how she is getting there. But don't forget to remember the names of everyone who went before you," she added warningly. "I'll start. I'm Susan, and I'm going to
Sweden on a surfboard. Let's start over here." She gestured politely to her right. Those of us on the lift side of the room groaned.

The first woman began. "I'm Dottie, and I'm going to Albuquerque in a car. I'm from Albuquerque, you know."

"Well," the Tupperware woman smiled, "that's good, but be sure they all begin with the same letter."

The chastised woman tried again. "I'm Dottie and I'm driving to Denmark. I'm not from Denmark at all, though." She received an encouraging grin and continued, "You are Susan going to Sweden on a surfboard."

We went around the room slowly. The late arrival sitting next to me said, "I'm Annemarie and I'm going to Africa by air. And you're Clara going to . . ." She struggled for Clara's destination.

"California," her daughter whispered.

"California," the woman said suddenly. "In a car. Hannah is going to Hawaii by . . ."

"Honda," the daughter said.

"Honda," the woman completed.

The woman on my other side did much better, but then she had taken notes. The Tupperware woman noticed, but kept smiling.

Obviously, parties such as this are the absolute dregs from the bottom of the activity barrel, but this is what we let our narrow minds drive us to when we are so bored we would be willing to watch a two-hour Lawrence Welk special if it were available. Why do we allow ourselves to sink so low? What has happened to the American imagination? Where is innovation, creativity? I cannot be looked to for the answers; after all, I have spent the last few years of my life attending Tupperware parties.
The Tupperware Syndrome is indeed the saddest state of humanity. When we are willing to allow ourselves to cheat at games, to be amused at dishes, to adore the newest size tumbler, then we have lost all sense of what decent recreation can be. Of course, bowling is no great thrill either.
VI. DATING: Idiocy

If there were something good to say about dating it would have been said. The void of positive commentary on the subject of dating should be enough to warn anyone away from getting into the habit. Dating, in my black book, is idiocy. Dating is misery. Dating is synonymous with death, except that with dating there is more than one funeral per person.

I have rarely met a man I didn't like, but I have never met a date I could stand. Upon hearing this seemingly rash statement, people tend to nod sagely and comment negatively on my own proficiency as the dated party, and those people would be right: I am a horrible date. Anyone who has been on any of my dates, however, would understand why. I suggest that these people who are so openly critical try going out on this date:

You are freshly wrenched from the illusion of love when you discover that the last party your boyfriend took you to was a theme party: "bring the ugliest girl you can find." You are heartbroken, but when a young, plain but passable marketing student named Willy asks you to a movie you have no wish to see, you go. You are such a brave, young thing.

The movie goes well because neither of you speaks. You do not even touch elbows jostling for the single armrest between your seats because you both sit with arms crossed stoically over your respective breasts. After the movie, he takes you out for a pizza. He talks. You are bored. There is hope, you find yourself thinking over the monotone of his discussion of previous dates. After all, man is not only personality. He is—man. You are woman. Your city is your jungle. Let the natives
in your soul's speak out. He continues to talk and does not notice that you have not spoken since the pizza came.

He takes you home and you sit on your side of the seat tensely, hopefully. He pulls the truck up in front of your parents' house and turns off the engine with a final click. He moves across the seat and says your name in a soft, breathless voice. You think that you are about to discover Harlequin heaven. He puts his arm around your shoulder, his mouth to your ear, and whispers deeply, "Do you smoke pot?"

This is dating: all expectations and no results.

Many young women think that this sort of date will never happen to them, but the average woman should be smarter. So she may have really wanted to see the movie, but she will have been mistaken. So the pizza may be tacos and beer, but it will never be filet mignon. And the truck may be a station wagon, but it will always be his father's extra car. In case I have not made my point, I will give more examples.

My first date was in junior high, but unfortunately I do not remember it and only found out about it when I was a sophomore in college. I was walking out of speech class when a tall, decent-looking man came up to me and asked me if I had a sister. I offered both of mine, but he asked for one who went by another name—a name I had used in junior high but had not used since. I said yes, and started to tell him that the girl he knew was me, but he interrupted to inform me that he had taken her out in junior high. I started to laugh but managed to strangle instead. Here was someone I did not remember telling me he had taken me out. I did, in the end, remember who he was, but I have never remembered our wonderful date. He did not offer to help.

My second date, the first in memory, took place when I was a freshman in high school. I was asked to a movie by a senior who did not drive, and
my mother volunteered my sister to take us and pick us up. He paid for my ticket, which cost one dollar. I knew nothing about this person other than that he was a senior and three inches shorter than I was, but I thought the first out-weighed the second, at least by an inch or so. I did not know, of course, that he had never been on a date before, so when six or seven people came up to him before and after the movie to offer congratulations, I thought his mother must have had a baby. Of course, the next Monday I was known at school as the only girl stupid enough to go out with Henry Laudermilt. I swore I would never go out again.

My next date was forced upon me by an anxious young man who wanted to go out with my best friend. My best friend had wisely refused to go along unless I was present, so she wanted this caller to fix me up with his best friend. What are friends for? I suspected then and know now that they are certainly not for taking along on dates. Before I hung up from the phone call, I had the presence of mind to ask who my date would be. I am sure the man was smiling when he told me his best friend was Henry Laudermilt.

On this particular evening, Henry appeared in a fresh crewcut and flood-high, striped, bell-bottoms—and this was a time when crewcuts and bell-bottoms signalled candidates for the priesthood. Our first stop was the putt-putt golf course, where Henry got into a nasty verbal fight with the people behind us. (Henry's mouth, unlike his costume, would not get him through the front door of any seminary.) We then went to see a movie, during which my friend and Henry's friend began holding hands. Henry, trying to imitate his friend's romantic maneuvering, reached suavely over to me with his right hand and firmly grasped the top of my right forearm. We sat that way until I went to the bathroom, and when I returned (and after each of the other four times I returned from the
Finally, we went to get a pizza. Henry shared his favorite dirty jokes with us until the pizza arrived. He noted that the pizza at the next table looked like animal vomit (I would not say this if it were not true), that our drinks were made of prune juice, and that he knew of a restaurant in the same chain which had been closed when the health department had discovered that cat food was being used in place of hamburger. Even Dear Abby would not believe this date.

There have been other dates since, although I don’t know why I continually subject myself to the misery. I have been tricked into dates (examples: the time I was asked to go with someone to meet some “friends”—the friends being a bottle of wine and a county road, or the time I planned to go to a movie with a couple who forgot to tell me that it was a drive-in and that I was going in a separate car with someone’s brother). I have been forced to attend dates, bribed to go out, and occasionally, have dated voluntarily, but I have always left my house on date nights with the spirit of a sincere Kamikazee pilot.

Dating in this city, and in who knows how many others, has not been allowed to pass the boy-takes-girl-to-movie stage. When I "dated" I never thought much about the problems of being a "datee" as opposed to being a "dater." A few movies and pizzas back and a look at women’s suffrage convinced me that the ritual was useless while the roles were so forced.

Now that I am more able to pay my share I feel as though I have more choice in where I go and how long I stay. If I am especially wealthy, I can pay for the whole thing and not be obliged to thank anybody (unless I borrowed the money from my mother). Unfortunately,
being able to manage one's own share does not mean anything in the mid-west. Men are still so insistent on "taking care of" their dates that prolonged argument becomes ugly. They only seem willing to let the other party pay when it is personally practical—i.e. they are short of money—and then they seem especially eager to make sure the datee understands that lack of funds is the only reason. "None of that feminist crap for me," I was once told.

Unfortunately for the male ego, women have egos too, even in Muncie, Indiana. And if things so practical as splitting the bill, the pick of the movie, and the good times are reduced to that all-encompassing term "feminist crap," then Muncie and the cities it is supposed to represent are no havens for men and women who would like to have a nice evening without being overshadowed by the strain of the forced roles in traditional dating.

As it stands, dating at the casual stage IS idiocy, and there are too many people working awfully hard to prolong the pain of dates. And if one thinks it is easy for me to fight back, to change the process, I suggest that it would be easier to unite Protestants and Catholics in Northern Ireland. I am as much a part of the dating web as the next person because I was led to believe that men took women out, and so much for dating. Even though I know better, I find it much easier to give in when an argument comes up over the bill because I know it will be easier, more acceptable, if I do. Perhaps this is why I am such a terrible date: I am unable to work within or without the idiotic institution.
VIII. RELIGION: Winning the Bible

Religion is, of course, a stupid topic. Each person I have ever discussed religion with is as violently defensive of his opinion about religion as he is about the way he sees color. If I were to put two people in a room and ask them both to identify the color of the walls, and if one swore the room was red and the other staked his life that it was yellow, and if I knew that I had put them in a room of blue, how would we ever know which one of us was seeing the right color? Argument between the three of us would be stupid, because we would all be as certain we were right as we were that the others were wrong. And argument about religion, or more specifically, the church, is stupid, too.

I first went to church in Muncie, but it was too late; I had no chance to win the Bible. Our first-grade Sunday school class had contests each week on the names of the disciples, the ten commandments, and similar lists, and the child who won the most weekly contests won the Bible. As I said, I arrived too late to win, but even if I had been there on time I don't think I could have pitted myself against my fellow first-graders, who seemed to have been training since birth to win that Bible and, apparently, the salvation that went with it. I attended the church for two years until we moved across town. Having failed to win the prize either year, I refused to return.

In sixth grade, I began going to a different church of the same faith with a friend and her family. We eased into junior high attending each Sunday, sleeping through the sermons and becoming animated for Sunday school, where lively discussions on school, parents, and death held our attention. I stuck with it until I failed to win a Bible selling raffle tickets to the church fashion show.
My next attempt was in high school: new friend, new faith, same Bible. This time the contest was more interesting. The person who came to church the most times during the year won the holy book. So, I thought, here is a test of endurance. I managed to go to church every Sunday for a month, but failed—and lost—again. I decided that winning a Bible was not my calling.

I missed three more years of church. One Friday, when the Bible was the furthest thing from my mind, a fellow student invited me to go to his church the following Sunday. I declined, but when he mentioned the names of several other prominent students who agreed to go, I thought it sounded fun. I went. I learned, that Sunday, that I had until summer to repent for my sins, that people talking in tongues sounded like chipmunks, and that the word "hallelujah" could be said in any number of interesting tones. Two weeks later, I learned that my friend had managed to bring the most guests to Sunday school class for the entire year and had won, by a margin of one generous person, the Bible. I felt sold out.

Attending church was never very satisfying for me, but perhaps this is because I did it so sporadically (and never with the right holy spirit). I have been told that if I were to go to some churches regularly I would find myself actually listening to the sermons, actually willing to turn over a few dollars when the collection plate floated by, actually enjoying myself. Maybe this is true. My endurance level is so low, as demonstrated by my inability to win the Bible, that I am not sure how long it would take for me to become an active participant in a religious service. If it took until hell froze over, then I doubt that it would have been worth the effort.
I have discussed my attitude toward formalized religion with many, many people, nearly all of whom have accepted it very well—in private, at least. I hear many people agree with me privately who would publicly burn me alive for such heresy. I do not claim to understand their reasoning, nor do they claim to know why they act as they do. Usually, we simply agree to avoid the discussion of religion because talk, unlike the Bible, is cheap.

The point here, and there is one, is that I do not know why people go to church. Some say they go because it is the one place they feel they can hear decent music. Others I have talked with go to be seen, still others to see. The social side of church is surely one contribution to large attendance. Many go, they say, to be a part of what church heads constantly refer to as "community." I even know a few who go because they are inspired to go, just as I know people who are just as inspired but prefer to have their inspiration at home. Most people I have attempted to discuss this subject with say they go to church because the price is right—the friends, the music, the box seats, and the Bible are all things to be won for sitting in a pew an hour a week. I have not decided how I feel about such a bargain.

I must assume that people around Muncie are like people in many other places, and that when they tell me that they hate going to church but go anyway, they are speaking for many people. Of course, some would say that my sample is hardly representative of even Muncie's population, and that, as I am admittedly seeking the answer to a stupid question, I must be willing to accept the stupidity of the answer. True and true. But if people like going to church, why is it so necessary to bribe them with bibles and salvation to get them there?
If I were to ask that question in my informal surveys, I would get many, many answers, all of which would be completely true as viewed by the speakers. One would see yellow, some would see blue, and some would definitely see red and put me in the public stocks.

While I don't care to overdo the moral business here, I must add that I finally did receive a Bible from a man standing at a street corner passing them out to anyone who smiled. I took one. All of that trouble I had spent trying to win one went to waste.
VIII. WORK: A Philosophy for Life

I have earned money as a babysitter, music teacher, dishwasher, waitress, office worker, secretary, house sitter, and hostess—not in the professional sense, of course. Although I have nothing in my bank account worthy of ten years hard labor, according to the American prophecy, the wealth comes later. I am not stupid enough to ask how much later—that is part of the American Dream.

If work is something one does to develop a philosophy for life—and I remember some relative reminding me of this when I explained that I was too busy watching television to load a dishwasher—then I think the job which settled my future was my winter as Santa's elf in the Muncie Mall. I did not learn, however, that "labor is the source of all wealth and all culture," as Ferdinand Lassalle claimed. I learned, rather, that 75% of all children in the Muncie area are named Jennifer, Jason, Joshua, or Jeremy; that it is unwise to carry a lost, frightened child in my arms when he has to go to the bathroom; that those children who most want to see Santa Claus are dragged away without the chance; and that the children who are the most terrified of him are the ones most likely to be forced kicking and screaming onto his lap. The greatest thing I learned, though, is that just about anyone can be Santa Claus, and it is surprising to understand what an important fact this is to know.

Even Santa Claus has to keep a schedule. He came in daily at noon, at ten on weekends, and left when the stores closed. When he could not make it to work—due to problems in the stables or severe toy back-up—he sent a substitute. And our substitute had a substitute had a substitute. In fact, those three Santas had us fooled as to which one was the real Mr. Claus. After all, they were such unlikely angels.
One of them called himself Dusty when he wasn't in his red suit. I am not sure what sort of name Dusty is for a man who reputedly lives in the north, but he was so much a Dusty that I am unable to come up with a better one. He was just Dusty, and he was a medical student who showed quite an interest in the anatomy of the elves. The elves, however, were not inclined to respond to a man of Santa's hefty build. One day, while Dusty was driving home in his red cloth suit and his bowl full of jelly, his home television set exploded and took the house with it. Whether he liked it or not, Dusty was trapped in his role as Santa for several days. He shopped for clothing on his breaks, leaving parents to explain to confused children why Santa was shopping for men's suits, size 44, in Britts.

We had a second Santa whose name, thankfully, I have totally forgotten. He hated children and refused to speak to them if they pulled on his beard. He would not give children the plastic hand-puppets they earned for sitting on his lap because he found the harmless toys offensive. He would not keep kids on his lap long enough for the picture to be taken, which was just as well, since in the final prints he often looked more like an irked Charles Bronson than a jolly elf. This Santa owned a gay bar when he was out of his suit, and while I see nothing wrong with his owning a gay bar and being Santa Claus, I feel that I can hold it against him because he was such an awful Santa.

Our third Santa was much older. He had been retired for quite a few years before he decided to don beard and suit, so he had the age spots on his hands that indicated to children that he was a Santa to be trusted. While he had an excellent "Ho! Ho! Ho!," he was not a talkative Santa and often forgot to ask the children what they wanted for Christmas. If he was not an inspired Santa, however, he was an inspiring Santa.
He had more staying power, more willingness to have just one more sticky, 
crying child put on his already wet lap than any Santa I have met since. 
Sheldon, which was what he called himself when he was incognito, taught 
trancendental meditation. He offered us free lessons. 

I smiled a lot as an elf. On my resumé, the smile lives on as 
"public relations." When I took pictures by pressing a switch on a 
pre-focused camera hidden within the top button of a seven foot toy soldier, 
that came out as "photography." And when I took money for those pictures, 
I worked in "finances." The job was far from easy. It was difficult to 
explain to anxious children why they needed to stand in line for Santa while 
he ran into the nearest department store to "feed his reindeer." It was 
even harder explaining why Santa charged for his pictures. I seem to 
remember explaining to one snide parent that even Santa had an overhead. 

One evening, I found myself explaining to a young boy who sat perched 
in his father's arms that Santa needed to go home for the night to work 
on toy trains. I stood on the top of three steps which led down to 
Santa's royal chair and our seven foot toy soldier, and was separated from 
the boy and his father by a rope strung, unfortunately, so near the edge 
of the top step that I was balanced awkwardly on the balls of my feet. 
The boy seemed very upset by the news that someone else's toys were more 
important to Santa than a lonely child shopping in a mall past his bedtime, 
so with my best elfen smile I assured him that Santa might find a moment 
to spare, and, unthinkingly, I turned to call that tired old man. With 
the grace and dignity that only a person who has been 5'10" tall since age 
fourteen can have, I confidently fell backward. Since there were three 
steps behind me I hit three steps on the way down to Santa valley. My 
flimsy ankle twisted under me at the bottom, I crumbled into an unelf-like 
muddle of arms and legs, and I struck my head against the deeply stuccoed
wall behind me. I do not know whether I lost consciousness due to the blow or due to the embarrassment of staying awake.

Luckily for the continued narration of this story, I woke up, although at the time I had my doubts as to whether I was waking or being resurrected. I remember the haze, the persistent repetition of my name, the blur of faces. "Rae," called a deep, commanding voice, "can you hear me? Rae? Can you hear me, Rae?" I remember thinking that I was wrong, that there was a God after all, and that I went to heaven in spite of myself. I remember the floating, the peace, the insistent calling. "Rae? Can you hear me? Rae?" And I remember opening my eyes to see God, my savior, welcoming me to heaven. "Rae," he said, holding out his great, aged hands. And he was Santa Claus. I was thrilled. God was Santa, who was Sheldon, who would teach me transcendental meditation. It was all very clear.

If I had awakened to find that God was an oversexed medical student named Dusty or the owner of a gay bar, my current attitude toward the general condition of life might be different. As it is, my mind has been twisted by the philosophical implications caused by discovering that God is a sixty-nine-year-old man named Sheldon from Muncie, Indiana. I wonder if God and Santa are the same. And, if just anybody can be Santa Claus, then . . . . I took many philosophy classes in college to figure this one out. I still don't know.

If I learned nothing else in this job, I learned that knowing what I knew about Sheldon made things a great deal easier for me as an elf. When I consider how hard people work trying to get up the mainstream, to get a little more money or another car, to somehow get beyond the point at which they are, and when I think about how unsatisfied they can be, I remember Sheldon, who may not be God, but who was certainly
my savior at work. (I am allowed to be corny here because I am, after all, talking about Santa Claus.) Sheldon and his staying power and his ability to "Ho! Ho! Ho!" when others would have committed suicide at the thought of saying it fifty more times on a late Saturday afternoon, have made him one of my heroes. I knew when I began working there that I liked him, but I had to fall down a set of stairs to find out why—he was there.

He did not make that awful job any easier, but he made it bearable. And despite the triteness of the point, it is, I think, true: when people are stuck in nowhere jobs in nowhere places chasing some sort of dream, people like Sheldon help a great deal. If there is a philosophy involved in work, I hope it is that work may not, and with the current economy probably will not, get the worker six cars, two yachts, and a summer cabin on Lake Michigan, but there is hope if it can simply be stood, if people can do the dreary jobs day after day without jumping from the nearest building. While being Santa's elf was far from dreary, it was certainly not always fun. Admittedly, there are one or two children in Muncie who owe their lives to Sheldon, who stopped me from strangling them into silence. I had to nearly break my neck to understand what he was, but I was soon very relieved to realize that there was SOMEONE, at least, who understood—even if it turned out to be just another person. Today, of course, Sheldon is probably just another grumpy child-hater, but I would never, ever blame him if he were.
IX. EDUCATION III: Great Moments in Literature

In the newspapers I often read this pitiful sentence: "The people must be taught to read," and I say to myself, what shall they read? It is education and undesirable literature, these are our enemies.

Antonio de Oliveira Salaza
New York Post, August 10, 1938

I once heard of a student who was majoring in English but making terrible grades. When asked why he decided to study English in college when he was obviously so horrible at it, he responded that it had always been his worst subject and he thought the best way to improve would be to major in it. In that case, I think the poor man should have tried philosophy.

I did not go to college because I was so terrible in school that I thought it might somehow help my terribleness. I went to college because it was what was expected of me. "What will you do?" my parents demanded when I half-jokingly mentioned not going. I didn't know, I told them, but I imagined I would think of something. When I am at my poorest I sometimes wish I had.

I started out in journalism, much as everyone who has ever worked on a high school paper starts out college in journalism. I took two classes and became bored with writing two word, one sentence paragraphs. I knew I would never last. I tried to think of something more stimulating. I happened to be a student secretary for a professor in the English Department at the time I was making this important decision, so I carefully considered my options and decided upon English. After all, I already knew someone there.

For those people who don't find English stimulating, I'm very sorry. Obviously, they did not have the professor who noted that Charles
Darwin and the first printing press in England were contemporaries, or the professor who asked questions on a test about a book which had never appeared on the syllabus. These people were never asked questions about the mysterious dentist in *The Great Gatsby*, a dentist who, in fact, never existed except as an optometrist on an aging advertisement. The people who are not stimulated by English have never been allowed to write a conversation between Abraham and Isaac on the way down the hill, perhaps the greatest conversation in literature never written. People who don't like English have never confused Hester Prynne with A. Gordon Pym and have never thought that Benjamin Franklin was referring to dieting problems when he wrote that "a fat kitchen makes a lean will." And finally, a student who has never studied English will never know the feeling of reading the last page of *Moby Dick*, and I can promise that closing that book after the last page is the greatest moment in literature.

Class discussions about literature are guaranteed to be interesting. I remember well the day we were discussing a section in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* in which a traveler tells a story about three men who seek gold but find only death. The professor, anxious to relate the day's lesson to real life, looked eagerly out of his notes. "How many of you have seen a dead body?" he wanted to know. A couple of students hesitantly raised their hands. He nodded and asked, "Have any of you seen more than one?" A lonely hand rose only inches from a desk. "What did they die of?" he asked. The student swallowed and mumbled something. "Oh. Well, have you ever seen one who died of ...?" he began. Chaucer was gone for the morning.

English professors are always longing to relate literary experiences to real life experiences. Just when someone's head is being carried in on a platter to be served to a king, a professor is bound to look up and
say, "Isn't that just like a man?" Or a professor will look up from a Poe story and say with complete seriousness, "If anyone here has ever been tied to a bench and had rats crawling all over him while a swinging pendulum comes closer and closer and will soon cut through his chest, he will know what Poe is saying in this story." Other good statements or questions include "How many of you have ever ridden down the Mississippi on a raft with an escaped slave?" and "Isn't this a nice phrase: 'A loaf of bread, a jug of wine, and thou.' If you have ever been hungry, thirsty, and in love the sentiment may sound familiar." and "Those of you with illegitimate children understand what Hester is feeling." Of course, the best way an English teacher can reach his students is to anticipate their emotions so that he can agree with them. He is bound to gain popularity if he says, "I know that this author is simply wretched, but as he is considered to be a major writer of the period I'm afraid we'll all just have to bear with him, shall we?"

The best professors, however, are those who become so involved with the literature they are discussing that they temporarily forget about the students and begin to give impassioned lectures about the work. When waving hands interrupt them they usually feel so guilty at talking so long that they call on the hands instantly. The hands and the people attached have questions aroused by the diatribe, and interesting, almost spiritual discussions are begun on even the most earthly sections of literature. Hours are spent discussing the significance in the color of a heroine's dress or the number of times a villain says "uh."

I would not have missed literature for anything. I had anticipated having a sincere hatred for college--mostly because I had no choice about going--but I did not, because I ended up in a field in which I was interested. I suppose I might have turned myself into a business
major, if I had tried, but I would have dreaded each class and been wealthy only a few years after graduation. Apparently, I did not want to escape my background badly enough to sacrifice my interests. I certainly wouldn't have sacrificed the Darwin-era printing press for a calculator or a one sentence paragraph, even though one is more accurate and the other more precise.

Surprisingly enough, there is quite a respectable amount of decent reading material out there, and only a little of it could be called "undesirable." And although reading it may doom one to the middle-class poverty group for life, it can hardly be looked upon as an enemy.
When I was in seventh grade, my plans for my future included children preceded by a husband, a three-bedroom house, a dishwasher, three or four television sets, a tasteful dining room suite, a complete set of china, a lawnmower not inclined to catch fire, no steps to fall down, no church to attend, a nice if dull part-time job with talkative people, and lots of friends, to invite to my Tupperware parties in my Muncie home. When I was a high-school junior, I looked forward to becoming a musician, a novelist, a famous indoorswoman, an exotic dancer, a mass murderer—anything that would make me stand out from every other WASP in the neighborhood. What caused this dramatic change in attitude? Muncie: Home of the Average.

Living here did change my attitudes. While I might have fought against the middleness of my life in any other average-sized city, it is because it was so emphasized here that I fought so hard. When I was in elementary school, I worked to be with the crowd; when I was in junior high school I worked to stay in the crowd, and when I was in high school I worked to escape the crowd. And all along there were other people in the crowd just like me working to be in just the same places I wanted, and so even in my goals I was the same.

I did not rebel against the symbol of Muncie for the same reason I did not rebel on dates: the line. One does not rebel; to stay on the good side of the line one must work within the system to change the system. Here, though, there is no system to be changed, only a naked idea that has been clothed by strangers who do not even understand the styles. And if we strip the idea back down, what will we find? Maybe there will just be more dates like mine, more work experiences like mine. Maybe there will be nothing like anything I have described, and I will find
that I am not average after all.

The assumption that I was should never have been made in the first place. What the average Joe American thinks and does and whether or not I fill the bill is a question which should not have been asked—because there is no average. If every statistic were gathered about every human being in the United States, every piece of information on what they wear, how many times a day they eat, what car they drive, what sort of toothpaste they use, where they work, how much money they make, how tall they are, how many divorces they have survived, how many legitimate children they have borne, how many television sets they own, what brand of underwear they buy, and how many times they go to the bathroom per day, and if all of this information were tallied by a computer trained to spit out the average for each item, and if all of the averages were tallied to describe the real average family, then the researchers armed with the information would be hard put to find that family. Even if they could locate the perfectly average family, they would have trouble getting that family to admit to their averageness, unless, of course, the interviewers were poking television cameras at them while asking.

Poor researchers. The answers to their questions are not to be found anywhere, not even in Muncie, Indiana, Ball jar capital of the world. After all, the researchers themselves do not even know what they are looking for. Do they want the stagnant, the average, the stand-outs in a stagnant but average society? Do they seek my friend, or do they seek her wealthy neighbors? And, in the end, why do they seek anyone? What is it in us that makes us want to find the answer most people choose, the brand of peanut butter most mothers prefer, the type of car most families drive? I suppose that our fascination with the "mosts," the "averages," and the middle class comes from our need for knowing where
we stand. We make more money than Joe; we should be glad. The Nelsons are so wealthy; we are surely being cheated by the American economy.

I am afraid that the average person researchers seek is a twentieth century unicorn, a single-horned, goateed, off-white creature whose best description can be found in a beastiary. The only way to capture this unicorn is through treachery—the trusting creature will believe it is a common house dog if we tell it so. Tell it a lie and it will follow you anywhere.

The melodrama of the average man is over, and I refuse to allow it to affect me any longer. I am ready, now, to go back to age three, to walk, talk, eat, and go to the bathroom without worrying about potential social repercussions. I am eager to throw Tupperware parties so that I can harass hostesses, to go on dates in x-rated bookstores or, if I choose, to play putt-putt, catch a show, and have a pizza. If the mood strikes me, I will go back to college and study chemistry or physical education (and cut classes), or I will try church again without even the hope of winning the Bible. Or I will sit at home in Muncie knitting afghans for grandchildren. Whatever.

Of course, I must finally admit that this whole thing was an immense lie. The truth is that if someone were to ask me about Muncie, I would not be able to tell him about the national average at all. I simply don't know it. Instead of asking me about Muncie, I wish he would ask me about where I grew up. "Here," I would say, "and it wasn't too bad."