

**Nodding off in the Unemployment Line:  
Coping with the New American Prosperity**

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I've been unemployed for three months. My last paycheck came on March 20, funded by the final month of my contract with Shoin Women's University, in Kobe, Japan. I had accepted an 18-month visiting professorship teaching English there in the summer of 1995. At that time, I had been employed only part-time in various academic institutions in the Kansas City area, and it took 3 jobs, on three separate campuses in two states, to yield about \$2400 a month, gross. Shoin's offer of \$100,000 over the year and a half, including a generous bonus and research grant, sounded like a major step upward, even if it were temporary. And it added the irresistible bonus of living in that enticing, but unknown, culture. Since leaving the U.S. in 1995 also meant cutting all my vocational ties to institutions back here, I was replaced in those schools before my tray was in the upright and locked position prior to take-off.

I've been looking, and was even invited to an interview at an employment service, Excel. They had advertised for someone who could write lessons and exams for an insurance school, and I faxed them my resume immediately. When I arrived (early) for my appointment the next day, my customary beard was still growing back as unsightly stubble after a sartorial misunderstanding in Thailand had left me clean-shaven a couple of months before. I looked like someone from the City Union Mission who had, unaccountably, found a blue suit and power tie to wear that day. Rather than interview me right away, I was given a battery of standardized tests to take, with questions such as, "When is it permissible to steal from an employer?" The answers offered were something like: A. Never; B. When your family really needs it; C. When everyone else at work is doing it, too; D. When your boss has pissed you off. After my exam was graded,

my interviewer went over the “problem areas” the test appeared to reveal. My intolerance of bullshit other than my own seemed to be off the scale, and I was significantly less respectful of ignoramuses with authority than they liked. Apparently, a prospective employer has a right to ask someone as personal and insulting a set of questions as it can devise, in the empty hope that it can weed out - what? What are those kinds of tests supposed to reveal? Thieves and embezzlers? Or merely the mildly malcontent, like the man videotaped taking a leak in his company’s coffee pot? A more useful test, from my point of view, would be a psychological profile of a long-term worker, if there are any left, at the company where I am applying. What has the job done to someone’s spirit and judgment? As much as the employer wants to know what kind of bozo they’re likely to have sitting at a desk if they hire me, I want to know what kind of bozo I’m likely to become if I sit at one of their desks for any significant amount of time. It’s only fair, which means it will never happen in a million years, at least in the current job climate which has skewed all significant notions of ‘fairness’ to the benefit of the employer. Nowadays, the individual takes his or her chances when they apply for a position somewhere. All you are likely to know are the strictly biographical data about the job: wage, hours, duties, location. But an employer is allowed to extract far more than simple description from a person who is looking for a job. The computer-generated test of one’s private proclivities, as administered at the Excel agency, is an unfair delving; a shameless fishing expedition into the minds of people too cowed to object. And I’m one of them. I’m also skeptical of the accuracy of these tests, but what is most important is that companies seem to have been convinced of their utility, as well as their predictive power. As long as people **believe** it’s accurate, it finally will **be** accurate. How will they know? They have test results to prove it.

We eventually got to the position in question. Pam (my interviewer) seemed to think that my resume needed some spiffing up before forwarding it on, and wanted to know if there was any other experience relevant to the advertised job I might be able to substitute for all this wasted time teaching at colleges and universities. I mentioned that I once had a license to sell life insurance in the state, and she acted like Dennis Rodman upon hearing that a new color had been discovered in the spectrum. It went in, teaching Western Civilization at the University of Kansas went out. I told her I'd fax her the revised sheet that afternoon, and I did. She was to send it over to the company and then get back to me by the end of the week. That was 2 months ago, and I'm still waiting to hear from her.

Neglect has been an ongoing theme of this adventure. While I have applied for dozens of actual advertised positions, sending laser-printed cover letters and newly relevant resumes prepared especially for the position in question, few places even deign to acknowledge receipt of the documentation, let alone eventual word of my insufficiency. I haven't just sent out a blizzard of resumes to every warm-body ad in the Sunday paper, either. If I cannot make a strong case for my candidacy, either in a cogent cover letter, or an objective view of my credentials, I don't waste anyone's time. But that has still left about 30 jobs and 5 employment agencies burdened with my need for work, and only 3 outright rejections. Three more places informed me that my application was being considered, but nothing beyond that was said, and one of those notices arrived two months ago. Apparently, leaving prospective employees twisting in the wind is considered standard business practice nowadays.

Already we've had to raid our IRAs for living expenses, and that money is running low. My wife, Mata, works day and night trying to sell insurance, consolidation loans, homeowners

and auto insurance, as well as mutual funds for Primerica Financial Services, the blue-collar marketing arm of Travelers, but her gross commissions over these three months have been \$300. If they just paid her 50 cents an hour for all the damned meetings they make her go to we could probably make the monthly nut. She's at one tonight, went to one yesterday morning, and will attend two more on Thursday and Saturday. Then she held her **own** meeting for associates of hers on Sunday night. I've never met a meeting that was worth the time I spent in it, and Primerica meetings actually outdo the government varieties, to which I had been a reluctant attendee for many years, for stultifying drivel. It seems a dependable rule that the more meetings an organization schedules for its members, the less it trusts them to do what they are expected to do. That feeling of mistrust seeps directly into the morale of the organization, deflating it. Of course, the remedy for that condition felt to be **more** meetings, demoralizing the troops further. It ends with the death of the organization, or at least the avowed goal of the organization, which has by then become to have as many meetings as possible, under as many different bogus pretexts as can be foisted off onto the recipients. Or it becomes a revolving-door organization, with people becoming rapidly disenchanted with being treated like irresponsible four year olds, and leaving disgruntled. I'm not sure which one Primerica is, but it sure has Mata hooked. I sometimes thinks she needs 'deprogramming' before she'll be able to function effectively in the world outside Primerica. But first, she has to be convinced that there's anything outside the Primerica circle worth the trouble.

Wednesday, June 25, 1997

Yesterday I finished reading *Locked in the Cabinet*, by Robert Reich, Secretary of Labor during Clinton's first term. I like Reich, and also what he stands for, and the book is wonderful;

fully deserving its residence in the bestseller list. But it is not a reassuring read for the unemployed. Of course, Reich landed on his feet; he's not that far from the floor, anyway. But any commitment to jobs with a future in this country seems to have disappeared.

Funny thing. My 30 year old son, Jake, got married for the second time this past weekend. He asked me to be Best Man -- a real bolt from the blue. We've always been cordial with each other, but never exceptionally close. Not distant, necessarily, but not bosom buddies, either. He has several friendships which have endured all kinds problems, mostly self-inflicted by one or both of the principals, but, in the end, I got the call. I can't tell you how flattered I was. Jake is an auto mechanic. He works at a Midas shop in Raytown, an eastern suburb of Kansas City. He's taken several specialized courses over the years, and has blossomed into quite a skilled worker. His graduation from high school, however, was through the grace of a few teachers who conceded a 'C' or maybe even a 'D' to him, just to punch his ticket and send him into the world.

He has always loved tinkering with cars, as well as most things mechanical; I've always loved thinking about things. We both decided to pursue what we loved, but the routes to those loves were different. He chose training over education; I decided on the opposite. Now he's employed, and if Midas sacked him today, he could be working somewhere else doing the same thing tomorrow. Literally. I have a B.A. and M.A. in philosophy, and a lot of hours past the M.A., I've taught philosophy at four different institutions around here, all temp jobs, plus the gig in Japan, and that doesn't amount to what an employer today wants: a definable, specialized **skill**, which I've been paid by someone to use. I've had photographs published, my written works performed on stage, put out my own newsletter in the early 1980s, wrote and edited a

weekly newspaper in the mid-'70s on Wake Island, and I can whip everyone's ass thoroughly on *Jeopardy!*, at least when they give me a buzzer that works. But I am lacking some sort of rote, automaton-esque skill, at least one in which I have been gainfully employed.

While I was in graduate school, the Hyatt took me on one summer as second-string somellier, since I have had a reputation as Wine's Bad Boy in Kansas City. But the Hyatt had a medieval idea of compensation where wine sales in their restaurants was concerned, and keeping the bills paid was not easy for those three months. In addition, the company is pathologically hair-averse, and required that I remove all plumage which was, in their estimation, optional. I fully expected a leg and armpit check on my first day, but they only wanted to 86 my beard/mustache combo, which was more than Mata could stomach. It may be a warning sign to a marriage when your wife informs you that the less of your face is visible, the better she likes it. Her way of saying it was by commenting that, without my beard and mustache, I looked like Roger Ebert. Since I doubt that she falls asleep at night with visions of a blubbery boinking by Siskel's sidekick, I try to avoid employment by places with rigid ideas of what constitutes acceptable grooming.

Last week, I decided to tackle the "philosophy problem" head-on in my cover letter to prospective employers. Of course, I never get my case before a prospective employer; my package gets speed-read by a drone in Human Resources with one eye on the Ricki Lake Show, or perhaps some internet smut, and that's that. So I've taken out my usual couplet of begging, fawning, and pleading, and added a paragraph about why a philosopher is what this job (any job!) needs. I talk about a philosophical education, particularly at the graduate level, concerning itself with analysis of language and its meaning, and leading the practitioner to a life of organized,

rational thought, and no close friends or family. Perhaps it's too early to know whether a return to groveling is in order.

I've always thought what I had to offer would be a good fit in a law office, or some environment where the legal process is at its center. Yet my most rapid rejection letters have been from law firms, and I've received multiple ones from Shook, Hardy, and Bacon, in Kansas City. They have advertised for an Analyst, no previous experience in the law required. The job specifications sounded like a great fit, and I would guess the salary would be respectable, but every time I sent in my paperwork, a quick nix was in the mail. I think I know the reason now. My specialty in philosophy is ethics, and I emphasize that on my resume. Shook, Hardy makes a significant part of its living defending large companies in product liability actions. Big Tobacco is onboard, and the firm is also currently doing something to keep a pharmaceutical company from paying off the halt and the lame who apparently took their medication. Anyone with a professionally developed moral sense might be regarded as a liability himself in an office charged with the duty of finding any possible way of letting a company under suit skate away. While I would bring my ethics to work, I wouldn't keep them lying on my desk, in plain view, unless that was what I was being paid to do. Like a woman who packs a canister of Mace, or pepper spray in her purse, it's only there in case of imminent threat to self or what one holds valuable.

A little more than 25 years ago, when my first wife was divorcing me in Los Angeles, I had to devote a significant amount of time reading the Sunday L.A. *Times* in search of employment. At the time, I was a student in a prestigious, and expensive, art school, using G.I. Bill payments and my wife's secretarial salary to keep us in our Redondo Beach apartment. Of course her expulsion of me from the marriage meant an end to other than state-sponsored

education. By the second week of reading through the ads, an oppressive weight of depression settled upon me. It wasn't just the divorce which dispirited me. My wife was making me feel worthless, and that was bad enough, but it was only one person, focused and isolated. Like a dread infectious disease kept in check with a rigorous quarantine. Reading through the want ads made me realize that the entire commercial world believed as well, and also sight unseen, that I was worthless. None of the jobs sounded like I was the person they were looking for. I was an outsider to the grinding away of commerce. That's not an unfamiliar feeling, but is seldom a reassuring one.

What I ended up with, in the bitter summer of 1971, was a route delivering the Los Angeles *Times* to 300 subscribers seven days a week in the smallest 4-wheel Honda ever made, the 600 model sedan. On Sundays, I had to go back to headquarters and reload three times. I also transferred to a state college, Cal State Dominguez Hills, and switched majors to Philosophy. In a few months, I was hired as a scab at the L.A. Zoo, driving a tram and narrating about the passing scene. Every time I find myself forced by circumstances to read the Help Wanted ads in the Sunday paper, I pledge that this is the last time, just as I did in California. I guess it never will be. Those pages are a chronicle of despair. I have been reduced to it far too often in my life, and I would think that the effect it had on me each time would cure me of ever placing myself in that position again. But again, I assume the position. In Japan, I found that nearly **no** white-collar job advertised publicly is ever filled through that medium. Is it the same in the states these days? As far as I know, it could be, since my appeals have all been barren.

My son-in-law, Chuck, is an intelligent public high school graduate (no oxymoron is too preposterous for me), and after resigning a job with the city, which seemed to have a lot of

security and a modicum of prospects, he has been able to hook onto positions in various places without much trouble. One advantage he seems to have on the asset side of the ledger is a network of friends and family who look out for his best interests, and send him toward likely sources of a paycheck.

I have 2 friends: Bill and Inga, and they are not in contact with each other. Nor are they with me, except sporadically. Bill has big piles of money, but is greatly distracted, and full of professed good intentions to use his influence and contacts in my interest, but no follow-up. Inga is in professional school to become a licensed physical therapist, has two grade school children, and tries to scrape by on food stamps. She's a former college ethics student of mine, so there's no hanky-panky of course. Non-ethics students have to watch their drawers, though. These two friends are in very different loops, but neither of those loops, nor my friend within, seems to work toward my eventual employment, not that they have an obligation to do so. But that is an avenue toward productive contacts, used by many people today, which eludes me.

Thursday, June 26, 1997

It's 11:00 A.M., and my day is over. This morning, I attended a job fair in the Overland Park Marriott, and it was a sobering experience. Not that I went there in the bag, but I am tempted to tie one on in reflection. If this represented the array of jobs being actively solicited today, it ran the gamut from A to B, to steal a wonderful line. Retail sales and telemarketing were the *alpha* and *omega* of this affair, with a cameo appearance by employment agencies. At 56, I was probably the oldest job-seeker in attendance, at least in the first hour the doors were open. Perhaps some older codgers will show up after noon, squeezed into their Depends, and with drool recently sponged from their lapels. I guess, to many of the young people there on

either side of the booths, I looked like the Ghost of Employment Past. I am, instead, the Ghost of Employment Future, but I fear they are too naive to recognize it. In the future, everyone will be a 'temp.' Even those personnel types who were recruiting us temps will be temps themselves. Maybe they already are. I would guess that most people there as representatives were temps, but didn't know it yet. I have unwittingly discovered a cardinal rule of work today: to your employer, you are a temp.

It was hard to make a case for myself to people who glanced at my resume. I could tell them of the abilities I had -- to analyze, to write, to speak, to distinguish between a Chateauf-du-Pape and Hermitage in a blind tasting. But as soon as they saw what I had done and what my education had encompassed, I could literally see all remaining signs of life drain from their eyes. The unscalable wall went up, and no number of impassioned reprises of "The Impossible Dream" would get me over it. If there wasn't a direct, linear connection between what I had done and what they wanted done, I was to be politely repelled like a Jehovah's Witnesses visitation. No one was there to help me bridge the chasm between what I could do, and what they had predetermined that they wanted in a candidate, and I couldn't do it alone. Employment, even at this preliminary stage, is a 2-way street; you can't be a seller if there's no buyer. While they acted as if they were buyers, their shopping lists were all nearly interchangeable, and with little latitude for surprises. The guest lists they had drawn up mirrored the monotony of what I suppose could be termed entry-level commerce. They were there to find people who would work cheap and long, and follow the script. I tried to convey my flexibility in salary and job description to all I met, but all they saw were difficulties to overcome in fitting someone like me into their team. At one overtly "academic" company, a computer training franchise operation, I

actually had to force the woman there to take my resume. She was looking for eager, market-saturating sales wonks, and someone who does teaching, testing, and evaluating as a profession was not interesting to an alleged educational venture. The agencies are my only hope from this morning.

Friday, June 27, 1997

TGIF. For most working stiffs, the weekend means an escape from the drudgery of the weekly grind, to be able to hide from the facts of what occurs during the other 5 days a week by mowing the lawn, cooking out, maybe visiting the grandkids. For me, the weekend means escape from the guilt and shame of the work week in which I have again failed. Failed to find a job, failed to carry my weight in the family, failed myself.

Mata never seems to have these kinds of intense feelings of self-loathing upon reflection of her inability to lasso a paycheck on a regular basis. For women in society, at our stage of evolution, employment is still a **psychological** option. I don't mean to claim that most women don't have a material necessity for a paycheck. More than half the adult females in this country **must** work, and that's a recent development, at least in evolutionary time. When a woman can't find a job, she may become angry, frustrated, and correctly though sadly perceive her value in the world of commerce to be minuscule. But I doubt that the inner scars that unemployment causes men is ever experienced by women. I think the reason for that is that one's fundamental self-image is formed socially and biologically. Men have evolved, in nearly every society, as the providers, and some of the inner motivations to succeed in that role have been the useful emotions of shame and guilt. Well, useful in moderation. There is something so deeply embedded in the male psyche about being the provider, that one's own spiritual and emotional

survival is defined by one's success in that venture. I think women have the same problem with child-bearing. All the talk about the "biological clock" is very convincing to me, and I have a great deal of sympathy for women who, though attune to its ticking, find themselves unlikely to do its bidding. Biology has outfitted them to that role, exclusively, and society has placed upon them the expectations that they will fulfill it. More shame and guilt. Men have to work. Not just as an economic necessity, but as a route to inner peace. No, I have **not** spoken with Robert Bly recently, and don't care to.

I'm not exactly sure what I will do this weekend, but at least I can do it knowing that no job opportunities are probably passing me by as I turn a critical eye toward the vegetables at the City Market on Saturday morning. By Sunday, the old dread will begin to build, since the want ads beckon, leeringly. Stoking the false hopes to be quickly doused by the impassive eye of the human resources specialist, or slowly smothered by silence.

Saturday, June 28, 1997

Today I'll take pictures of a wheelchair softball tournament for my brother-in-law, Bobby. He's not only the organizer, but also one of the participants, having become a paraplegic several years ago as a result of an accident with his employer of the time. One of the reasons I am not a great business success is my unwillingness to make much money off family and friends. I'd rather give stuff away than sell it, and have been doing it all my life. This has, at times, led to some marital strife which was far from fleeting. Bobby wants photos of the action which he could use later for publicity and a brochure he intends to print in 1998, for fund-raising purposes. He also claims an intention to compensate me for my troubles, as well as help me contact other participants who might want to purchase prints. I'm not a professional photographer, though I

play one on TV. I went to that art school in L.A. as a photography major, leaving me a capable amateur under optimum conditions, and I usually don't embarrass myself. But acceding to Bobby's request was more to feel like I was **doing** something, rather than sit home on another Saturday watching the robins cover my picnic table with shit.

Sunday, June 29, 1997

The want ads were bleak, and wanting. Two marginal possibilities out of 34 pages of listings: a "trainer" so vaguely described in the brief entry so as to leave open the possibility that toilet training was being requested; and a glorified paper-pusher, with the requisite glorified title to match: Executive Assistant for Research Operations. Thirty years ago, the identical position would have been called 'secretary.' Bobby made the 6:00 O'clock news last night on the NBC affiliate, but his evanescent second of fame will not lure me out to Swope Park for the last day of the softball tournament. I shot too much film for someone down on his luck and not likely to get sufficiently reimbursed for his troubles, and I also neglected to make sunscreen a part of my Saturday ablutions. I am cooked, lacking only a resilient exoskeleton to make my lobster impersonation a winner.

This morning, with Mata in church, praying either for my improved luck in job hunting, or for a completely employed man to take her away from all this, I answered the phone to an unfamiliar voice. Not unknown, but not one I had recently heard. She is Margot, a former student from Rockhurst College, now nearly the end of her M.A. quest at the University of Missouri. We had e-mailed a couple of times when I was in Japan, but it had been nearly a year since our last contact. In the spring of 1995, when we were both finishing up at Rockhurst -- she, getting her degree; me, being informed that my situation there would be a victim of declining

philosophy enrollments -- she told me about a secondary school in California which was interested in incorporating philosophy, particularly values and reasoning, into its regular curriculum. We had conversations about how much we felt that level, or even at junior high, was a natural place to begin exposing kids to the tools and methods taught by philosophy.

Most public schools seemed to be unlikely places to spread this kind of sedition, especially since the commercial presence in American education was on the increase. Now that's a trend I find chilling. The education which leads to a good citizen differs greatly from that required for a good consumer. At least, 'good' from the perspective of the seller, in that latter instance. A good citizen needs to be able to think critically about the choices he or she must make, and also be able to know what constitutes a set of consistent, rationally defensible public values. I believe that to be a major task of public education, and one which has been completely neglected in this country. An apathetic citizenry is made, not born. H.L. Mencken once described in a different context what is needed to be the kind of consumer business requires: a limitless capacity to believe the incredible. He called it the source of all our national problems, and it is hard to disagree. It's also hard not to observe that the average product of our public educational system possesses that capacity bountifully.

The school Margot had heard about in 1995 was located near Lake Arrowhead, in the mountains of southern California. Her sister was an administrator for them, and Margot offered to hand-carry my resume to her when they got together in Washington, D.C. in June of that year. Of course, I was happy to let Margot tote my baggage, but that was that. I heard nothing from them, though, upon her return, Margot glowed with the encouraging reports that I was just the person they were looking for. Within a month, Shoin beckoned from Japan, and I signed a

contract with them, and faxed it off to Kobe, on Monday, August 7. On Tuesday, the 8th, someone from the school in California called me with an offer to fly me out for an interview. I was the only one being considered for the position, which had lucrative permanency written all over it. Unfortunately, the caller confessed, they had intended to contact me much sooner, but my name and dossier had fallen through the cracks, and only recently had been retrieved. I told her about the visiting professorship for which I had just signed on the dotted line, and that I would honor the contract in Kobe. She said that what I was being considered for had no rigid start date or time, and that we could postpone the interview until my 18 months in Japan was over. Such a deal! I could have a year and a half at Shoin, and then come back to something both interesting and challenging in the states. I told Judy, the California contact, that she and I should stay in contact while I was overseas, which would be a relaxed way of getting to know the job and the applicant, and seeing how the fit developed.

Judy's corresponding turned out to be brief, annual in frequency, and not very informative. Suddenly, in mid-summer of last year I got a preprinted **postcard** from the school's headquarters in Idaho saying that my application had been reviewed and that they had no need for me at the present time. I e-mailed Margot with this discouraging news, but she told me it was certainly a mixup, and that I should write to her sister directly -- at her home -- to straighten this mess out. I did, twice, but got no response from her, and when I e-mailed Margot about these non-developments last fall, I never heard from **her** again, at least until this morning.

My rich and creative streak of paranoia, never far below the surface in the best of times, began to weave last winter a totally unsubstantiated web of treachery and deceit. Of course, Margot had taken the job I had originally been earmarked for. She conveniently used my 18

months in Kobe as an opportunity to add a little more educational qualification to her own resume, and then used nepotism to usher me from the scene like a shit-faced heathen at the Sunday School picnic.

Apparently, my fictional excesses had no basis in fact, if today's call is to be credited. Her sister jumped ship this year to another school, just being built in Oregon. They need a director of curriculum and an all-around utility teacher for the first few years. That's one body, by the way. I was urged to contact Margot's sister at once. And will do so on the morrow.

Last night, Mata and I had dinner with our only upscale friends, Bill and Gloria, plus Louis and Philomene, at the latter couple's loft apartment in downtown Kansas City. We are never likely to be in B&G's league, financially, and while Louie and Philly talk a strong down-amongst-the-masses talk, they walk the walk of the affluent. At a party, just after I returned from Japan this spring, Philomene and I had an interesting conversation. She seemed to have a moral dilemma, and I appear to be the on-call professional ethicist in that circle, especially for religious slackers. It is a poorly compensated professions at parties, I add, knowingly. Philomene is a phenomenal artist, of more than local renown, and Louis is an excellent, if less well-known, painter. His dogs playing poker series contains images so lifelike you can smell the doo-doo from across the room. One year, for his birthday, I gave him an ornately wrapped collection of as many kinds of erasers, correction fluid, and other species of graphic mistake eliminators as I could find. He still talks about it. Through clenched teeth. Philomene's ethical quandary was of a different sort. Galleries in various parts of the country were able to sell her paintings readily, often for five-figure amounts, and she was being pressured to crank out more work than she felt she could comfortably call 'art.' I don't recall what I advised her, but I do remember feeling

good that she saw it fundamentally as a moral and aesthetic problem to be confronted, rather than a business and logistical opportunity to address.

Wednesday, July 2, 1997

The summer heat has relented tonight into mere swelter, and I am sitting on the front porch, in the glider, my computer unplugged, like Eric Clapton, but just briefly. I can escape the heat, but I cannot escape my situation. I keep thinking it is temporary, like the lines attributed to W. C. Fields being told by a dowager that he was drunk. He is said to have retorted that she was ugly, and that by the next day he would be sober, but she'd still be ugly. Which am I? Well, thanks to some 1986 Johnson Turnbull Cabernet Sauvignon, I am a little of each. But is my unemployment destined to be an Elephant Man-like permanent condition, or merely a passing buzz?

Margot never did e-mail me her sister's address, and Margot's phone is unlisted, and also unknown to me. Is a hidden agenda being played out here? This is certainly a night for unanswerable questions. Since this is the third time she or her sister has dropped the ball where my potential paycheck is concerned, a seemingly unrelated fact has resurfaced in my conscious. She once confided in me, with a steely gaze it should be added, that the B+ I gave her in Philosophy of the Human Person was the only B she had received in her entire college years. I attribute it to my belated attempts to counter grade inflation. Has she, having enlisted her sibling, embarked on a lifelong vendetta for the unpardonable sin of objective evaluation? Of course, there are other, and at least equally plausible explanations for Margot's inaction. Perhaps she and her sister share a genetic predisposition to sloth. Perhaps my vocational well-being is much farther down the list of their priorities than Margot makes it sound. A paranoid mind is a terrible

thing to waste, which is why this journal has come into being.

Thursday, July 3, 1997

Tomorrow we'll probably go to North Kansas City for an annual party at the house of Tex and Peggy on Lake Waukomis. It's a potluck afternoon feed for people I have never seen, followed by a fireworks show memorable only to the very young and impressionable. We'll take sushi, and I'll leave my camera at home. Mata will deposit her business card in as many mitts as will accept it, and I'll look for an uninhabited corner in which to become invisible, so as to avoid the inevitable question of strangers, "What do you do?"

Sunday, July 6, 1997

The Business Card Body Count from the July 4th party was one. And it was mine. We met a woman from Sprint who does corporate training, and I tried to look like fresh meat to her. Fat chance. She was nearly 5 years younger than I, and was already mulling over an early retirement offer from her company. She wants to start her own business in the same field, and I indicated my willingness to follow her into the abyss, and I also did my best to show her that I would not be gasping and wheezing as I did it.

Avila College, a local Catholic institution, had someone named Norm call me to say that I was chosen for an interview for a part-time professor job. Nothing in the ad which I answered, or the literature which followed his phone call, gave any indication of the pay scale. That hardly sounds promising, since I believe that competitively-salaried jobs usually feature that fact early, and prominently, in their information to prospects. In addition, the "interview" will consume **five hours** of a Saturday morning later this month. I will be expected to write an essay, lead a class discussion in a subject of my choosing, participate in a "leaderless group activity" which

sounds a lot like lunch to me, grade a student paper, and also sit for a conventional employment interview. All this for a part-time job which will not likely cover a third of our monthly expenses.

It seems as if employers are a lot more arrogant these days. In part, I think it comes from the death of organized labor as a workplace force of any consequence in this country. Not that colleges have a history of labor unrest, but the people who hire for colleges, as well as everywhere else in the country, were educated during a time when unions, as well as any other meaningful collective bargaining organizations, had diminished in power. It would not be incorrect to call this the Reagan Era. In the balance of interests which is supposed to be reached in an employment agreement, at least in an ideal world, those of the employer seem to be favored much more frequently than those of the worker. How many places provide retirement plans, health insurance, paid vacations any more? Damn few places I've applied. The company can pay you as little as it can get away with, shit-can you if it chooses to, and your rights concern the "right" to look for another, equally demeaning job. The infamous 'employment-at-will.' However, the seeming voluntary-sounding nature of such a scheme is exposed when it is shown that there is nearly no alternative to that kind of employment in non-unionized America.

Of course there's more. Simultaneous with the reduction of jobs that pay a living wage and allow a modest level of benefits is the ruthless reduction in publicly-funded social services. Eventually there will be a critical mass reached in this country. In that mass will be people like me: unable to find a job which keeps me afloat, allows me to pay for some investment in my future, and gives me entree to a meaningful and respectful health care plan. Employment today fails to provide the three fundamental material needs a human has: current solvency, future

security, and provision for health needs. The day of reckoning will surely come long after its architects have taken the dirt nap, but it will come.

The first job I applied for in April has been readvertised. I've been out of work so long that someone has begun working, lived a productive life, and then retired while I'm still waiting for my next Dear John letter from Human Resources.

Monday, July 7, 1997

Wimbledon has just concluded, and I'm thinking in tennis metaphors. A job is advertised. An applicant who believes himself qualified responds with a letter and resume. The ball is in the employer's court, and yet it seems to dribble away to the sidelines, eventually resting motionless, before the match has become interesting. Perhaps the arrogance of the job market requires applicants to bombard the employer's court incessantly, like one of those ball-launching machines, until the other side takes notice, and capitulates. Or at least sends a nice rejection letter. That whole notion offends my idea of fairness and equality, the Achilles Heel of moral philosophers. If there is some sort of rough parity of interests between employee-seeker and job-seeker, then each should treat the other with respect. When I apply for an advertised job, I make certain it is a job I can do competently. My letters are well-written, and both they, and my resume are laser printed. I arrive early for **everything**: interviews, work, parties; I'm sure I'll be the first one to attend my own funeral, and the soberest one upon departure. I show respect for a prospective employer by dressing professionally, speaking well, and not wasting their time. I am due the same respect, and I seldom get it. And I'm not asking for anything more than a thumbs up or thumbs down signal, corporately speaking.

The book I wrote while in Japan, tentatively titled *The Nail that Sticks Out*, is a secondary

vocation of mine these days. It amounts to 142,000 words, and I have sent excerpts to about ten literary agents in the East. Their rejection notices were all of the form variety, and disconcertingly rapid, but at least they let me know promptly that they were not interested in representing me. And they uniformly apologized for sending an impersonal note of announcement. Wouldn't it be strange if the often-vilified New York Agent became the benchmark for personal respect in the tiny occupational world which I inhabit? Because I had several articles that I thought might interest a magazine or newspaper, I have also written off for what are called 'writer's guidelines,' always including a self-addressed, stamped envelope. Less than half the publications have responded, eating up my 32 cents, as well as their chance to publish some unique and gripping prose. In the choice between arrogance and incompetence, I'm not sure which explanation I prefer.

Tuesday, July 8, 1997

I have been offered a job, in a manner of speaking. Gloria Vando Hickok, married to my friend Bill, and a pretty good pal in her own right, has published a journal of women's arts and letters called *Helicon Nine*. It ceased regular publication a few years ago, but is kept alive by Gloria in other guises. She irregularly publishes books, anthologies, and collections of poetry. She has championed the work of former Kansas City Royals relief pitcher, Dan Quisenberry, who still lives hereabouts, though his work is unlikely to be mistaken for that of William Butler Yeats. And every year, *Helicon Nine* hosts a contest called the Willa Cather Prize, for both fiction and poetry. Last night, a woman named Betsy called from The Writer's Place, which is where the enterprise has its office, and asked me if I would be one of the readers in the fiction part of the contest. I have to read 25 novels or short story collections in a month, and then 5 more the next

month. I am to be paid \$100, but only after my eyes drop out and my brain turns to porridge. If it takes me 5 hours to read and comment on each one, that's \$.80 an hour. They should at least supply a bottle of wine for each book, to accompany the voyage I will be taking into contemporary American fiction. My experience with the subject is limited to what I tell my grandchildren I 'do' all day.

It is truly kind of Gloria to think of me in this capacity, though I know she was looking hard for warm bodies who knew a smidgen of English for the job. When I went to the Writer's Place this noon to pick up my box of manuscripts, I saw the unbelievable number of books and poems everyone will be reading. The room was awash in earnest expectations and forests felled in vain. And this is just a minor award. However, a glance askance at the list of readers did not reveal anyone other than me who needed a regular paycheck to keep afloat. I know most of them from various literary/social functions Bill and Gloria host, and invite us to, and few of them, other than Bob and Donna, seem to need to write in order to keep the MasterCard people from getting ugly.

I also went on an interview at an agency this morning. It advertised the job I went to a different agency to apply for back in May -- or was it April? This agency's pre-interview exam asked fewer questions about your moral fiber and dreams about your mother, and had a more rigorous test of language skills.

Wednesday, July 9, 1997

What hath ineffectual therapy and excessively lenient composition teachers wrought? Not this journal alone, but also titular contestants for the Willa Cather Prize. I read my first one yesterday, all 265 pages of cardboard characters and nonexistent descriptions of place and time.

Somebody will pay, I guarantee you.

The offers keep pouring in. Today, I got a summons to jury duty, beginning August 5th. It pays \$6 a day, plus carfare, and should leave me plenty of time to read my assigned list. I'll have an interview tomorrow at A.D. Banker, as a result of my visit yesterday to the BTS employment service, and today I mailed off my manuscript to the sole New York agent who requested it.

And this weekend, Mata and I go to Lake of the Ozarks, for a retreat sponsored by Primerica. I can feel the dread building already, like the gradual onset of nausea, or the prospect of imminent dental work. This will be the 4th one I've attended with her, so I'm well-acquainted with the beast. But while familiarity prepares me, it never takes away the desire to flee, screaming, after the first half-hour. No occasion is innocent in the eyes of the planners. Every hour they can dragoon us into a room is one with which we will be bludgeoned with maximum hoopla and evangelical spirit, be it a dinner, picnic, or impromptu get-together in an out-of-the-way alcove. Since I am Mata's "partner" in this venture, I am expected to actually want to be shouted at by a frothing millionaire, and be pelted with bushels of false bonhomie by strangers, all of whom want me to save the world by convincing as many of its inhabitants as possible to purchase Primerica products. One of these meetings is going to send me over the top, and you'll read about it in the police blotter, or perhaps Geraldo will have an interview with me direct from the slammer.

I do support Mata in her attempts to make a go of this business, primarily out of enlightened self-interest, and have even purchased a white dinner jacket for the formal dinner on Friday night, though fully a quarter of the men in attendance won't even have a coat and tie, let

alone a black tie. A few will not yet have learned to walk erect. I give her hell in private about the way she goes about trying to build her client and associate base, but I am dutiful in public. At least, until my tolerance begins to unravel permanently in some unknown future meeting, and I spray the room with my Uzi, or my arsenal of hollow-point epithets.

Thursday, July 10, 1997

My interview today was in a building which looks like a sixteen-story replica of Darth Vader. It is black, with black opaque glass and a sinister feel as you approach it. The message is one of brute, uncompromising power. What would it be like to work there, and see that apparition loom toward you through the dashboard at 7:50 every morning? I'll probably never know. The company, A.D. Banker, wants someone to take lecture notes and lesson plans and flesh them out into correspondence courses in all aspects of the insurance biz. A person with a deep background in insurance probably has a heavy foot in the door for this position, though I did get an opportunity to write something for my interviewer, Cynthia. The subject was the auto insurance policy, and I was allowed 3 books as references. I would guess that my prose style will stand out from all the other applicants, which may not work to my benefit. And even if it does, I would also guess that a well-versed insurance nut would be preferable to someone who will have to look everything up. Cynthia confessed that her undergraduate degree was in philosophy, which I took to be an element of potential solidarity between us. But that fanciful notion was quickly quashed when she confessed that she ended up detesting the subject, and couldn't wait to get out of school in Northwest Missouri State U., so she could leave logic and epistemology behind. To her, I probably looked like every philosophy professor who ever tormented her with their criticisms of her reasoning and analysis. Another strike against me.

Yesterday's reading assignment was marginally better than Tuesday's. It was what was meant to be a complete novel, but hardly more than 50,000 words, and cold, unsympathetic characters. But what perturbed me most about this book is that all the people in it who cussed, did so inexpertly. Now there's nothing wrong with inventive oaths, but I'm incapable of any right now. But while some profanity is graceful, some is just clumsy and thrown on the page, or in the air, to have some four-letter words in play. And it fucking shows.

Friday, July 11, 1997 -- Lake of the Ozarks, Missouri

In past years, the Primerica retreat began with a formal awards dinner on Friday night, then 4-6 hours of hard-core ranting and frothing Saturday morning and afternoon, followed by a cookout that night. On early Sunday there is a Christian worship service, so they can bring The Big Indemnifier on board, followed by another 4-5 hours of positive reinforcement before we are loosed, glassy-eyed, upon the unsuspecting public. This year, however, an additional 4 hours have been tacked on Friday afternoon, before the dinner, and that's where I am now.

At these get-togethers I feel like a closet heathen at a revival meeting. My worst fear is to be noticed -- or worse: to be asked to stand up and give a testimonial. That's not just a metaphor. There's a conspicuous element of fundamentalist Christianity explicitly made a part of the organizational goals. "God first, family second, Primerica third," is the way the hierarchy of priorities is often stated. And they are apparently not referring to Vishnu, Buddha, or Allah, at the top of the food chain, either. So I feel doubly alienated at these meetings: once by the rabidly anti-intellectual approach of the company, and second, by the blatant appeals -- if not demands -- to religious sentiments I do not possess.

My disquiet about the company is not a skepticism about their products. The

fundamental idea is very sound, and the way they try to help implement that idea is fine. If I were employed, I'd be buying the same things they want their customers to buy, and Mata would be getting the commissions from it. It seems to me that the preponderance of things they want their clients to do is worthwhile. But it is when the pitch turns to recruiting the client as another Primerica representative, as it inevitably must, that the fervor crosses the line. It is the evangelical approach to being committed to Primerica which transforms my apathy into antipathy. I am not a person devoid of commitments. I am certainly committed to Mata and our marriage. When I am teaching, my highest commitment is to my students and their best interests. I love my son Jake, my grandchildren, my few friends like Inga and Bill. I am dedicated to writing as much and as often and as well as I can. And I am trying, every day, to live a life of virtue and honesty. I take the concept of commitment seriously, as well as the acts which follow from it. Being harangued into taking on the kind of tunnel-vision commitment required by PFS is offensive, bordering on the absurd. It is my prevalent state of spirit at the time which usually guides me toward either offense or laughter, and, in my 4th month of no money, grins are hard to summon up.

Ironically, I might be a prime recruit for these people, were I to allow myself to be. Down on cash flow, down on prospects, but capable of memorizing their verbal spiel with little trouble. However, they want cheerleaders and I'm a critic. It's a comfortable role for me, and I have no inclination to abandon it, but I recognize that it limits me in vocational choices. Being a critic requires independent thinking. Not just the ability to do it, but the **desire** to move away from the unexamined opinions of the crowd, the drive to diverge.

Saturday, July 12, 1997

Last night's orgy of redundant hyperbole and self-congratulation extended to 12:15 in the morning, and less than 8 hours later, we're back in another meeting. Over 500 people attended the "formal" dinner, yet only one idiot actually showed up suitably attired in white dinner jacket and cummerbund: *moi*. Not even the millionaire host could be bothered to play dress-up, and I became an object of much curiosity all night. People stared, slack-jawed, every time Mata and I sashayed across the ballroom, and I had to periodically check to see if my fly was unzipped, or one of Mata's breasts had flopped out of her dress.

The overt links to Christianity continue to believers and unbeliever alike. This morning's speaker says the concept of Primerica is biblical. In that scenario who is he? Elijah? Jehovah? And who am I? Jezebel? Judas? Our host is giving us 3 hours off this afternoon, but suggests we use it to go off somewhere to do some "soul searching" about our commitment to the business. There are some accurate biblical analogies which come to mind, however. An Old Testament plague might be something like the flood of PFS agents ravaging the landscape of middle America, leaving nothing undevoured.

Each of the speakers talks about his or her own past, usually with an emphasis on a previous life of sin, such as insolvency, or insufficient grasp of The Big Picture. But in each case, the individual was 'saved' from further descent into degradation by one of the Saints of Primerica. Currently speaking is Kim, the wife of a high producer, and she is issuing the standard Partner's Speech. Somebody, usually a woman, is assigned this task at every major annual meeting. It is based fundamentally on another durable Christian concept: guilt. We partners -- the non-Primerica spouses and Significant Others -- are not involved enough, we don't go to enough meetings, we aren't always "positive" concerning all aspects of PFS work, we don't

cave in to the self-evident moral superiority of the Primerica agent. She almost likens the partner to a satanic figure, prone to test, tempt, and belittle the agent rather than be an unquestioning supporter. If we don't climb on board the bandwagon, she suggests it is right that we be left behind. Literally and maritally. So much for "family second, Primerica third." Fear and guilt: the two greatest sources of religious motivation.

What's ironic in this entire scenario, presented in this and every weekend retreat, is the claim that moral stature follows financial stature. It is assumed that business success confers upon one the right to lecture others on character and behavior, a clear *non sequitur*; the conclusion of ethical rectitude does not follow from the premises of economic prosperity.

It is 10:10 A.M., and Rev. Randy is preaching the PFS sermon. Full-time involvement (i.e., quit your day job) has been revealed as the cure for **all** ills, not just financial ones, I'll have you know. He cited a phenomenon of dismissed corporate executives needing so much psychological help to cope with their newfound unattached status that specialized hospitals and clinics have apparently sprung up in response to this need. But Rev. Randy knows the True Cure. Send those people to Primerica instead! Their troubles will dissolve like marital fidelity in the lounge of an out-of-town motel, though that metaphor wasn't coined as an exercise in confession. Bring your cares and woes to the altar of Primerica.

Sunday, July 13, 1997

If it's Sunday -- the last day of the retreat -- then it is surely time for the "altar call." Mike, the current Deacon of the Dollar Sign, is using the same script used by Billy Graham, Billy Sunday (for you old timers), Father Divine (for you old timers of color from around Philadelphia), and evangelists of all persuasion throughout the eons. "Some of you out there

have reached a moment of decision this weekend.” True. Do I lay my head on this table on its right side or on its left side as I attempt (unsuccessfully) to sleep throughout this testimonial?

“The time for commitment is now!” I certainly should be committed immediately if I seriously begin to contemplate participating in this game except from the sidelines.

Today is also the mandatory choke-back-the-tears session by one or more speakers, recounting the old story, apparently sounding new each time to the faithful, of how they have been saved by PFS. It happens every year, an event as predictable as the tides and no less moist. Today, we have also been given the necessary glimpse of Paradise, another integral element pirated directly from the Christian liturgy. Religion would have been quickly unmasked and discarded if it had only appealed to fear and guilt as a way of keeping the marks in line. The promise of a new life, a next world, or some variant of that, makes the endurance of all the travails of this world tolerable. We’ll be able to see that new beginning on Tuesday, amazingly enough, but only if we shell out \$20 for tickets to a day-long session of the latter-day Book of Revelations in a Kansas City theater. Several of the big dogs of the company, including its president, are on a tour to tell the true believers about the coming of the Kingdom, and to describe its wonders in detail. In other words, new products are in the pipeline. Mata has already bought me a ticket, so the queasiness of this weekend will be overlapped by the dread of the impending Tuesday. Does Maalox make a special, Primerica-strength formula?

There was one humorous moment this morning, though nobody else in the hall laughed but me. One of the early leaders of the company, now retired in Georgia with a new young wife, seems to give tours of his home for other PFS leaders, and a speaker this weekend brought a videotape of the house, but for a different purpose. From the outside, the building looked like a

cross between Tara and a slightly larger version of the state capitol of Alabama. Two people lived there, having just unpacked their belongings from the double-wide they had rented the month before. Inside, it was furnished in the most garish, grotesquely ornate manner possible, with the kind of quasi-gold leaf trash found in Wal-Marts of every geographical location. I did think it was a joke, but everyone else seemed impressed. Good money and bad taste: the American Dream.

Earlier this afternoon, the elusive Margot called again. It would seem as if her e-mail was acting up, and while she could receive my impassioned, though disillusioned plea for her sister's address, it had taken her three weeks before she decided to resort to a phone call. I was able to keep her on the line long enough to extract the address in question, as well as a phone and fax number, and I've already scratched out a letter and mailed it off. Margot seemed to think I would be offered the most marvelous position imaginable, and that I would live happily ever after. Her attitude toward employment is much like Bill's; full of optimism and pots of gold at the end of the rainbow. Both of them have as much money as any normal human being requires for an extraordinary lifestyle, let alone one absent worries of the monthly kind, and I think their attitudes toward work come directly from their circumstances. For either of them, working is something you can choose to do. If nothing of interest is available, you can choose not to. The bills still get paid, vacations can be taken, presents for the nieces and grandkids are easy to summon forth. The desperate edge of intensity that my life has begun to assume never need come their way, at least for the same reason as it does to mine. The material conditions of life are a given in their existence; they are the very crux of mine.

Tuesday, July 15, 1997

It's only 11:30 in the morning, but already it's been a busy day. As mentioned earlier, Primerica scheduled a gander into the Promised Land with an all day meeting at the convention center downtown, and Mata bought tickets for both of us at \$20 a pop. I felt that our plummeting net worth could be better served than to drop a double-sawbuck on the edification of a malcontent like me. She was fairly adamant, which meant that refusing to go would likely precipitate a major sulk by her and its reciprocal for me, a heady cocktail of guilt and resentment. I guess one of the skills you develop in making a marriage chug along is knowing when your mate has taken an inflexible stand, and when there's some room for negotiation. I was able to make the most of the scant wiggle room left this morning. We decided that I would go unless she could sell the ticket, like a scalper, on the street in front of the center. She was able to do so in 120 seconds, and I was driving home immediately thereafter.

Today is predicted to be the hottest of the summer, so naturally I have planned strenuous outdoor exercise for a part of it. Our yard is 150x50, and needed mowing a week ago. I did it this morning before the sun started making little weed mirages in my path with each swipe of the Toro. When I returned, to water and a few precious minutes of AC, the phone rang with interesting news. A.D. Banker wants me to have a second interview, tomorrow at 9:00 A.M. Perhaps I'm closing in on something after all, albeit the least of all irons I still have poking about in the cooling embers. In my first interview, Cynthia confided that there was literally no advancement possibility in the company. It is family-owned, and the Bankers (or whatever their real names are) hold all the top management positions. The pay is the very minimum I can accept in the long term and still get by. And I'll be working in an industry which would make Scott Adams (creator of *Dilbert*) salivate like one of Pavlov's Pooches. Perhaps my greatest fear

is to be offered a job.

This morning's e-mail brought a letter from Mayumi Norikane, one of my old students at Shoin. I hadn't heard from her before, but I inquired about her in a letter to one of her classmates, Asami Yoshimura. Mayumi was in a class with me for each of the three semesters I taught over there, and her English was very hesitant until the last term, when I noticed some real improvement, and gave her an impromptu award at the end of semester for 'Most Improved.' She reacted like those people in the Publisher's Clearing House TV ads. Praise seems to be something the Japanese educational system rations out very meagerly, so I was pretty much something the students had never seen before. I laughed, brought in food, gave away Kansas Jayhawks T-shirts to the most proficient on that particular day, smiled and applauded for good work, and was never afraid to make a fool of myself in pursuit of good results. One of my KU mentors, Professor Richard DeGeorge, once told me that a teacher should never sacrifice his dignity. In many ways I consider myself a follower of Professor DeGeorge, an announcement he might greet with great chagrin, but not in the area of dignity. I gave it up every day for my students, and I believe they were better for it. Now, I'm not trying to write my own letter of reference here, but Mayumi's letter, like many before her's, full of caring about me and gratefulness that I was her teacher, have led me to recognize that no job I will ever have can measure up to my experience in Japan. I have never felt so valued at work, and as much for my difference as for my adherence to what is expected of any teacher. How often is an American worker made to feel valued by those in the same venture? In Japan, I was compensated handsomely, given a lot of freedom in the way I chose to do my task, and the "customers" continue to fall over themselves praising me, and telling me how much they miss my daily

presence in their lives, many months after the last of my products was consumed.

Since I had a close call with Primerica this morning, my mind has also been on this previous weekend. Why aren't good Christians offended at the blatant use of their religion, both implicitly and chapter-and-verse, by the PFS high rollers? To me, it seems like blasphemy, but the devout in attendance appeared to accept it with equanimity, if not embrace it with fervor. It just shows truly how money is the great leveler today. If enough of the stuff is at stake, all kinds of grotesque malequations can be man-handled into parity. Thus, mountains of money, gone after using the name of the Lord, are the moral equivalent of His Work.

Wednesday, July 16, 1997

A 9:00 O'clock at the Darth Vader Building. I'm 15 minutes early, and the waiting room contains no literature of any description. No wonder they advertised for a writer. They might be better off hiring a doctor and telling him to bring all his old magazines with him. Coupon books, redeemable at various local merchants, are stacked by the receptionist. A person with no money in his pocket can make little use of 30% off at Blimpy's. I could go through my wallet, weeding out obsolete acquaintances and expired credit cards, but that task couldn't be stretched out to 5 minutes. Cynthia has been summoned by the switchboard operator, and she seems surprised to see me at that hour. She turns and walks away, leaving me in the chair, the corporate equivalent of being made to sit in the corner for being inexcusably early.

My appointment is with one of the partners who owns the business. He turns out to be a handsome, tall, and young gentleman, recently turned 40, who was **made** to sit behind the wheel of a BMW convertible. A displaced Communications and Cinema major from U.S.C? A glance on his office wall revealed a B.S. in Agricultural Science from Kansas State. A cowflop-

stomping, alfalfa-chewing, keg-tapping, pigtail defiling, sheep-schlepping Aggie! Major disillusionment. He loves the sound of his own words, no matter how often they are reprised, and I had a few slender seconds to impress before he launched the next recapitulation. The job sounds interesting, however. He wants me to write a textbook in Business Ethics, targeted for the insurance sector. His goal is 300 pages, and he implied that it could be done by the end of the year. What does he want, writing or word processing? If they take me on board, the ethics text will be my Trial by PageMaker. If they like what I do, and I like the way things go on the job, they might keep me. If there is dissatisfaction on the part of either party, there's the door. A Temp by any other name ... I'd really like to write a text on the subject, but I hate to crank out something that has the potential to make them bags of money, and only be paid minimum wage for it. I'm sure there's no possibility of working out a royalty deal with them, and I'm not even certain I get to have my name on the cover.

Thursday, July 17, 1997

At 9:00 A.M. straight-up I fielded a call from BTS, the employment agency that got me in the door at A.D. Banker. The job is mine at \$24,000 per annum, assuming I last an annum. I start Monday, and that might seem to be the end of many things, including this journal. It should evaporate my feelings of self-loathing which have been far from absent in this chronicle. It might even permit me to use the Sunday classified section as starter fuel for the Weber kettle, at least when I can afford to buy charcoal. And meat.

My interviewer yesterday, possessing the singularly powerful name of 'Dennis,' and I see each other as temporary solutions to ongoing problems. He alluded to the possibility that, in five years, as long as I had good employee appraisals, I might get up to \$30K. Parr-tee! Eleven

years ago I left considerably more than that to go to graduate school, a sweet dream turned bittersweet by the need to withdraw for economic reasons before getting a Ph.D. The Dow beat the shit out of 8000 yesterday, while it was under 3000 in 1986. But I'm taking a substantial pay cut, compared with then, and am damned glad for it.

There are a couple of other jobs for which I am under consideration, if that's quite the word for it. Two of them are worth dropping A.D. Banker like a bad habit for, and I will if they offer me something. In the meantime, I'll keep this little writing exercise going, since my employment tale has yet to be concluded, I feel. That feeling is not just my own internal mechanism of self-doubt, which seldom experiences downtime, but was fueled by the skepticism of Dennis in our conversation yesterday. He mused during our interview, wondering whether a good writer, devoid of professional knowledge of the business, could actually perform the task he had in mind. Does such a person actually exist? He queried no one in particular. Apparently, what little he had seen of me hadn't quashed those questions in his mind. He'll find out in a few months, and I'll try to get my finances back on at least an even keel. He and I each have two primary goals in our association. One of them we share, and one of them we are opposed in. I want to write a hell of a fine text in Business Ethics for the insurance industry, and he claims to want that, too. But I want to line up something for the first of the year, at the latest, since the pay and prospects here are not worth more than being treated as a temporary oasis. Dennis wants to see if the quality and quantity of work he can get out of me is worth what he is paying me, and I already know that I, and my work, are worth more. On that we will eternally disagree, and when I can find someone who can come closer to my idea of what my time and output are worth, I'll bail out like it was the *Andrea Doria*. So, do I have a 'temp' attitude, too? Sure. But I maintain

it comes from the penurious captains of contemporary industry (okay, Dennis is barely an Ensign, but let me use an old metaphor in peace) who want to find people who will work as cheaply as possible, rather than finding the best and paying them accordingly. As my old pal Gomer (Ed Moody) has said, “Buy the best and cry once.” Companies today have to expend an excessive amount of resources on personnel matters because they can’t find enough good employees, and so they treat all workers with the same derogation. The incompetent workers set the standard for company labor policies, and the productive ones have to stand for an insulting work environment, since the company can’t be bothered to distinguish between good and bad. One result of this is that companies are increasingly reluctant to pay the price for the best. Therefore, they cry often, mainly as a result of good workers going where they are appreciated, if that place can be found. And they cry good money in higher “Human Resources” costs. So the ‘Temp Problem’ springs up at the intersection of decreasing employee competence and increasing employer stinginess. And at that intersection, lots of good people get crunched. That may not be the whole story, but it’s certainly a part of the story, and I’m about to be a participant in another chapter of it.

Sunday, July 20, 1997

Being newly occupied, I decided to make a dent this weekend in the pile of faux fiction Gloria has saddled me with. Yesterday’s good intentions along those lines were sent packing around noon with a phone call from Klamath Falls, Oregon. It was a man named Don, who represented the Crater Lake School, and who is doing the hiring for Margot’s sister. Amazing! We talked, and the place sounded better with every syllable. I mentally tried to locate all our suitcases. It’s located on a 500 acre ranch with its own lake/wetlands, and is directly under the

Pacific Flyway for migratory waterfowl. Other than needing to wear a hat during the twin migration seasons, it also meant that the students would be able to include a significant part of nature studies into their lives without ever having to go on a field trip. Don taught math and science, and wanted someone else to handle English and social studies. That's what the phone call was about, so the job doesn't entail any administrative responsibilities. Which means that the salary is nowhere near the lofty sum I was expecting. My guess was a minimum of \$40K, with a possibility of a lot more. They're saying 32, which I can turn over just by adding one night course a week at Avila to my base pay at A.D. Banker. Everything about Oregon sounds great except the white supremacists and the money, and I can get both without ever leaving Missouri.

This morning Mata dragooned me into attending a church service, of sorts, with some people she has been trying to sell Primerica to. In selling to strangers, or near-strangers, credibility is everything, and her credibility to religious types would be enhanced were she able to trot out a husband who was willing, though not eager, to attend a worship service. They identified themselves as the Kansas City Church of Christ, and something clicked in the back of my mind. A nominally religious organization with a similar-sounding name was in the papers for some unsavory practices just before I left for Japan. I'll have to do some research this week. It might be that Mata is being hustled more than she is doing the hustling. At any rate, I felt like a prostitute there, though uncompensated by anything other than the likelihood of a few weeks (or days) of placid family life. I suppose many people go to church to gain one sort of peace; I go for a slightly different kind. Mata must have detected a weakness in my resolve which she felt it was worth exploiting while it was still there. I had resigned myself to the previous Primerica

weekend, and acquiesced to the possibility of using the ticket on Tuesday, though it never became necessary. My lilliputian feelings of self-worth must have eroded my backbone, and I hope that will change after a paycheck or two lands in the family coffers.

Well, the service sounded a lot like a Primerica meeting, plus singing. The messages were certainly identical: **commit and recruit**. On the latter count, the “church” even had an explicit “sales quota:” 100 baptisms in 100 days. With every exposure, I continue to be aghast at how the line between ‘new breed’ religions and marketing has become blurred. Salvation is just another product to be pitched at a mark. And once you’ve sold him or her, they must go out and sell it to some other unsuspecting souls. A Pious Pyramid scheme.

Sunday, August 3, 1997

After two weeks at A.D. Banker, I can say with confidence that it is not a relationship with a lot of future. Of course, that was something alluded to by Dennis in our interview prior to my invitation to work. A closer look at the company confirms my first impression that we are not a good fit. One element of the conditions of employment, as stated in the employee handbook, is an absolute prohibition on discussion of your pay and compensation with any other employee. I’ve never worked at a place which required that, and it can only be related to the abysmal pay scale offered. If everyone knew how badly everyone else was being screwed, the discontent in the office would reach critical mass in less than an afternoon. One other ominous observation I’ve made is the near absence of employees over 50. Most are in their 20's and 30's, and I would warrant it is related to the lack of advancement offered, coupled by a tightwad pay structure. Anyone who works there for long either gets resigned to having no prospects, or to having little in the way of meaningful pay raises, and eventually bails out for a better deal. I

asked my office mate, Steve, if any of the people in the office had second jobs, and he replied, “Most.” The partners make a decent attempt to keep the workplace reasonably user-friendly, with things like a personnel list of the whole company, alphabetized by **first** names. The informality is nice, and I suppose I’ll appreciate the mandatory office visit in the morning of my birthday by many of my colleagues, plus the partners, singing and presenting me with a cake. But I can’t imagine that keeping any but the superficial around for long.

The query to Steve about outside jobs was as a result of being offered a teaching position at Avila College for one night a week, starting in October. I’ll be teaching ethics to non-traditional students, and the money will just about get me to a living wage, *in toto*. The other writer who was hired on the same day I was, Tom, also got a night job teaching at Kansas City Kansas Community College. I caught him reading Kafka during lunch, which I presume will be a more than adequate preparation for life in the corporate world.

As a distant consequence of the job fair I went to a few months ago, I have received two calls from young ladies at Bernard Haldane and Associates. The first time one called, I was polite and cordial, and I guess sufficiently non-committal to leave the impression that I was open to their suggestions. At the time, I wasn’t, but I just figured they’d give up and look for someone with **real** job skills. Of course, they already have work, and don’t need what I assume will be the expensive intervention of Haldane. Now I think I’ll see what they have in mind. After writing the first 20 pages of the book for A.D. Banker, I realize again that I could do well as an ethics officer for a company, and would probably be well paid for my expertise. It is probably important for me to get this book on Ethics and Insurance finished, since it will likely give me some documentary evidence of ability in the area. But those are not jobs which get advertised in

the Sunday paper, which means that an outfit like Haldane might be one avenue for uncovering them.

Tuesday, August 5, 1997

A little before 2:00 P.M. The outer office at Haldane's is more crowded than a dermatologist's during poison ivy season. The plaque on the wall attests to their operation as being one of "career consulting." That has a non-committal sound to it. No outlandish claims that they will actually accomplish something on your behalf. No, they'll just shoot the shit with you and offer overpriced advice. In the world of corporate head-hunters, I get the feeling they are head-sellers, or maybe head-trollers, scraping the wretched of the job fairs off the floor and inviting them to cast their hopes with Haldane. I'm sure the advice is damned expensive if paying for the thick carpet and plump furniture in here is one of their goals. Lots of "consultants" scurry about in dressy shirtsleeves, mostly male. Interestingly enough, the two phone calls I received soliciting a visit were by honey-voiced women. But the bottom line seems to be served exclusively by men.

It hardly looks like the morning lineup at Manpower in here -- a social gathering at which I have been a participant in my younger years -- but everyone looks like they carry a palpable sense of dread with them. It's so easy these days to disguise the fact that you're one bounced check away from the streets, or the courts. Ask me. I'll apparently be the last one called, since the waiting room is now filled only with the sporadic sneezes of the receptionist. I try to be stealthy as I move to a chair farther distant from her germ-propulsion experiments. Recent copies of *Fortune* litter a nearby table, so I thumb the table of contents for an interesting column or article. Nearly every contribution seems aimed to aid your successful broken-field running

through, or around, the Federal tax code.

At ten after, a balding, energetic man of indeterminate racial background greets me and offers me choice of coffee or water before retreating to his office in the back. His name is Alex, and he wants to know what I want out of life. I want mainly to know what he is going to charge for this occupational therapy session, but he dodges that query, as he would all afternoon. Of course, getting someone to talk about himself is the best way to clear his mind of unwanted minutiae, and Alex asked me to start with my high school years. Eventually, I wound down simultaneous with mentioning the start of the A.D. Banker job. Alex implied that I was lucky to get a job as dog catcher with the resume as I had prepared it, though his way of saying it had more to do with me not “showcasing” my abilities best in that sheet of paper. He also physically shuddered -- that is not an exaggeration -- when I told him how much I was being paid for writing the Business Ethics book. By the end of our session, he said he wanted to talk to his superiors about the field that attracted me, since he was not familiar with the demand for it, and then we would get back together next week. At that time, he would also reveal what The Haldane Treatment would cost, in my case, and he asked that Mata accompany me for that appointment, most likely to help carry me down to the car when I hear what they want for their services.

Wednesday, August 6, 1997

If there is public transportation to the River Styx, it must resemble the #71 Prospect bus. The lost or defiant of this world trundle onboard during the 7:30 run northward, portents of another day of disappointment carried like a placard. Most of the women also tote along an excess load of fat cells, and seem barely a Twinkie away from needing a seamstress attend to

their capri pants. In Japan, buses seem to contain a cross-section of most social and economic classes. In America, riding the bus is your public confession of an impoverished state. When I told a co-worker that I was going to be taking the Prospect bus to my appointed date with civic responsibility, a.k.a., jury duty, she looked at me as if I had announced an intention to give a manicure to a grizzly. Why would I even contemplate such a thing? The cost of downtown parking, for starters.

In the jury holding tank, a little before 8:30, I watch the other summoned souls file in. The line they form resembles a casting call for the Montel show. Nearly everyone has brought some reading, though my Hackett edition of Kant's Ethical Philosophy is definitely a minority report alongside USA Today and Danielle Steele.

After seeing a film about Jackson County and jury service, and then another one featuring an inspirational message from the presiding justice, Judge O'Malley, the jury supervisor asked if any of us wanted to be excused for some legitimate cause, such as imbecility or being a Doctor of Chiropractic, characteristics which seem often to coincide. The line of would-be malingerers which formed after her announcement was amazing to behold. There were only about 50 people to begin with, and about one-third of that number wanted out.

A little before 10:00, I was part of a panel assembled in Division 8 to hear a civil case. About 30 of us went in to be evaluated, but only 13 stayed to be empaneled, and I was one of the 13. While it has been described as a simple case, I worry that it will drag out an unnecessarily long time. The judge is excessively soft-spoken, and one of the attorneys, Richard Rubins, is hard of hearing but too vain to wear a hearing aid. Once the trial began, the defense attorney betrayed a low, mumbling monotone. With two marbled-mouthed participants, and plaintiff's

attorney in desperate need of an ear trumpet, everything said will probably have to be repeated with maddening frequency.

In the preliminary questioning of the panel, before the final jury was selected, it seemed as if volunteering any information was likely to result in banishment. “The nail that sticks out gets hammered down.” Oddly enough, my Aloha shirt seemed to spook no one, which renews my faith in the American legal system. The final count of categories of this jury and one alternate: 8 women, 5 men; 10 white, 3 black; 5 smokers, 8 non-smokers. Wait a minute: that’s 39 people. The last category seemed important, since the entire court house is advertised as a smoke-free building. However, the jury rooms have a secret side room for smokers to go and practice their loathsome habit, and make only a slight ripple in the proceedings.

The defense attorney’s low drone quickly became a problem once she began presenting her witnesses. Her questions were nearly inaudible, and contained all the necessary information in them. They were designed to elicit a “yes” or “no” answer. “Mr. Edwards, on May 17, 1995, did you drive a red 1991 Honda Accord northbound on Troost Avenue at 3:30 P.M., attempting to turn eastward into the parking lot for Seventh Heaven music store accompanied by the plaintiff and another gentleman?” It was often difficult to piece together her line of questioning, and since the case involved two young black males, their testimony required an Ebonics interpreter to explain it fully. The court did not provide one. At our first recess, we jury members got to know each other better. A bald-headed, retired military man spent far too much time telling how much he thought the court reporter was a beautiful woman, and that he couldn’t take his eyes off her during testimony. So much for the impartial gaze -- or leer -- of justice. Several people are acting like they’re already auditioning for the part of foreman or forelady, including The Sarge.

At one time we had hopes that it would be a one-day trial, but that seems pretty remote now, as semi-audible testimony and inaudible sidebars alternate regularly. Rubins is the most publicly visible lawyer in town, thanks to spokesperson role for his partnership in TV ads, but he is far from impressive in this case. He is clearly not as well prepared as the young defense attorney, but his voice is better than hers. This is truly a penny-ante case, and Rubins's appearance in it is baffling. He's only asking for \$1500 medical expenses and whatever suffering compensation we think his client deserves for breaking no bones, spraining no ligaments or joints, and sporting no contusions or abrasions. He was never hospitalized, and his life was barely inconvenienced, but he wants us to be his accomplices in picking the pockets of his opponent's family. Both these young men were high school sophomores when the car wreck occurred, and I am not alone in believing the court's time, and ours, is being wasted here. But our jobs as jurors is to take it seriously, and so we shall.

Thursday, August 7, 1997

Back in the box, listening to summations. Rubins offers more a commercial for his law firm than a recapitulation of the evidence, and engages in so much smearing of the other side's witness and tactics that defense council finally objects, and after a lengthy sidebar with the judge, changes the tack of his final argument. Ms. Mason for the defense -- did she choose that name from an old copy of *TV Guide*? -- had a much more disciplined closing, and cogent case, but it's hard to make a case that her client wasn't negligent in a partially contributory way.

Deliberations begin with a very mouthy, opinionated middle-aged woman nominating herself foreperson. We accept her, and she begins by mistakenly thinking that the position she just assumed meant that she was to present us with her idea of the proper verdict and wait for our

ratification. In civil cases, only 9 votes are needed for a verdict, and it was clear from the first five minutes of deliberations that only 3 of us would even **consider** finding for the defendant. Since the plaintiff had the case won, we (a young white woman sitting next to me, and an older black woman at the other end of the table) could only try to minimize the award. It turned out that we had hidden allies in that goal, since some of those who voted for plaintiff didn't want to compensate above actual medical costs. We aligned ourselves with them, and the jury split 6-6 on award. I proposed a compromise \$500 above medical costs, but none of the other side would nibble. One of them proposed a settlement \$250 above my suggestion, and they got 9 people to accept it, and that was all they needed. The 3 of us who originally had qualms about the entire issue of negligence weren't needed to sign off on the verdict, which suited us fine. We left the jury room a bunch of happy campers, since all of us were able to do what we generally wanted to do. Plus, it was now lunch time, and we were hoping Rubins would take us all out and treat us at the Savoy Grill as a way of celebrating his client's victory. At the end of the trial, we also got our financial compensation for laboring in the vineyards of justice: \$6 a day, plus 76 cents travel money for each one-way trip. Tough way to make a living.

Sunday, August 17, 1997

Last Monday's second appointment at the Bernard Haldane office was a curious sparring match. Alex, our "counselor," though he held the mandatory bloated title of "Vice President," spent our scheduled hour explaining in as a vague a set of generalities as I have ever heard what the firm would be doing for me. It sounded like I would be remade in Gordon Gecko's image, though I would guess that the obnoxious Danny De Vito character in *Other People's Money* would be more their speed. He gave us a sheet of paper which purported to commit them to

getting me elected next senator from the state of my choice, but was a little fuzzy in particulars, too. I know what I can do, and am able to communicate it to anyone willing to listen. One thing Alex and I did agree upon, however, was that the last place a person wants his or her resume to end up is in a Human Resources office. It is one big cauldron of pitiless acid, wherein your resume, as well as your hopes, quickly and remorselessly dissolve. But how would Haldane guide me on an end run around those tree stumps in cheap J. C. Penney suits? It wasn't clear, in the specific-heavy manner I wanted to know before committing a large sum of money to their coffers.

And how much money were they talking about, anyway? Alex wanted to save that for the end, like a good salesman with an overpriced product always does. Since Mata was with me, he also tried to pique her enthusiasm for the project, too, but both of us were wearying of plot development and wanted to cut to the chase. He finally laid it out to us, but wanted us to realize there were several payment plans available, though all of them required a minimum of 40% of the total outlay up front. We held our breaths as he tolled a death knell to his commission with the words, "Thirty-nine hundred dollars." It might as well have been thirty-nine million. I think we put on a good face, acting as if we first needed to check with our advisors to see whether putting our municipal bonds on the market now was really a good option, and checking the most recent Nikkei Index to see if our shares in that seaweed processing venture were ripe for the selling. We slunk out of there, in spirit at least, like whipped dogs.

I had tried selling some wine from my cellar a few months ago, but I have found that it is far less liquid than I had hoped it would be. With 800+ bottles, worth over \$20,000 on the open market, that would seem to be one route to stave off the increasingly hostile letters from

American Express and Visa, as well as putting my vocational fate in the hands of Haldane. Plus, making the job I have now one which could handle the monthly indignity. But nobody I've talked to in the wine-bibbing brotherhood sounded anything more than politely interested, even when I pressed a list, still warm from the laser printer, into their palms. Perhaps the liquidity of wine, like reports of Mark Twain's death, is in the eye of the beholder. Fifteen years ago, I began publishing a newsletter in Kansas City about wine, called *Hair of the Dog*. Business naivete, rather than literary ineptitude, foretold its premature death a year and a half later. But for several years I was in the vino loop, a network of people distinguishable by their red-stained shirt fronts. That was a form of networking, not so called then, and it is not a network I am able to tune in anymore.

The day after the Haldane meeting, I asked my office mate at A.D. Banker, Steve, if he had ever heard of Haldane, or knew anyone who had engaged their services. A wry smile accompanied his tale of woe and disillusionment. He had actually paid the money to them a year and a half ago, and, as he said in a self-explanatory, *quod erat demonstrandum* manner, "I'm still here." The total number of interviews they arranged for him? Zero in 18 months. Precisely equal to his prospects at the A.D. Banker Plantation, which a few of us are beginning to call it. All they did for Steve was give him a few sessions in interview techniques and mental attitude, rewrite his resume for him, and spend his money. Not that I had any realistic hope of coming up with that kind of money in a short time, but I was curious whether there was a success story behind every client transformation. Steve, with a Ph. D. in Risk Management from the University of Iowa, would seem to be someone fought over by all kinds of companies, and yet he languishes here for peanuts and a management attitude which treats its employees, even those in

“professional” capacities, as if they can’t be trusted to manage their time to the benefit of their duties. His story of the Haldane experience certainly cemented my resolve to forget them, though my pocketbook had already made that decision for me.

Last week, a philosophy buddy, Paul, called from Maple Woods Community College, where he has a full-time job. They needed an extra body for a night course. Would I be interested? Sure. The pay isn’t much, but it beats spending Wednesday nights cooking and eating, or undergoing gradual brain death in front of the tube, trying to Win Ben Stein’s Money. I’ll even get to teach a few things I like. The book list was already set before I was summoned, and included some of the Socratic dialogues of Plato, and Voltaire’s *Candide*. Teaching the latter will be like coming back to a see a treasured old friend after years of separation.

Monday, August 18, 1997

For as long as I’ve been at work, I’ve noticed a bunch a noisy school-age children running around the office as if they owned it. They do. Even though the employees’s manual states that spouses and children of workers should remain in the reception area until we are summoned, or work is over, it turns out that these kids are the spawn of the younger partners, and they get the run of the place. There is also a day-care facility on this floor, owned by the company, but only for the use of the kids of the partners. Marie Antoinette would fit right in here. Apparently the ragamuffins get bored in there, and choose to run out, jabbering, into the halls of commerce. That’s bad enough, from my perspective, but discussions today informed me that a previous mailroom employee was sent off to mow the lawns, clean houses, and wash cars of the partners upon occasion during business hours, and as a part of his purported duties.

Tuesday, August 19, 1997

Two weeks ago one of the senior editors, Scott, gave notice to take a more lucrative job in the compliance section of a fair-size insurance company. I had taken his desk when I arrived on the case, and he was bumped up to an office by himself, though with the drawback of being next to the office occupied by the founder and senior partner. He seems to have undergone a rapid decompression in the motivation area of his A.D. Banker career, and spends a lot of time going from office to office passing on the latest sedition. Today, he informed us that SpyMan has made a reappearance on the 16th Floor. The Darth Vader building is about a block south of the Overland Park Marriott hotel, and one of the partners reportedly has been seen from his office on several occasions, using binoculars apparently to look into the hotel rooms across the block. A man with too much time on his hands.

Thursday, August 21, 1997

Last night I showed up for my first teaching assignment since the end of semester in Japan, back in January. The students at Maple Woods Community College were considerably less ruly, and more surly, than Shoin's loveliest, and one young woman could evidently stand no more than ten minutes of me before abruptly springing up, gathering her belongings, and stalking out with a barely audible oath. The class of 40 contained 70% women, and 2 very heavy people, one of each gender. This last observation, either offensive or innocuous depending on the correctness of your outlook or circumference of your girth, was important because I had planned some hypothetical case studies for the class to tackle, and a pair of them are titled "Fat Boy 1" and "Fat Boy 2." I always wonder about what the use of them does to overweight people in class, though the plumpness of the boys in the examples is not gratuitous; it's necessary for the case to work.

Yesterday at work, we were all introduced to a new telephone system. It seems fairly complicated at first, but it has a bunch of useful features, and really takes very little time for the normally able to operate. It was purchased from, and installed by, a part of the A.T. &T. folks, and was up and running this morning when we all arrived. Some of the trainers/installers also remained behind to hand-hold the few who couldn't quite sort it out yet, and revealed to us, whether by accident or design, that this system offers **enormous** advances on surveillance technology. Now the uncharacteristic desire on the part of the partners to pay for this monster becomes clearer. In a management meeting on Monday, the resident computer wanker, Warren, worked hard to sell to them the idea that a C-note a month for Internet connection would be a worthwhile investment, particularly for those of us who had to research textbooks and other educational publications the company cranks out. There is literally not one adequate in-house reference resource, and those of us who write and rewrite are forced to take time off from work to travel as far as an hour's drive to look up works in university libraries. Internet access would bring resources unobtainable from any other source as close as a mouse click away. But the partners didn't want to spend the hundred bucks. But to be able to overhear and trace employee phone calls, both incoming and outgoing? Wheelbarrows full of money must have been dumped on this project.

Well, I shouldn't complain; nobody ever calls me, except by mistake. And the employees were treated to an impromptu pizza lunch for our long-suffering acquiescence in the communications transition.

Tuesday, September 2, 1997

Well Labor Day has come and gone with little in my labors of the past week or two to

spur an additional entry in this journal. One amusing event did take place -- amusing for the non-participants. Warren, the computer maven, stuck something in his eye at work, temporarily blinding himself, and requiring medical attention beyond that offered by the first aid kit. He went to a doctor, was attended to, and also got fitted for a Kid Shaleen/Schweppes or Hathaway Man eye patch. On his way back, his newly reduced vision sent him falling down some stairs and he broke his foot. Only in a Dilbert strip could something like this happen.

My job at A.D. Banker is no different than it was last month. No one seems to mess with me, and I do appreciate that, though I wonder how they'll feel if my final deadline slips. It doesn't seem likely at this point, since I have the book about 40% finished with nearly 4 months left to go. In my desperation to find another job in another career field, I looked at the *National Business Employment Weekly* last week, but it was as barren as my vasectomized semen. There was a little tabloid, *Employment Journal*, on the rack next to it, so I thumbed through it. SOL again. However, in the back of the magazine, there was an opportunity to send away for reprints of past articles, and one of them caught my eye. It was titled "Ethically Speaking," and it was described as a tell-all story of what kinds of hot positions are available in the ethics biz. Fulfilling P.T. Barnum's truism, I sent in my \$7.95. It sure beats \$3900 at Haldane.

Wednesday, September 3, 1997

I've noticed, and you may have noticed much earlier, that my emotional life is being narrowed into the boring field occupied by resignation, guilt, shame, and depression. At least manic-depressives have those wonderful wild moments to look forward to when the doldrums seem interminable. Us depressive-depressives are SOL, to overuse an acronym always handy for the depressed. Last night Visa wanted to know why I had become 3 months in arrears in my

maxed out Gold Card. What could I say? I'm employed. My take-home pay is less than \$1500 a month, and that will be dramatically reduced in a month when my "benefits" kick in. They informed me that because of my elite status as a 90-day wonder, i.e., it's been 90 days and they wonder where the fucking money is, that the interest rate on my burgeoning account will be raised, and perhaps seconded. Great news. American Express has seen no money from me in 3 months, as well. They don't send me statements any more, but manifestos.

I've also noticed, coupled with the first observation of this day's entry, that I am mightily absorbed in my work at A.D. Banker. While the topic of business ethics is very interesting to me, I have often been a very social person in past workplaces, sometimes to the detriment of job efficiency. I used to spend so much time visiting Mata at her desk in the National Weather Service Office of Hydrology before we were engaged that her boss had to call my boss to rein me in. It might be worth noting that her desk was about 4 miles from mine. Nowadays, I get to work, open the computer, and start typing. Or, I get a stack of journals and a fistful of highlighters, and read the words of the insipid. Ever the slowest one to catch on to human motivations, especially my own, it seems to me that I am using work as an escape from the rest of my life. It's an odd reversal on what most people profess. How difficult must life be to face if a fairly menial occupation, meanly compensated, has become more fascinating than anything else in my world.

Friday, September 5, 1997

We discovered today that we will not be paid for our Labor Day holiday. The other person implied by that pronoun is the other person hired as a writer on the same day as me: Tom. He also is nearly stone-ignorant of insurance, having just received his M.A. in English from

Emporia State. In two ways, I am more fortunate than him. I would guess I am making a little more money, since they initially tried to wheedle me into accepting \$20K instead of my regal \$24K. And secondly, he is working on a project **totally** alien to his background and experiences: annuities. At least the ethics text I am writing calls upon an interest and expertise I enjoy exploiting, though not being exploited for. Tom was lost from Day One, but seems to be doing his research quite assiduously.

At home, Mata and I have reached an impasse in our marriage -- again. We haven't spoken civilly in two or three days, and it is taking a toll on my ability to concentrate at work. Just a few days ago in this journal, I noted that I work, in part, to escape the reality of the rest of my life. The disease of my marriage has begun to spread and infect my working hours now, and that means I get no peace from the guilt and anger which alternately torment me. I haven't slept well this week, either, which is always a bad sign, since that has always been a source of refreshment for me. This weekend may be a bumpy one.

From my perspective, the problem has its source in Mata's intransigence concerning Primerica. We need another source of income -- desperately -- and I have suggested periodically she take a part-time or temporary job to run at least until we have righted ourselves, financially. She has done literally no business in this past month, and seems uninterested in drumming up any, though she does seem passionately committed to sitting by the phone waiting for it to come her way. My third job starts next month, and my second one hasn't begun paying yet, so we are stuck with my \$300 a week take home, after deductions and groceries/gas have been extracted. If we paid nothing else: car, house, utilities, insurance, it would still take 2 months just to pay off American Express. The 1992 Corolla is paid off, but nearly inoperable. It needs a new clutch,

has an unrepaired front-end crunch which took off a headlight and punctured the radiator, and all this will set us back more than one month's take home pay. We're doomed, especially if I'm the only one in the workforce. Of course, another, equally plausible alternative is for me to find some additional weekend work, especially something which pays off immediately. If I could squeeze in an extra 20 hours between when I get off Friday and when I go back to work Monday, even at only \$7.00 an hour, it would amount to another \$100 a week, take home, to help chisel away at our granitic glob of debt.

Darting in and out of the rat-a-tat-tat of my conscious thought for the past few weeks have been the parallels between Primerica and religion. If Mata is a typical example, the former feeds on shamelessly bogus associations with the latter in order to give its agenda *faux* credibility. When I talk to her about the accelerating downward spiral of our financial condition, her main responses are ones of hope, faith, and belief. I mention net worth, bills unpaid, our Incredible Shrinking IRAs, and she responds by claiming (correctly) that I don't have sufficient faith in (choose one) the process, her skill, divine intervention, or any combination of the three. My philosophical background leads me to be skeptical of claims unsupported by evidence, or (more to the point in this instance) claims refuted by all available evidence to which she was a direct contributor. She is very religious; faith comes easily to her. However, is faith the best response to **every** occasion? There are phenomena which are difficult or impossible to demonstrate empirically. The foundations of religion come to mind. Then faith seems to be the only basis upon which to affirm anything. In other cases, evidence is not difficult to locate, but one might have moral qualms about attempting to obtain it. The fidelity of one's spouse is an example of this. A detective could settle that question, if there were one, for a few hundred or thousand

dollars, but trust seems a more appropriate path to take. Financial activities are not in this area at all. Evidence which needs little in the way of interpretation can be found easily and, I feel, should be authoritative in the case of questions. Her losing streak with Primerica should not be a test of faith, but a test of rationality, and rationality follows the argument and the evidence which comprise the premises thereof. When there is evidence of an overwhelmingly singular nature, and where the stakes of the venture are serious, reliance on faith is an evasion of the most treacherous nature.

I know how difficult it is to escape your private life at work since I am in an office where the woman who sits directly outside the door of the office Tom and I share (Steve has been kicked into Scott's now-vacated digs) cackles and clucks continually, and this morning has treated to all within earshot to a review of her dating life prior to marriage. The saga was as boring as I anticipated. Most people do seem to put in an honest day's work here, which I can verify by my memories of federal employment. Of course, that latter experience was paradigmatic of rampant sloth, and may be a comparison with which any workplace looks dedicated and efficient. My state of impaired spirit has begun to make me physically ill. I'm not dashing frantically to the rest room, yodeling breakfast, but a feeling of tangible malaise, exceeding even Jimmy Carter's wildest hyperbole, weighs me down like too much time spent in a Shoney's all-you-can-eat line.

Monday, September 8, 1997

This weekend gave my spirits a temporary lift. Mata and I finally talked, and she'll make a better-faith attempt to find work this week. On Saturday, my grandson Mikey played his first Pop Warner football game of the season. At 9 years of age, he appears to be the youngest and

smallest kid on the team, but played like he would be forced to hand-wash his own uniform if he brought it home soiled. Even though he played the running back position, he didn't touch the ball during the entire game. He also played either linebacker or defensive end when the Panthers didn't have the ball, and continued his uncharacteristically fastidious habits. They won, however, which is what most people want to know. All the members and coaches of the team are black. The team we played was all-white. On our side of the field, only a Latino woman and myself broke the color barrier. One of the strongest memories I took from the afternoon, however, was how angrily and cruelly the opposing coach shouted at his team on the field. Our coaches shouted, too, but never with the edge of mean-spiritedness which came from the other man across the field. I was tempted to stroll over to listen to what he told his players when they were nearby. Was this some kind of motivational anomaly, or did this represent the man's true self? I also wondered if he resorted to racial epithets and slurs to motivate his team to beat a non-white one.

Sunday's good news came in two unconnected parts. First, I decided to make a few loaves of cracked wheat bread without a recipe, and they came out magnificently. The second part came with a telephone call from someone at the Kansas City *Star*. Since we are subscribers, I was certain that Mata had neglected to pay the most recent invoice, and that we were being dunned during the church hour. After all, miscreants like us can also be counted on to be infidels, as well. Apparently, however, we are still in good graces with the bean-counting side of the hometown newspaper. The woman who called didn't act as if she knew. She wanted to inform me that I had been chosen a winner in the annual vacation photo contest. From over 2000 entrants, 18 were chosen to clutter a special few pages of the September 21st paper, and I'm one

of them. The exact places awarded haven't been decided yet, she said, but everybody gets a little something. I may have to raise the price I was going to charge Bobby for the reprints of the wheelchair softball tournament.

Friday, September 19, 1997

On Tuesday of this week I officially became an A.D. Banker employee, and disappeared from the Temp Scope of BTS. What makes that a notable achievement, other than my evident desperation for continued employment at any wage, is that it permits me to have the "sign-in code." With it, I log in my attendances and absences every day on the computers. What was remarkable was that the attendance log is open for all to see. Since I have difficulty in attributing any other than Machiavellian motives to the owners/managers of this establishment, I figure there must be a reason for allowing all of us to see the time schedule of all other employees. Of course, the partners do not time in and out. Since bottom-of-the-barrel compensation is the rule here, I have been astounded at how many people with families work at this place, some without part-time work elsewhere. A glance at the automated time sheet has given a partial explanation. Quite a few employees here are scheduled for 10 and 11 hour work days, 5 days a week. Saturday work is not unknown; in fact, there's a special section on employee dress code for Saturday work in the Employee's Manual. Since all of us, other than the glazed eyes and ringing ears of the Customer Service folks, are salaried, the Legree family of A.D. Banker would appear to give a few people a quasi-living wage only in exchange for hours that would have made a 19th-Century English sweatshop owner proud.

Last night, on the Bravo Channel, I watched, with steadily increasing feelings of guilt and shame, a one-hour documentary on Edward Albee. Other than the excessive number of

times the screen was filled with the fawning, self-important interviewer, it was a fine show. When Albee described the way he wrote plays, it was nearly identical to the way I have done it. My unfinished play on friendship, barely one act old, needs my attention, but I arrive home at the end of the day without a word in my system. Initially, I had thought that writing, and filling my mind with words all day would increase my capacity for writing, but the opposite seems true. This journal barely gets an entry a week, my correspondents are beginning to wonder if I've been dragooned into the Federal Witness Protection Program, and no other projects have gotten anything out of me, other than non-linguistic ones, e.g., photography. Still, when I send out my resume each week, it is usually for other word-associated jobs.

Part of my hiatus in corresponding is as a result of two events occurring last week. CompuServe, my e-mail link to the Psycho Friends Network, finally suspended my address and use of their aether. They seem to be under the impression that the small amount of use I subject the system to requires my compensating them on a regular basis. My previous method of accomplishing that was to permit American Express to advance them whatever they required, and then I would forward that sum to the Gold Card people whenever they requested it. Well, they have been requesting it more frequently than I have been able to provide it, and as a result, they have decided to cast me adrift in a sea of pseudo-insolvency. The second event is linked to an identical one in late June, not thought sufficiently important to record here at the time. Then, my Panasonic laser printer experienced what seems to be some kind of mechanical anorexia. It was diagnosed sight unseen as a "feeding problem" by some sub-literate wonk at the wrong end of an 800 number. Were I to provide them with a credit card number capable of sustaining a \$100 jolt, they'd send me a reconditioned model, and I could use the box and prepaid shipping to send my

old one back to them. No other repair option was offered. This proved a valuable lesson in technology today. Nothing can be fixed any more. A feeding problem is cured by an entire viscera transplant. If the Panasonic people ever elbow their way into the health care field, look out: hangnails will be attended to by amputation at the shoulder.

Though unemployed at the time, I was still able to pay for the exchange, and have since then used the rehabbed replacement to print up the resumes and cover letters jeered at by all who read them, which is approximately 10% of those who receive them. Since my 'new' printer was genetically identical to the old one, its eating disorder had been programmed in as a permanent feature of its personality, much like family members who display the same slouch, gait, predisposition to heart trouble, or whining. This printer, too, began to refuse nourishment, and again I summoned the tech school dropout at 1-800-USUCKER to send me yet another malformed sibling. But things were different this time around. Since the current printer had only been drinking toner for 2 months, the replacement was free, but I still needed a credit card number to ensure that they'd get my exchange one. None of my plastic passed the test, and neither did Mata's. So here I am, unable to get what is rightfully mine according to the guarantee provided me in June, as a direct result of my being unable to give the credit card companies what is rightfully theirs according to the contract I have with them. I suppose there's a moral symmetry in these events. However, just as American Express and Visa will get everything I owe them, plus a handsome tip in the form of interest payments, I'll get my next replacement printer. I can ship this printer back first, at my expense, and when it arrives, they'll forward another of its kind to serve me for the next 2 months.

Monday, September 22, 1997

All the offices at work are being re-carpeted this week, so we had to move our furniture and possessions, as well as the contents of the bookcases which reside within, to an out-of-the-way place to permit the workers access. They were stashed in the nursery, which afforded my first chance to see where the partners's brats frolic. Michael Jackson's kid should have it so nice. The room is exceptionally large -- bigger than 2 or 3 normal offices, and it has a full kitchen attached and a complete assortment of any plaything known to Toys 'R Us. There is another room attached to the playground, and it contains a fitness area for use only by the partners. A treadmill faces a TV/VCR setup, and remotes lie around in easy reach. To be fair, the facilities are apparently used regularly, since the partners are the most fit-appearing people in the workplace. However, the children continue to rollerblade through the halls, despite freshly-laid carpet.

Tuesday, September 30, 1997

A mammoth job fair was scheduled today, to be held about a quarter mile from the office, so I grabbed a fast food lunch and spread my good cheer and impeccable resume to dozens of booths. Since I only had, at most 35 minutes of actual schmoozing time, I had to be focused on making my visit as effective as possible. It is easy to spot the job fair veterans. They only hit the booths with cheap giveaways in the form of pens, wearing apparel, and Faberge eggs, and grab all they could stuff into the plastic bags given out at the doors. While one expects a fair amount of sartorial uniformity at such events, I was truly amazed at the disparity in what passed for job-hunting spiffy. Since a large section of the exhibitors were looking for techno-nerds, that breed can probably dictate their own terms to the salivating companies, including apparel. The two hard-drive denizens of A.D. Banker, Warren and yet another Steve, apparently aren't required to

don necktie as a condition of employment, since I've never seen them with one on. Whether they are perceived as being 'sub-professional' by the partners, or they have been able to extort the conditions of their choosing from work -- on pain of total system failure if they are not permitted -- is still a mystery to me.

I also had a clearer idea of what I wanted to sell as my primary ability when I went to a booth, and that helped make for brief visits. Actually, I had **two** clear ideas: ethics and writing. Consequently, I had two very different resumes, depending on the likely requirements of the firm in question. Ethics is still a very hard sell. These recruiters at job fairs are the front-lines grunts of the human resources world, and seldom do they come to such events with ethics consultants on their lists of 'must find.' Of those I talked to about it today, the ones who were able to restrain themselves from rolling their eyes upwards until they slammed against the tops of their skulls told me that the person I need to speak with wasn't there today. Usually, they didn't exactly know who this person was that I should talk to, but it sure wasn't anyone there with a name tag. Either they would lamely ask for a resume, or I would press one into unexpectant hands, and our conversation would trail off into mumbles. I did try to foist myself off as a medical ethicist at an agency which supplies needle-wielders and back-pummelers to hospitals and clinics, and for my troubles at amusing them, the people there feigned genuine excitement and interest. The wonders of modern pharmacology.

The Kansas City *Star* was there as a co-sponsor of the event, and I tried to look like a writer. I was far too sober to do justice to the impersonation, and I get the feeling that not a lot of hard-drinking reporters and columnists have survived into the unindulgent '90s. The paper had a photo spread a few Sundays back, showing the people who write for the various departments, and

a group of more well-scrubbed Sunday School teachers you could not find. Only Charles Gusewelle looks like he's a double-shot away from the gutter, which might be why he's just entrusted to write narratives that take place in isolated deep-woods cabins, or countries with a reputation for serious juicing, like France and Russia. Maybe my blue shirt and power tie look is more to their liking these days. I dropped off a writing sample at their table: two entries from this journal.

Wednesday, October 1, 1997

Yesterday marked six months since returning to the U.S. from Japan, and it has been the worst six months of my recent life. The lack of worthwhile employment and our deteriorating financial condition are only the most visible signs of this estimation of mine. They are, in principle, subject to change, though the latter will be more gradual than the former, and also largely dependent on it. I don't play the lottery or games of chance, and no one in my family is likely to die other than me.

On the last day of March I was sitting in the international departure area of Kansai International Airport, clutching, and being clutched by, my former student, Shoko, while tears began to dry on both our cheeks and chins, perhaps knowing the pain which was to come would be even worse than the pain of parting. In separating, there is someone to share your seeming inconsolable grief. Now there is no one. The plunge downward is somehow cushioned when someone else joins you. Sounds like another remake of "Days of Wine and Roses," and there may be some aptness in that parallel, substituting for the alcohol. When I got home last night, there were two letters from former students waiting for me. One, from Kazuko, was **faxed** to me; three pages of hand-written chit-chat from Japan! I know what the international long

distance charges are in that country, and it probably cost her \$10 to do that. It's hard to get a weekly call from Inga these days, and she lives in the same Zip Code.

The presence of so many medical establishments made me realize that I missed a great opportunity at the job expo yesterday. I promised the temp agency mentioned yesterday that I would send them a *curriculum vitae*, the academic form of a resume, with a more detailed explanation of the ways in which your abilities have been dawdled away on campus. Thinking about that last night, I remembered telling the woman I had talked to that the *C.V.* would show my background in medical ethics more clearly, since nothing in any of my myriad of resumes had that as a feature. I suddenly realized that the ethical problems of the medical establishment, and of medical practitioners in the coming century, will be problems of business ethics as much as they will be of biomedical ethics. Those latter are the old problems of the '70s and '80s, and while issues like abortion and euthanasia will still challenge the individual moral intuitions, the most far-reaching ethical quandaries are now, and will continue to be the accommodating of business imperatives to effective patient care. Someone with a background in both will be needed in medicine starting now, if not before. The recent scandal of Columbia HCA and its deposed president point to a need for moral perspectives which understand both kinds of issues. So, I'll write to all the local hospitals with some kind of a one-page, cogent exposition of this thesis, yet another one-off resume, and unbated breath.

Friday, October 3, 1997

On the first Friday of each month, the company apparently schedules a general celebration of the birthdays of employees and anniversaries of service. One of many things which has amazed me about this day is that Tom and I were recognized for reaching the

milestone of 3 months! How bad is it when a company actually finds it worth noting that a person has endured for a quarter of a year in its employment? I have also mused about the prevalence of overweight people on the payroll here, mostly women. When I returned from Japan the number of fat people in this country struck me anew, though not physically, I am pleased to report. More than half the women who work here are visibly overweight, and about one-third of that number are pathologically so. Is this a coincidence, or can a theory yet be wrung out of a seeming innocuous factoid? My mind has nothing better to do than the latter, so here goes.

A.D. Banker is a low-paying, but employee-friendly workplace, if you don't look beneath the surface of the employee-employer relationship. There is literally no room for any but insignificant advancement in the company. It's a great place to come, pick up a paycheck, and not be impeded by any lack of ambition. People who stay here have, for the most part, given up. Given up on making something of their abilities, controlling their weight, sweet tooth, sloth, and other human frailties I smugly claim to have defeated by will alone. It's a little like a worse-paying government job with fewer benefits. Both have a silver-haired patriarch to keep an eye on things, much like a stern but forgiving father figure these women wish they had been blessed with in life. Of course, one of the father figures is figurative -- Uncle Sam -- but Leon is the apotheosis of the role in reality, as his tall, nearly gaunt figure strides the halls, reaching out with a deep Kansas voice to bring all us errant children into his extended nest.

One call back from the Tuesday job expo yesterday was a woman from a head-hunting firm who wanted to know whether I was fluent in Lotus Word Pro. I was not, and remain so. She had a technical writer position available in Dallas for Burlington Northern, and would pay

relocation and temporary housing expenses. She wasn't quick to mention the pay, though I did slip the word 'compensation' into our phone conversation as an opening for her. She rose to the bait not at all, which mirrors my fishing experiences as a youth. Her promise to call me back today before 11:30 is five minutes from being a lie.

The biggest, and best-publicized consulting firm at the expo was Andersen Consulting, and while I tried to look like what they wanted, the two people at the booth had all the eager faces they could handle, and the best I got was a one-page information sheet with some phone numbers on it. The name next to one of the numbers was that of a former student of mine, Shelby, from Baker University. I recall that I neglected to flunk her partying ass out of my courses, and I think she was in an ethics class I taught. I know she was in the freshman Critical Thinking ordeal all have to endure, or at least remain conscious through. Could it be that I have discovered the raveled end of a network to explore? I called her number this morning, but heard, through voice mail, that she is out of the office all day. I'll call again Monday.

Thursday, October 9, 1997

Yesterday was our first fire alarm of the Fall season, and what a thrill it was to trudge down 16 flights of stairs to find 1.) That it was raining outside, and 2.) The alarm was false. The closest thing to smoke I smelled were the fumes generated by the overfed and underflexed thighs rubbing together in the stairwell on their way down to safety. And somebody ought to come in and paint murals on the walls of those stairwells if false alarms start to become a source of amusement for sickos on the 2nd floor.

Tonight I take on my first ethics class at Avila, and I am already certain that 2 classes in successive nights was a ghastly mistake. I am already whipped from last night's Intro class at

Juco, but that's primarily because they make me work for my pay. It shouldn't take 5 hours to get through excerpts from Descartes and Locke, but it has. Speaking of *tabula rasa*. Vacant faces staring back at me show that Locke underestimated the situation. Those minds are blank slates after 2 weeks of trying to explain him. At Avila, the class size is only 12, and the subject is ethics, but they expect us to keep everyone in their seats for 4 full hours on a work night: 6 to 10. If they are like previous classes, the clock-watching will become epidemic after 9:00.

Including by me.

Monday, October 13, 1997

This past weekend my business ethics book-in-progress seems to have provided some interesting reading for one of the partners. In a meeting held a week ago, four of us presented brief overviews of our projects for the company, as well as printed copies for them of evidence of what we were claiming as progress. No one could be expected to actually read the 200+ pages I had thrown on the table, but one partner apparently did. She communicated to the managing editor, Cynthia, her distaste for what I had deemed 'progress,' and I was summoned into a closed-door meeting for an attitude adjustment. If you've read as many pages as I have written thus far, you know how likely an adjustment actually is, sufficient to alter my behavior. But it was just what I needed to add an exclamation point on a weekend of full-frontal depression, no sex (and none desired), and 48 hours in the kitchen. Cooking has become another activity which takes me away from my circumstances for a brief amount of time, just as work had done until recently. As the circumstances of my employment become more clearly intolerable, and past due bills continue to accrue interest, I find that the work environment offers no escape from my depressed state, but is an element of it. When I am cooking, I place myself in another world

where I can accomplish what I set out to do, to the general approval of all who care to evaluate the results. Mata doesn't eat much of what I cook anymore, but I find I am cooking less for her than for my own sense of survival. Not physical, nutritional survival, but some sense in which I recognize something admirable in myself.

Well, the revisions I am directed to perform on the manuscript will affect about 85% of what I have written so far, and one pivotal chapter will have to be burned. In it, I use examples to illustrate ethical principles which get referred to very often in the chapters which follow. Not only do the principles return constantly, but also the examples which illustrate them, since they are very striking and memorable ones, if I do say so. Too striking for the partner, who was offended by mention of death in most of them. Of course, death and insurance have never been known to frequent the same hallway, so her puzzlement is understandable. Unfortunately, I had used the illustrations for three legitimate reasons: one, to make sure they, and the principles behind them, **were** memorable; and two, because it was necessary, I felt, to use sharp-edged examples to establish the usefulness or validity of the principles initially, prior to sliding them into the gray muck of business examples. Third, in using examples outside the insurance and financial services fields, I wanted to establish that ethical principles in the book had more than application to mere business situations. The partner, Debby, wants all the examples in the book to be directly relevant to insurance workers. The problem with that approach, as I see it, is that keeping all ethical principles expressed as if they are purely applicable to the business in question will make it easy to sacrifice those principles for the sake of business expediency. If they are seen as having no life or repercussions outside the company, they can also be seen as just another part of being in business -- to be dumped if not profitable.

Wednesday, October 15, 1997

Another closed-door meeting concerning the book this morning, this time with Debby's brother, Dennis, and Cynthia. It isn't as bad as I had feared. Unfortunately, acting on those fears, I sent an intemperate three-page memo yesterday to Cynthia sketching out my version of a worst-case scenario and an offer to fall on my sword. That won't be necessary, though it wasn't rejected out of hand, I add, glancing nervously from side to side. Depression and paranoia are the Siamese Twins of my psyche these days; one is never seen without the other, and therefore both are entirely too prominent in my conscious life. I need a vacation from myself in the worst way.

Monday, October 20, 1997

I need to revise something I wrote earlier concerning the hours and compensation at A.D. Banker. Commenting on the low wages which are apparently rampant here, I noted that several people on the payroll are scheduled for large hours every day, e.g., 6:45 A.M. to 6:00 P.M., and tied those sweatshop hours to the only possibility one has to make a decent living. I was wrong, but I'm not sure whether the revised situation is better or worse. I mentioned the phenomenon to Steve, who has more than 8 hours in his daily schedule, and he said that the start and end times on the schedule merely denote a work "window" within which he can work any 8 consecutive hours he chooses. But no work beyond 8 hours. I wonder if everyone is on the same general schedule. Lots of people who come in before I do also stay later than I do. Do they get time-and-a-half for their overtime, or is it their little gift to the partners? I'd lay my wad on the latter.

On Friday night, Dateline NBC did a hidden-camera expose on employment services like Haldane, and it was not only chilling but had an personal aspect of *deja vu* to it for me. Some of

the lines used by the recruiter/counselor in the sting were almost verbatim echoes of what Alex had said to me in my two visits. Of course, I never paid them any money, so I couldn't judge the parallels between the Washington company NBC did a number on and Haldane, after you committed yourself, and your money, to their care. Luckily, Steve also saw the program, and he confirmed that his *vu* had more than a *soupcou* of *deja* to it as well. In particular, Haldane seemed to have a propensity for shifting its clients around from one counselor to another once the check cleared. You are unlikely to know who will be meeting with you for any given appointment, and as the TV show depicted, they vary significantly in preparation and competence. He said he'd been through about 4 of them, which exceeded the number of interviews they arranged for him by 4.

Thursday, October 23, 1997

Sex and death. What's the difference? I've been mentally preoccupied with thoughts of my own death recently. When I was younger, my mind dwelled, to excess, on sexual thoughts. That certainly didn't make me unique as a young man, but I'm beginning to see both these as mental preoccupations of men who are failures. When you are young, sex makes you feel alive even when the rest of your life is stagnant and meaningless. Sex gives it meaning, even when real sex is rare and disillusioning. Eventually, you discover sex to be the sham it is, and realize that, with no prospects for success remaining in life, only death is genuine. The problem, as anyone can see, is that death is a one-time event, Hindu beliefs to the contrary, and whatever sense of satisfaction you might think accompanies it will be squandered quickly and eternally. So, in the final analysis, death is as uninspiring as sex, though it can be made less messy for the fastidious. Still, both are frauds, and one is left with a sense that neither life nor death is any

great bargain, except as spectator sports for the sadistic.

What are my options? Perhaps my recent fatalistic venture into a high-fat diet may decide that for me, but absent ticker turpitude, several more years of sleepwalking into the eventual arms of The Reaper is likely to be the best I can hope for.

Wednesday, October 29, 1997

Greetings from the cellulite capital of Kansas. Someone else (Jeff) had a birthday celebration today, and a fatty cake with sour cream icing and a jug of sugary quasi-fruit punch was our punishment for being present today. I've gained about 15 pounds since July, and I wish it were the prosperity doing it to me. But twice or thrice a week some marginally official occasion is announced -- usually a birthday -- and a cake and drinks suddenly appear from nowhere and we waddle up to the trough, snorting and grunting. You can nearly hear the seams of dresses and drawers groan under the pressure of new calories looking for a place to reside, permanently. Friday is Halloween, and the company has some sort of chili cook-off scheduled in lieu of earning our minimum wage. Never being one prone to overwork in the service of someone else's hoarded affluence, I have volunteered to participate as one of the chefs. On an unrelated note, I have resolved never again to work in a building where you can't jump out its windows.

Monday, November 3, 1997

The chili contest was no contest. Eight people opened cans and tore envelopes of some company's idea of what the masses thought chili should taste like. Ground beef was dispatched from under plastic wrap with a Piggly Wiggly label on it, and some people, it being Halloween, even donned costumes as a way of avoiding work for as many hours as they could. First prize

went to Brad, who revealed his secret to all in attendance; he followed the instructions on the Williams Chili Seasoning package without deviation. Second prize went to something that looked and tasted more like chicken a la king. Mine was an also-ran, guaranteed by the fact that it actually tasted like something not found in a can. Two of the renditions highly praised had such a notable taste of tomato paste that I suspected that it might have been ground chuck, catsup, and a couple of chopped onions. The phrase ‘pearls before swine’ is more than a metaphor.

Monday, November 17, 1997

Finally, the health care benefit of employment has kicked in, and I immediately called the physician I signed up to serve me, in order to obtain a prescription for the *nummular eczema* which has begun to torment my feet, ankles, and elbows. The doctor I chose was unknown to me, but his office is within walking distance of my house, which should be useful unless I suffer gunshot wounds to the legs. The earliest he can squeeze me in is sixty days hence, by which time the eczema rash will have reduced my entire epidermis to the status of one running scab.

Welcome to health care in the modern world. I will have paid over \$500 in premiums before I am even capable of using the service.

Mata has actually begun to rake in a few premiums from Primerica. I honestly don’t hate to report this, though I’m sure you have your contrary opinions. I’d **love** for her to become a roaring success in that business, mainly because she promised me that I could quit working and write plays full-time if she did. At the Saturday meeting, she snagged over \$700 of checks, and claims to have more than that just waiting for a momentary weakness of will on someone’s part. If she went full-time in that business, and could support my habit of regular meals and occasional

clean clothes, I'd become her part-time secretary, handling the paperwork which saps so much of her attention and time. As long as I could set aside 3-4 hours every day for myself to write. This is probably the first time I have felt even slightly encouraged about her prospects with that company. Unfortunately, that would mean attending far more meetings than I care to, but I guess that would be a part of the deal. Maybe I can negotiate my way down to not more than one meeting a month, or 12 a year, which might wipe out my entire annual obligation with one weekend retreat.

Friday, November 21, 1997

The "Product" Division of this company, which means anything which is published under our name, decided earlier this week to have an informal lunch out today at a nearby Chinese restaurant. As divisions go, it's nothing more than 2 writers and 5 editors, which shows you how much original work is done here. While I've only been given a little narrow view into what the editors actually do, other than Robert Louis Stevenson's description -- to separate the wheat from the chaff; and print the chaff -- it seems as if the A.D. Banker editors are white-collar pirates by another name. They appear to take written material in a given subject by other companies and rework it just enough to escape any charges of plagiarism, then publish it unashamedly under the A.D. Banker label. Makes you proud to be an American, doesn't it?

I suppose the lunch is intended to be camaraderie-building, but it has been scuttled at the last minute by Dennis, one of the partners, who needs the managing editor, Cynthia, to participate in a noon conference call he is initiating. Knowing meetings presided over by him to be a treasure-trove of The Obvious, and lasting longer than Karen Ann Quinlan after they pulled the plug, I wonder if we should bring back something for poor Cynthia. She really is a patient

and long-suffering boss, and I continue to appreciate her non-interventionist management style, even when she stops in my office to find me playing in a crucial Microsoft Hearts Tournament. It will be interesting to observe her style when I miss my December 22 deadline.

The conference call took place earlier than was first scheduled, so luncheon went back on the agenda, with six of us in two cars, segregated by gender in some sort of insane sorting mechanism that no one seems to like but everyone seems to employ. The buffet was quite varied, if your idea of variety is satisfied by chicken cooked in as many ways as General Tso and his associates could imagine. For some reason, occasions like this bring out something in me which is ghastly to behold. Warren, the aforementioned tie-less computer wonk, is also a design editor, thus qualifying him to eat with the penniless intellectual elite of the company. He and I were definitely acting up, and not in the sense that we were Outing all the closet types around the table. Around people I know vaguely, and am not utterly repelled by, I often find myself playing rapid-fire punning and humor games. Warren enjoys doing that, too, and the two of us seemed to carry the entire entourage to a place few of them ever wanted to visit, but were forced to by merit of sitting at the same table with us. In retrospect, it might have been nicer, and more informative had I asked some innocuous questions about the lives and times of the other passengers, as they held onto the table-top with a white-knuckled death grip for fear of being hurled across the room and into a hot steamer tray of Muu-Shu Pork by the centrifugal force of our coupled wits. But I didn't, and strangers they remained. Cynthia was able to quickly slip in some information which led us all to believe that she was an accomplished pianist, and Julie's parents live on a farm in Baldwin City, a town where I taught at Baker University for the five years immediately preceding my Japan adventure. At meal's end, we all traded fortunes from our cookies until we ended up

with one which fit. Mine was: "Constant use will wear away anything -- especially friends."

Tuesday, November 25, 1997

This past weekend was one of the worst in terms of self-loathing. We went to a reading at The Writers's Place, invited by Bill and Gloria. We went, but were so impoverished that we couldn't come up with \$5 each at the door. I was prepared to bolt anyway, since I have never found the aesthetic purpose in poetry/prose readings. At most, they might possess some social utility, but being an unsociable sort myself, that doesn't add anything to the positive side of my ledger. Mata, however, once she was dressed and had her size 5s wedged into the door, was not about to retreat without finding out first whether the entrance fee could be waived for the insolvent. It could. The young man at the door was infinitely corruptible, and permitted us entry on our hard-luck story alone.

The woman doing the reading had won the 1996 Willa Cather Prize. Yes! The very same prize for which I had, earlier this year, been a disillusioned reader in the 1997 version. Her prize-winning collection of stories had just been published, and to celebrate that event, the publisher (Gloria) had invited both the author, and the final judge of last year's contest to present themselves for a public assessment. The judge had a famous literary last name -- Masters -- though it didn't usually appear followed by "and Johnson," but preceded by "Edgar Lee." This wasn't the long-deceased Edgar Lee Masters, originally from Kansas City, but his son, Hilary, also a writer. He provided the winner with an introductory speech so stuffed with dust jacket quotes that I wondered whether there was a secret contest on to see how much hyperbole could be crammed into a five-minute oration. Of course, this winner might indeed be the reincarnation of Dorothy Parker and Jane Austen, so I decided to let her own words speak for themselves.

When they did, they sounded prosaic and ordinary, and I wondered a second wonder of the night: how truly ordinary must the pages and chapters be which she rejected for this reading to family and friends. I'm now thinking Hilary could be impressed by the Yellow Pages.

However, when he read from his own recently-released memoir, it had a wealth of detail and the joy of living with words all one's life, that I was stumped to understand how he could write such interesting stuff, and still find her efforts anything but stultifying. The upside of this might be the workshop in memoir-writing which he is giving on Saturday morning, and to which Bill and Gloria have paid my fee. It seems likely to end up as a Love Feast, if his kind words for the plainest of prize-winning prose tonight is any indication, with only positive strokes passed out to the assembled would-be rube writers. That I could use, even if I know it's insincere. It turned out that all participants in the workshop were to have submitted a memoir in advance for Hilary to read and critique, and he would base the content of the workshop, after a few preliminary remarks, on a deconstructing of those offerings.

Somehow, while that information slipped past me undetected, I still managed to surmise, on my own, that it might be a good idea to bring something of mine in that genre for him to look at. Most of the submitted stuff was exceptionally dreary and unimaginative; pointless exercises in partial recall. At the end of the workshop, he announced that anyone who hadn't been able to hand in his or her sample could do so at that time, and he'd read it on the plane back to Pittsburgh, and return them with his comments. A very decent gesture, and I've taken advantage of it.

So why was I blue? One of the great things about depression is that it needs no rational basis for existing. Just like faith, it's either there, or it isn't, and no amount of persuasion in

either direction is likely to change that. I spent a couple of delightful hours Saturday afternoon with the attentions of my granddaughter, Madisen, who might, before everything is said and done, be the one person who saves my life. There were a lot of other family members around in that small living room, but she only had eyes for me, for the most part. We kissed incessantly at my parting, and I was truly touched. Perhaps I should reiterate, for the invasively prurient among you, that Madisen is about 500 days old.

And on Sunday, the Chiefs managed to prevent themselves from losing, which is the way they usually chalk up a “W” any more. It’s hard to call that ‘winning.’ So that shouldn’t have been a source of any greater angst than usual, but for some reason, or absence of same, I just nose-dived into despair, and blamed it on the usual suspect: Mata. We had a miserable, angry conclusion to the weekend, slept in the same bed without any unnecessary touching, and the spleen, instead of dissipating by morning, had intensified.

I called her at work by 10:00 to apologize and try to smooth things over, and one of the things which occurred to me during the time before the call, as I struggled with my own lack of self-comprehension, was that a lot of these feelings are directly related to my 18-month experience in Japan. Nothing new there, to any of us, but my interpretation of those months has now made an unanticipated 180-degree turn. I have previously thought of that time as the most wonderful of my life, something never experienced before, and not likely to be in the future. It is the treasure of my memory, where I can dip my mind incessantly and always come up with a reminiscence of richest value. On Monday morning, it hit me that those months were the worst time of my life, and I should rue the day I was ever contacted by Takahashi, spawn of the Pacific Rim Satan. It has ruined my life, which, I must ruthlessly admit, will never again take place

there. My life is here, in the U.S., and I now have this aberrant experience with which to compare life in these United States, always to the detriment of the latter. All the bad things which are happening now could have been avoided had I not signed that contract, and I probably would be teaching philosophy in a fir grove in the mountain of Southern California for decent money. That was the job Margot's sister was ready to fly me out to evaluate in summer of 1995. That theory spent about six or seven hours of serious residence in my conscious on Monday, and completely evaporated when I returned home. In the mail was a hand-made card, letter, and pictures for my birthday by a Japanese student to whom I was alarmingly devoted, Haruna. And a package also arrived, containing a video tape from three others of my favorites. Kazuko, Eri, and Kazuyo had taken a video camera to Shoin, and taped themselves, places on campus, and other people trying, with limited success, to speak English into the camera. It was touching and funny and far surpasses that shabby Rolex Mata was planning to get me. K., E., and K. Also took their camera to a train platform, and interviewed a couple of people they knew, but who didn't know me. It had a Richard Lester/Beatles kind of feel to it throughout, which matches the zany cast of characters who produced it. They ended up in Kyoto, an hour-and-a-half train ride east of Kobe, where they visited two of its famous temples, *Kiyomizu-dera*, and *Kinkaku-ji*. I had visited both, and *Kiyomizu* often, and it was so sweet of them to think of me in that regard. Well, how can I say terrible things about my time in Japan. No matter my inability to cope with being back and failing miserably, no blame attaches to those people, or that country, or with my decision to teach there for a year and a half. My troubles are my own, and just as Mata should not be the scapegoat for them, neither should Japan.

Wednesday, November 26, 1997

Today has been proclaimed “Pig-Out Day” -- I am not making this up -- by the powers that be at A.D. Banker. Those are the exact words in the office e-mail message to all from Cindy a week ago, announcing it and giving us all seven days to stockpile the required lard, butter, or Crisco to whip up our favorite bucket full o’ bilge. In addition, it’s the day before my birthday, and seeing that we are off tomorrow, the mandatory singing of “Happy Birthday” will reverberate off my office walls before the end of the day, complete with I can only imagine what in the way of sugary excess as a celebratory nosh. Yesterday, when we sang to Jodi for the same reason, I made a request for a twigs and bark cake to furnish some fiber lacking in the A.D. Banker diet. This morning, Mata had a sparse but sweet bouquet of flowers delivered to the office for me. It took me by surprise, since the next ones I expected to be purchased for me would be for my funeral. Does she know something about my health that I don’t? Or is it merely wishful thinking on both our parts? Then I remembered that this office building is directly adjacent to a cemetery (true), and so it is unlikely that she spent a lot of money on the posies. At least, I hope not, but the thought was an unanticipated kindness.

Show time! This noon I went in to the lunch room to eat my Cuban black beans and rice, but the dining table was crowded with the day’s Pig-Out fare, and it was barely possible to sit down. There was so much left that I decided the beans could wait for another day, and foraged on celery, crackers, and some unidentifiable paste meant to be spread on a plane surface and then fled from before it ate through the lacquer. A fruit bowl had also been supplied, and I peeled a tangerine to polish off the meal. One small piece of rind fell to the floor and, as I bent over to retrieve it, I heard the unmistakable ripping sound of thread separating from fabric in a violent and uncontrolled manner. The seams of my L.L. Beans had come apart like my late Aunt Doris

at a Jane Wyman movie. Luckily, no one was in the room but me, but a Braille inspection revealed, which is the perfect word for it, a total seam rupture, with my fart-stained boxers displayed for none to see. It takes little imagination to figure that no one actually **did** want to see anything beneath my outer garments, but I knew that my regulation birthday cake and songfest by the Moron Tabernacle Choir was still ahead, and standing is *de rigeur* when they get to the “Hallelujah Chorus.” I visited Cindy, head of Human Resources and, with my jacket tied around my waist, casually shielding the affected area, explained my problem, and asked whether going home to change pants was considered official company business. It was, and she didn’t even want to check the veracity of my story.

I returned confident that the eventual tribute could take place with little discomfort, other than to my eardrums. But the clock ticked past 3:00, 3:30, 4:00, and no unruly mob appeared at my office door, setting off the sprinkler system with the blazing candles. Oddly enough, someone named ‘Glenn’ was feted in late-morning on his 85th birthday, and he doesn’t even work here. He is the father of a senior partner, Karen, and known by most who work here. He seems to come in and trudge through the halls regularly, and I do remember seeing him upon occasion, but figured he was with building maintenance, or just another disoriented old-timer, fresh from visiting a grave site next door. We were all summoned to the lunch room to sing in Glenn’s honor, and share some sheet cake and toxic fruit punch, and dutifully did. By 4:30, no one was summoned to my office, except to see if Tom and I had remained awake following the gourmand-like excesses of the day. While I had initially rued the thought of the birthday formality, I slowly began to feel cheated. Maybe my curmudgeonly chickens were coming home to roost. 5:00 arrived, and I departed, unsung.

Monday, December 1, 1997

In the month following my birthday, a sparse committee of embarrassed employees finally came by with a chocolate Oreo cake (and nothing to wash it down) to wish me a happy month-after-my-birthday. I gave them a hard time, but they were willing to accept any level of abuse in order to earn a shot at the cake.

On the actual date of my birth this year, Mata had arranged that we accompany a Primerica colleague of hers, and her husband, to the town of St. Joseph, where his family was hosting a large dinner for the holiday. Not having to cook is no inducement for me at all, but the couple who would be vouching for us did own a dog about which I had heard wonderful things, even from the feline-favoring Mata. I would be allowed to romp and frolic with this dog named Amber for the hour prior to our departure as long as I behaved myself for the rest of the trip, prepare some sort of dish to contribute to the general larder, and wash all extremities which Amber had touched before again touching Mata. I was able to accomplish the first two, but the aroma of a dog on my person was a cologne I had not recently worn, and I let it linger until the next day. Mata did not. At least, around my person.

Friday, December 5, 1997

A message in office e-mail this Monday purported to remind me that I had volunteered to bring “treats” this Friday to kick off the general celebration of birthdays and anniversaries. I recall no such raising of my hand at an inappropriate time, but my name was on a list of the damned, five in total, which included two of the most gargantuan women in the place. I was the only male so dragooned. Also on the list was a sensibly proportioned woman, Jodi, who works just outside my office door, and so I struck up a conversation about our food assignment this

Friday. I hadn't made Tapas in a long time, and while there are a couple of Spanish restaurants in Kansas City, it seems unlikely that any of these culinary cave-dwellers have ever gambled their anesthetized palates on something so exotic. Jodi thought that something like that sounded like a good change from everyone's Thanksgiving indulgence, and suggested that she might bring some hummus and pita bread to add to the international theme. I then decided to survey the rest of the contributors. One of the behemoths, as mentioned above, said she already had what she wanted to bring and had stashed it under her desk even as we spoke. From which pantry she retrieved about 4 boxes of candy canes. I suppose that's meant to represent the North Pole/Arctic contingent, though a few pounds of whale blubber or a freshly clubbed baby seal might be more appetizing.

Now let me reiterate, this is meant to be a fastening of the feed bag in anticipation of all the individual celebrations of the December birthdays and anniversaries of time in service. This is just to practice for all the daily parties for specified honorees on his or her special day. And it's also in addition to any spontaneously announced 'pig-out day' which might be declared in the flush of business success or doldrums of morning sickness. That last is not merely a rude sexist comment. It is a rude sexist comment, but not merely that. Sometime in October, three employees discovered they were pregnant, and all began experiencing morning sickness simultaneously. If the women's rest room is similar to the men's it has only two stalls. That confluence of the stars and DNA seemed to signal a crescendo of food days, so I am not certain that scheduling of extra gorging times is entirely random.

I ended up making four separate dishes for today's scarf-fest, including a pretty fine pate, if I do say so, made with pork, lamb, walnuts, and juniper berries. As anticipated, someone did

ask me what those little black things were all over my meatloaf. He still lives only by virtue of the fact that I am an old man.

Thursday, December 11, 1997

In the office e-mail this afternoon was the news that my immediate supervisor, Cynthia, was leaving the company in a week to take a position in the city of her residence, Lawrence. Other than the fact that she was my editor, we shared the following other similarities, as distinguished from the rest of the A.D. Banker people by being 1.) **Not** pregnant, 2.) Literate, 3.) And truly not in anyone's face. Cynthia has always been willing to drop whatever project she was on to help me with some new software, or a question about A.D. Banker procedures and format. She'll be missed for several reasons. First, it seems most likely they'll bring in someone from the outside to take her job, even though she was promoted to the position from within. I don't know who else is even marginally qualified for the position, other than Tom and I, and I'm pretty dubious that either of us will get the golden nod from Dennis. Steve already said he's uninterested, especially after the results of his annual review, in which the company gave him about a 3.8 % increase in pay, in spite of the fact that he is literally doing the work of two people now that Scott has left, and not been replaced. Perhaps there's someone lurking in the shadows of Customer Service, with a degree in English and ambitions above a headset and screen full of course offerings. And the degree in English may not be mandatory, since Cynthia's is in philosophy. Two things do seem certain. My life will probably be more strictly monitored after she's gone; and no one as supportive of my approach to the subject and my mode of expression is likely to exist in the real world of ready employees.

Monday, December 15, 1997

In the labyrinth of concessions which compromise a marriage, ours has two major themes: Primerica and Religion. There are few things Mata asks me to do against either my will or better judgment, and perhaps I should be grateful. There are even fewer I ask of her, though that sounds smugly self-serving. Perhaps I am so acutely aware of my own discomfort and resentment at the ones I go along with to suit her that it cautions me against a like tack. Both of hers involve the common theme of recruitment, and, stripping away any kind of pretense she may have to the contrary, she wants me to climb onboard both trains, heart and soul. I resist both for reasons completely separate from her insistence. She knows how I feel and the reasons for my resistance. In a long and painful fax I sent her from Japan two falls ago, I explained my religious beliefs, or lack of same, in as much detail as I could. She accepted that condition, or appeared to, but it might just have been the fact that we were apart for the first time in our marriage, and missing each other dominated any other feelings we may have had. My disquiet about Primerica has been on the record for several years, as well, and I never bring up either subject, thinking them closed. I guess, to her, they never are. The belief in redemption is a wonderful thing, and I share it upon occasion. But I don't feel as if there's anything about either of those two subjects where I require a fundamental attitude adjustment, and so I am put out when forced to sit through presentations blatantly, and I feel, ignorantly, designed to manipulate someone's point of view. There's a fundamental difference between enlightenment and manipulation, and I respond well and often enthusiastically to rationally presented examples of the former. In the 2 arenas in which she is trying to prod me into acceptance, enlightenment and reason seem more feared than employed.

So that's the long-winded introduction to yesterday afternoon's interminable hours at a

Kansas City church called something with the words “Sheffield” and “Life” in its name. While it is a proudly interracial assembly, for which it should rightly be acclaimed, it sounds virulently homophobic, and excessively literalist in its approach to the Bible. See, I’m not a completely lost soul; I capitalized the name of The Good Book. It was presenting a dramatic Christmas show for which Mata had purchased scores of tickets, regardless of our financial condition. One was for me, and she even called my old friend, Inga, to dragoon her, current squeeze Darnell, and her 2 kids into attendance. Naturally, Mata’s brothers and sisters were also provided price of admission, and she even offered Jake and his new wife a chance for salvation. They opted for the K.C. Chiefs’s game, which was being televised at the same time, as did Melanie’s husband, Chuck. I’m guessing that he used the ready excuse that he would be willing to care for Malcolm, their new son and our grandson, which might have been the only acceptable alibi Mata would honor, short of recent dismemberment. She even forced a pair on a young couple from mainland China, one of whom hardly knew a word of English.

Having grown up in the genteel Eastern churches of respectable Protestantism, I’ve got to tell you, Christmas was never like this. The manic and overdone Yuletide satire *Scrooged*, with Bill Murray, seemed tame and understated by comparison. This was the Christmas Story, as told by Rambo and Arnold. Fatigue-clad young men (and one young woman) roamed the darkened church aisles, firing off deafening rounds of blanks from their laser-sighted automatic weapons, and shouted coarsely at us, and each other. The story, to put it kindly, was preposterous. It takes place in some unspecified future time where “one-world” government prevails, thanks to a Satan-led American president, and Christians are hunted down and killed. It has a nominally happy ending with a very Caucasian-appearing God who comes down from heaven with a flaming

sword to banish the low-lives (including, apparently, homosexuals) to a pyrotechnic hell (the brimstone-aroma machine must have been on the fritz, however). It was a Saturday morning cartoon, done with “live action figures” showing that might and right are more than kissing cousins, and that those who have not been ‘born again’ are no better than, and deserve the identical fate of, the devil himself, though the fireworks for the descent into hell of a mere malcontent or freethinker was much more modest than the one reserved for Old Scratch. The only tenuous connection with Christmas was that the reputed date of the “Rapture,” when those who have been ‘born again’ are abruptly removed from the earth in the midst of whatever they were doing, whether doing some last-minute Christmas shopping or boinking thy neighbor’s wife, was arbitrarily set to have occurred on Christmas 7 years before the time of the drama. The ungodly carnage which resulted from pilots and co-pilots being wrested from their occupations to their permanent station upward, or speeding cars on the freeway suddenly bereft of drivers was mentioned in the play as a not-even-regrettable by-product of this religious displacement. Apparently, ‘rapture’ for the blessed few can result in a horrible death for the seemingly innocent many, and God hardly notices. Of course, they **were** given a chance to succumb to this sort of irrational blather, so their penalty for having higher intellectual or spiritual standards than a ferret is justified.

Prior to the presentation, the Pastor of the temple stood before us in what was little more than a tiresome half-hour infomercial, hawking various church-related products. There were a CD or two performed by the church choir, as well as a book written by the Pastor himself, pointing out those passages in the Bible he agrees with, and explaining away those other passages he doesn’t. And then, at then end of the hour-and-a-half of 120-decibel military maneuvers and

fireworks display, the Pastor took the stage again before the literal smoke had cleared and made his pitch to round up the usual suspects at the altar. Of course, he was successful, since several sensitive souls had the fear of the Lord implanted in them by the none-too-subtle methods employed by the Jesus Police. I was repelled by it all, a feeling which was compounded when Mata's 27-year old son, Michael -- a True Believer in the fullest sense of that term -- kidnaped my 9-year old grandson, Mikey, from the seat next to mine, and dragged him down to the front. Then he came back and twice asked me to join him there. I was tempted, only to go down there and rescue poor Mikey, whose trust and innocence is being exploited in a shameful manner by these charlatans. Michael also tried to dislodge the Chinese couple, who were sitting next to Mata, many seats from the aisle, and dispatch them toward The Light, but they displayed an admirable steadfastness to the goal of an early exit. They were only a few steps behind me when we were finally dismissed to the chaos of the parking lot and a desperate attempt to catch the final minutes of the Chiefs's game.

Friday, December 19, 1997

Yesterday was the annual Christmas luncheon, hosted by the partners, and they really sprang for some good chow. There were lots of fruits and vegetables in evidence, most of which were leftover at the end of the meal. It was prepared by a competent caterer, and was an unqualified success. We also did our gift exchanges and the employee of the year was recognized. This latter event, which seems rather straightforward, is apparently steeped in whispered controversy. The person is chosen by a secret ballot cast by all employees (I voted for Cynthia), and the democratic aspect of the process is trumpeted by the partners in one of their frequent *faux*-populist displays. A curious result, however, is that all the past honorees, whose

names appear on a plaque just inside the front door of the suite which houses us, are from one section of the company. It is the same section which is overseen by Debby, the partner most richly reputed for high-handedness and haughty condescension. The word in the trenches after the luncheon is that I was unbelievably naive in thinking that the persons selected for present and past honors are the ones which actually garnered top votes. A second-hand report of an actual witness claims that once the votes were tallied, Debby tossed them in the waste basket and named the person **she** wanted to reward for service to her private company agenda. This was alleged to be the result this year, when the votes apparently went to someone she had no interest in recognizing -- Holly -- but not to one of her supervisors -- Dan -- who had helped her cause in the past year. The partners were apparently coerced into announcing a tie vote this year, and giving an equal award to both Holly and Dan. Then she gave another impromptu award of equal monetary value -- a bottle of Perrier-Jouet's "Flower Bottle" Champagne with 4 hand-painted glasses in a presentation case -- to another one of her supervisors who had hog-tied a particularly recalcitrant client. The partner in charge of our side, her younger brother Dennis, was mute throughout. And no one on our side was recognized as even having vital signs. In this organization, those of us who produce the educational materials are perceived not as generating revenue but consuming it. Since we don't sell anything directly, this woman's diminished mental capacity is incapable of seeing what we do as something which contributes to the success of A.D. Banker.

Today is Cynthia's last day. Her job will not be advertised, but will be filled from within. It was already offered to Steve, who turned it down. The terms of the offer, however, would have made anyone turn it down. Since Steve is already doing his own job, plus that of the

departed Scott, at no additional amount of compensation, Dennis offered him the unparalleled opportunity to add Cynthia's duties to his already full platter. Again, at no additional compensation, though it was alluded that his extra work would be taken note of at his next salary review. It seems as if Steve has heard this tune before, and mistakenly danced to it. When he was given Scott's work to perform, that was the story handed him, but when his next review came about, his compensation received no sudden spike, but an extra 0.2% was tacked on for his troubles. Steve, rightly, felt insulted, and has refused to take on the Managing Editor tasks without **first** receiving a substantial increase. All this is straight from Steve, the company's only Ph.D. Dennis came by earlier this week to tell both Tom and I that we will be coming into his office very soon to talk about our "future" with A.D. Banker. My guess is that Tom has the inside track for M.E., mainly because his graduate degree is in English, and that he has demonstrated that he will work for less than I will. The latter is a more compelling qualification in this company than the former. He also seems to fit into the company's low-profile, make no waves, shut up and listen image its employees are urged to adopt. I mean this with no disrespect toward Tom, whom I like and admire. It's much more his way than it is mine, and that fact is obvious to all who can see.

Only a few minutes after writing that last paragraph, I was summoned into the office of Dennis to have him weigh in concerning my future, if any, with the company. We both recognized that my lack of insurance knowledge was an impediment in finding me a compatible long-term place in the company, but that my writing ability was something they never really had before. Pluses and minuses. Did I want to stay on with them after the ethics book was completed? He almost sounded like a 'no' answer from me would solve his problems

completely. Since I wasn't completely incompetent in my job, nor am I enough of a fuck-up or malcontent to warrant boosting out into the street, it would be a bit of a sticky business to cashier me, especially at Christmas time. In my experience, that has always been the **best** time to get rid of dead wood. In my single years, being dumped by a girlfriend with the fondest Yuletide greetings became a nearly annual occurrence. Why shouldn't companies use the same unprincipled principle? A.D. Banker wasn't about to do it, since they recognized that the products they had been publishing have nearly no literary or intellectual merit, and Tom and I are the nearest thing they have encountered to people who could make amends.

He didn't offer me the Managing Editorship, as I expected, but he also hinted that he wouldn't give Tom a shot at it, either. His plan, much in line with what Steve suggested through our recent conversations, is to have Tom and I edit each other's manuscripts. Since we are the only 2 writers on staff, we are the only ones in immediate need of an editor. Why pay for one when he can use us to fill in at no cost? After the ethics book is finished next month (as I promised to him that it would) he wants me to take an existing lesson that needs updating and a heavy shot of user-friendliness, and punch it up. It will probably be one on securities, which will mean that I will likely be going to school for it, as well as maybe even getting a securities license if I want to.

I didn't tell him I was looking for other employment, but I'd guess he's used to that as a permanent condition among any employees here with a shred of ambition. Again, I wonder if I should be happy or rueful that he doesn't plan to fire me after the ethics lesson is done.

In lieu of a Christmas card to all the workers here, I composed a 2-page Christmas poem, printed it up (on **my** printer with **my** paper, in case you are looking askance at my already

compromised ethics) and distributed it to everyone, including the partners. You will appreciate the fact that I have decided not to reproduce it here. I mentioned about half my co-workers by name, attached to a reference about them which described something about their presence on the job. I stayed away from mentions of cellulite and gluttony, and still most people who got a line about them resented it, and hurt feelings seemed to flood the 16th floor, though it could have been attributable to El Nino. I can only surmise that people nowadays feel as if they have a constitutional protection against having their personal sensitivities violated in even the most benign, gentle, and good-humored way. It also might just be a Midwest thing. Where I grew up in the East, we would play with each other. That was one of the most important manners of social contact and communication. People don't play in the Midwest, they either smile blandly, or sulk. Humor is limited to mis-telling a stale joke they heard from someone weeks ago.

Monday, December 22, 1997

Haberdashery notes include the news that L.L. Bean, provider of the chinos which gave up its threads as if a member of some sort of Khaki Kult, delivered a replacement pair without comment. The new ones are a grade up from the ones I sent back, so I feel vindicated as well as nether-protected.

Last week, Mata put in not an hour of gainful employment, but went to the annual Primerica convention in St. Louis. This put a double-hit on our beleaguered finances: \$300+ not coming in, plus untold amounts going out in the form of T-shirts, mugs, and motivational trinkets to give to her "team members," which is the phrase she is expected to use when referring to those staring, brain-damaged inert substances who couldn't be motivated to mop up their own drool. With 5 days of bachelorhood staring me in the face, it might be expected that I would set forth on

a Rabelaisian odyssey worthy of 10 extra pages in this already steamy journal. But, never having read any Rabelais, I have no idea what counts as ‘Rabelaisian.’ Maybe all he did was sit around, planning to have a week of ‘Chaucerian’ abandon, without knowing quite what Chaucer would have done because he had never read “Canterbury Tales.” So, I had a week of ‘Nixonian’ lust, which involves forswearing yourself to paranoid nightmares, at once both ludicrous and harrowing. In one of them, I was actually speaking French to some young Japanese women. When I awakened, I realized I was having yet another dream of futility concerning Noriko Itsugami.

What is depressing about the five days of freedom is that I didn’t even think about naughty prospects, my dream of Noriko notwithstanding, let alone draw up a clueless plan to act upon them. Instead, I brought Chinese take-out over to Melanie’s and played with the grandchildren for a while. I guess that’s what constitutes party time for old farts. And I no longer have any doubt that I am an old fart.

The partner’s children have cranked up the volume in the halls. They seem utterly without discipline or a sense of limits. Over lunch, a couple of old-timers, by which I mean at least one year in service, warned me about next week. Right after Christmas, they are turned loose in our offices with their new toys, fortified with a sugar burst from tons of Christmas candy. Mere pandemonium would seem like a blessed relief after the week between newly-opened presents and newly-broken ones. I was told that last year was the worst, with roller blades all around and every employee’s set of toes in mortal jeopardy. Perhaps this year it will be Uncle Saddam’s Mustard Gas Kit, complete with white flags to wave and barf bags lifted from the Southwest Shuttle to Dallas.

Monday, December 29, 1997

I blinked and it was gone, and I'm not referring to my virtue. Xmas, for X's sakes. We were told to be at Melanie's by 9:00 A.M. on the morn of X, to witness first-hand animal lust for material goods. That meant no sleeping late that day, and with Friday a work day for The Anti-X at A.D. Wanker, this was the holiday that wasn't. It was doubly bad to go watch 3 grandchildren who were getting lavished with every description of goods, from wearing, to riding to electronic, knowing that our contribution to the orgy of waste was nearly invisible. It's not that I want to get them an extra boost on the consumer road they are led down, inevitably. Xmas is that special day when love **can** be measured, as well as weighed and counted, and by those accounts, we obviously despise our grandchildren. But we went, ran several rolls of film through the cameras, and then were informed that we needed to leave, since they were packing up and going over to the 'other' grandparents's house: the ones who buy scores of presents and feed them what they want to eat, rather than the exotica of gastronomy. So we were back a little after 12:00, leaving us all afternoon to, alternately, stare at each other and watch old movies on the TV. I've also been informed that Mata has accepted an invitation on behalf of both of us to a non-alcoholic New Year's Eve party at the new home of her superior in Primerica. Not only will it be a no booze affair, I was also cautioned against wearing the ragtag socks I usually do, since it will also be a no shoes party, since the house has white carpeting throughout. People who buy white carpeting apparently do not have enough sense to do otherwise and therefore deserve to have their poor judgment and bad taste demonstrated by a cleat-shod soccer team direct from a mud-soaked practice field. But I suppose I'll behave, though the prospect of alcohol is the only thing which attendance at one of these Primerica get-togethers might excuse. Shop will be talked

incessantly, new products and scams reviewed in glowing terms, and resolutions to become six-figure powerhouses will be bandied about as loosely as promises to love, honor, and obey are prior to the solemnizing of the vows. Often, when Mata and I are invited to affairs hosted by mutual friends like Bill and Gloria, or fringe acquaintances, we seek each other out as conversational oases amidst the rubes, or the chosen few. At this one, she'll be the worst possible company, and I know there won't even be a dog for companionship, especially with a white rug.

Work was nearly deserted on Friday, the 26th, but all the partners were here, making certain that those few of us who actually came in were doing some work rather than screwing off and getting paid for it. They nearly outnumbered us. Word has it that they're all going to New York City for New Year's Eve, and will be back next week. Too bad the Unabomber is apparently in custody, though he wasn't known for doing airplanes.

Friday, January 2, 1998

The messages of hope which accompany the New Year are absent within me. While the change from the old to the new is a necessary convention, and even more welcome in the dead of winter, it feels, in the bottom of my heart, artificial. The cards and messages from Japan in the past couple of weeks have dwarfed the number, and content, of those stateside. With the exception of the letter from my former colleague Joe, all domestic messages have been perfunctory and lifeless. My two nominal Kansas City friends, Bill and Inga, have remained mute all season long. They may claim to be busy, but Aya, in Osaka, wrote me a long and lovely e-mail message on New Year's Eve after returning home from a 14 and a half hour work day (9:00 A.M. to 11:30 P.M.). It was full of sweet thoughts and hopeful wishes, all in a language

with which she struggles. Of course, Bill struggles with English, too, and Inga is more comfortable with Ebonics, but their first language is, at least nominally, mine as well.

The New Year's Eve party was all I anticipated, which is to say all I dreaded. Not only was it hours of inane puffery, it was also a drive of over a half hour on strange roads confronting alien curves and out-of-control drivers with attitudes to rival those of an anti-government survivalist on April 15th. I wore Japanese 5-toed socks which were the wonderment of all who glanced at the floor. I didn't entirely melt into the walls, but took my turn at the table tennis table as well as the banquet table. The menu appeared to be all-meat, all the time, with a perfunctory vegetable tray receiving the attention I'd get at a party featuring the Chippendales. The few cooked non-meat items all had excesses of fat in the form of American Cheeseoid substances, most prominently frozen broccoli heaped into a baking dish along with all the Velveeta their commission checks could afford. I made one pass at the bounty, took several of the cucumber sushi rolls I made and brought, and looked for a vacant chair. The number of those furnishings was greatly outnumbered by attendees, and by the second hour, I worried that fist fights would break out over use of one, especially among the more portly of those who could wedge themselves through the door. As the witching hour approached, I could only console myself by remembering that I was being spared the sound of Beirut in the '70s which is what our neighborhood resembles every New Year's Eve. Fortunately the number of people who professed wanting to kiss me at midnight, and the number of people I professed wanting to kiss were the same, as well as the same person, luckily. Mata, that person I hasten to add, received an award, which was true of nearly everyone with vital signs and an insurance license, and we got home by 1:30, just in time to hear the final mortar rounds going off from the direction of Swope

Park.

On Wednesday, I received a call from a job for which I had applied the week previous. They want me to interview for it, and the date and time is set for Monday at 10:00 A.M. The job is ambiguously described as a “Court Advocate” for victims of domestic violence, but the company seeking applicants is a private one. Since I have misplaced the ad I answered, I can’t recall the salary, if it was mentioned at all, but it sounds like a job which has been recently ‘privatized.’ That sounds ominous, though it would probably be fair to state that **everything** sounds ominous to me in my present state of mind. The sudden appearance of Ed McMahon on our front lawn with a huge check made out to me would appear ominous. In this neighborhood, he probably would be shot for his troubles before he made it to the piles of bark which have begun to flake off the elm trunk near the door.

One of the first things private companies do when they take over governmental services is cut the wages of the position and send the incumbents fleeing to the unemployment lines.

Whatever comes of this one, it certainly appears as if a haircut is on the agenda for Saturday.

Monday, January 5, 1998

The fog outside mirrors my mental state concerning the job for which I am interviewing. Only the sketchy ad description has told me what it is called, but I’m sure all will be revealed by the interviewer this morning. I arrived early again, never having been to the building before and allowing my fear of lateness to deposit me in their parking lot 20 minutes before I am due. My perpetual, if not obsessive, punctuality is rooted in the belief that I have a lot going against me, including age, beard, and a philosophical education, and that I didn’t need to give prospective employers any more reason than those to crumple my resume into a little ball in my presence and

toss it toward the oblivion of the waste can. The sign on the door to Suite 2500 read “SafeHaven, Inc.” Inside were plenty of children’s toys and playthings, as well as a set of about 6 offices. My interviewer, Sandy, was willing to see me when I arrived, rather than at the appointed hour. The person who left the job had just passed the Maryland Bar Exam and was moving back there to open practice. Sandy herself had a law degree, but seemed quite happy with my background and education. The job did sound interesting as well as of several parts. I was unlikely to become bored in it, though overwork seemed a distinct possibility. The ad didn’t mention salary, at least in hard numbers, so I knew that had to be on my short list of unanswered questions when Sandy finished her pitch. She finally brought it up out of her own accord, and with apologies. Considering all they needed from an applicant, they were only offering \$20K. My heart literally sank. I know it’s a cliché, but I also know it’s a genuine physical feeling a person can have, and I had it. I quickly confided that twenty Big Ones wouldn’t cut it, but once Sandy was underway, there was no stopping her. She completed her spiel about the company and the position for which I was terminating my interview. I suppose I should eventually stop being amazed that companies can offer something less than \$10/hour for positions which require a great deal of education, flexibility, uncompensated overtime, and skill at thinking on your feet. To the people who own this venture, I would be nothing more than an overeducated customer service wonk, and would be salaried comparably to a GED who fills any customer service slot.

Tuesday, January 6, 1998

Rumor of the day came from Steve. Contrary to what Dennis alluded to in our separate conferences after Cynthia’s departure, a new Managing Editor is being named. It’s Julie, one of three design editors, and the least senior, least experienced, and least educated of all on our

department, with the exception of the boss. She does have the best legs, and anyone who thinks that wasn't a consideration in her promotion also probably thinks you can get AIDS from a toilet seat. Julie is nearly a cipher in the office, so much so that in my Xmas poem I likened her to a mime. She is the only woman in the department, and that, along with her unobtrusiveness, seems to have been the major criterion for her advancement. Dennis is an empty-headed ninny, and needs to have, as a manager directly under him, someone who he doesn't view as threatening. Only Julie fills that bill of specifications. In addition, he is run rough-shod over in the business by his older sister, Debbie, and consequently seems to need to have whatever woman works closely with him be professionally submissive. This appears to have been the motivation for naming Cynthia to the position when she was, though I sure don't mean anything disrespectful since I continue to have a great deal of regard for her. The other two design editors, Craig and Warren, have a considerable lead on Julie in knowledge of the company and experience with the goals and needs of the business. Well, I guess I'm just plain pissed. I didn't necessarily want the job, but I do think Tom is a much better choice for it than Julie, as are Craig and Warren. Come to think of it, I think **I'm** a better choice than she is, though the other four (including Steve) are better qualified than I am.

Friday, January 9, 1998

Things are really confused now, but it may only be in my mind. Julie vacated the Managing Editor's office after just one's day's residence and is back at her old desk out in the traffic pattern. Steve also returned to my office and allowed that he might have been mistaken about her sudden and unwarranted promotion, and opined that she may be merely doing some proofreading work in addition to her other duties. Unfortunately, I shot off an e-mail to Cynthia

about how her office had been commandeered by someone unworthy, and begging that she return and, with our help of course, oust The Pretender. Cynthia was happy to hear from me, but had troubles of her own, and didn't care about anything that happened here any more, unless it was dirt. The job she left A.D. Banker for seems to have turned into The Kansas Inquisition. Her new boss, docile and affable during the courtship phase of her decision, has become a genuine Mr. Hyde, complete with all the abusive tactics that attorneys are famous for. For both our sakes, I may have to drop in for a "research" lunch as soon after payday as possible.

Last week I answered an ad for a writer of humorous stuff for a growing greeting card studio, and on Tuesday night there was a message on the phone at home that they liked what I sent them in the form of a wise-ass cover letter and some samples of what I do. **I didn't** send them any excerpts from this work in progress, which I take it accounts for their positive reaction to my writing. I have cranked out my own one-of-a-kind greeting cards for friends through the past 15-20 years, under the spurious label of Furry Breast Productions ("When you care enough to send the Furry Breast."). Just before getting the offer from Japan, but knowing that American academia wasn't likely to be in my full-time future, I made up a few sample greeting card ideas and sent them off to various companies. None of them bought any, but two of them sent handwritten notes saying they liked my style, and asked me to continue to submit. 2000 wonderful women students at Shoin Women's University in Kobe intervened, and I never seriously thought of that kind of work. The ad in the *K.C. Star* mentioned both full and part-time work, and the phone conversation I had with a guy named Scott told me that both kinds of positions are still available. They're going to send me a packet of materials as well as samples of the kind of lines they want to put out, and I'll have a week to crank out some stuff in their vein. Best sample

returns get the available positions, and the rest of us go back to writing insurance tomes.

Thursday, January 15, 1998

Yesterday Dennis called a 3:15 staff meeting for the publishing part of this empire, in part to clarify duties now that Cynthia has bailed out. The hour of convening coincides with my most drowsy time at work, and I knew from experience that meetings with Dennis are very efficient sleep aids. Warren, Julie, Tom, Steve, and I crowded in his office, raising the heat to electric-blanket snuggly, and he started the meeting by saying that he wanted us to talk about the status of our current projects and what we wanted to do in the future. He also seemed to be soliciting our input on a project he's engaged in concerning a change in the format of the student handouts. As could have been foreseen, a meeting which claimed for its main purpose reports from us, would instead quickly become a Dennis Monologue, and not this Dennis. We finally did get a chance to put in a word about what we were doing and when we'd be done. Our future assignments had an ominous sound to them, at least from this paranoid's point of view. Instead of Tom and I swapping manuscripts and editing/proofing it, Tom would get mine, Steve would get Tom's, Julie would get Steve's, and I would get squat. What obtains? Everyone else has also been given something new to begin working on shortly, but I was merely told to beef up the current ethics handout used in classes. That's a one-week job, tops. I asked about the big securities book he had talked about handing to me as my next major project, and he said that he's decided to shelve that. Tom and Steve also noticed that I wasn't being given much in the way of a future at A.D. Banker, so it wasn't only my paranoia interpreting it. On an unrelated note, I tried to hit the 100,000 word mark in the Ethics text in time for the meeting, but fell 178 words short.

Friday, January 16, 1998

I am taking a note of my failures today; some trivial, some pregnant. Yesterday was Coming-of-Age Day in Japan, which should mean that I'm less than 2 weeks away from an onslaught of pictures of my favorite 20-year olds in kimonos. All Japanese who turned twenty in the previous year all celebrate together their official debut into adulthood. For the women, it is their first opportunity to wear an adult kimono, which differs from the 'juvenile' ones they've worn up to now, though the difference is imperceptible to these western eyes. It's a big day, however, and a couple of my friends over there have written to me with the misgivings they feel about leaving their carefree days behind and taking on responsibilities. I'd like to counsel them that they don't have to leave those days behind, but I know now it's not true, at least in an ultimate sense. I was able to postpone it for quite a while, but it eventually claims you, and perhaps the ferocity with which it has descended on me beginning with my return from Japan last year is merely its way of making up for lost time.

That leads, distastefully, to the second omission from this journal. Since starting work at A.D. Banker, I haven't appeared to indulge in the full-frontal self-loathing which became a hallmark of my life last spring and summer. Obtaining a job has only sent those feelings slightly beneath the surface. They are still being nourished by a rogue's gallery of sources: the bill collectors with their thinly-veiled telephone menace, the arrogant condescension of the partners of this company, allied with their insufficient wages, the deteriorating house and neighborhood which I am powerless to affect. And let's not forget my own contribution, far from insignificant: the fertile soil of inferiority where all these seeds take tenacious root. It's all there, stronger and less resistant to the occasional positive note than ever. I awaken every morning to the devastating news that I am still me. Somehow, I keep hoping that one day will dawn and I'll be

someone else, someone with a life, someone with justified hope in his heart, someone who can look in the mirror without quickly averting his eyes. But so far, no such luck. I'm beginning to hope I don't wake up at all again, but I'm too much of a worthless coward to do anything about that wish, either. So I awaken, stumble into my slippers, and set the wheels in motion. My life has become mechanical, except for the moments of harsh negative emotions, and I feel demeaned by it, simultaneous with feeling as if I **ought** to be demeaned. Last night Mata asked me to get counseling, and while I'm not opposed to it for any fundamental reason, it seems as if my problems are economic at their center. Without changing that, any therapy would just be a form of window-dressing. The primary questions would seem to be: do I want to be cured, or do I want to try to live with my condition? That condition is, of course, being incapable of obtaining a rewarding job, resulting in a insulting series of temporary positions leading to a perpetual shortfall of funds and no known way to reduce expenses, coupled with no job skills that anyone will pay to employ. The cure doesn't lie on a shrink's couch, but in a human resources office. Mata has apparently given up on there being a cure for me, and has opted for having me sedated for the duration. I haven't reached that point yet, but I see it as a clear possibility, shading toward probability, in the not-so-distant future. Do I fight on to the end, or do I go in for a form of psychological euthanasia? And what would that little operation leave me as? While it may not be a lobotomy, it's not just cosmetic, either. It would force me to admit that my uselessness to society is a permanent condition, incurable except by removing the illusions which caused it.

Tuesday, January 20, 1998

Yesterday, much of the nation celebrated a day on which Martin Luther King, one of my enduring heroes, is remembered for his courageous contributions to racial understanding in this

country. Of course, A.D. Banker recognizes no such need to memorialize Dr. King, and I was dutifully at my desk before 8:00 A.M. I have been in regular e-mail contact with my old boss, Cynthia, and she expressed the desire to have a lunch together so we could communicate on some level other than supervisor-employee. Since she didn't simultaneously suggest Chinese take-out in a motel which charges by the hour, I assumed that she wasn't alluding to the carnal level, but believed that we had some personal or intellectual basis for continued contact which transcended what we did at A.D. Banker. I've agreed with that, and was eager to do so, though I might have been equally eager to undertake Muu Shu Pork in the No-tel Motel, but she didn't suggest it. We settled on Free State Brewery, one of my favorite haunts in Lawrence, Kansas -- where she lives and now works -- when I lived there and pursued an ultimately elusive Ph.D. We had a very pleasant hour-and-a-half, generally engaging in trashing a large number of A.D. Banker people, as well as a number of large A.D. Banker people. We also filled in a few of the blanks in our personal lives, and she really seems like a splendid person to have for a friend. It seems unlikely to happen, however. A play I'm writing makes the point that male-female friendships which intersect marriages are considered guilty until proven innocent, at least by the other spouses. Both Cynthia and I are married. Unfortunately, innocence is nearly impossible to prove, especially after a playful allusion above to sticky sheets and a buzzing neon sign in the afternoon. Most friendships between marrieds either wither because of mate hostility, or endure under a continual cloud of suspicion. That's the way it has been with Inga and me for the three-plus years I've known her, and in the last few months we've just given up trying to keep a friendship alive other than at a perfunctory level. The price, on my side of the ledger, is too steep for the puny refreshment I get from her. But talking with Cynthia made me realize that I am

without any meaningful intellectual companionship in my life, and that's probably an element in my depression. I'm not going to locate any at A.D. Banker, except for a furtive minute or two bantering with Kimberly, in Marketing. She and Tom are the only two people here who appear to have read a book other than a paperback with a cover depicting a bodice being torn by a handsome brute from the 18th century. Having spent the last 12 years of my life on one campus or another, I have become mentally spoiled by the options for intellectual and cultural stimulation there. Even at Shoin, where most of my students didn't have the language skills to hold up anything more than a very rudimentary conversation, I did have a great office-mate, Chris, who was a rich source of considered cynicism as well as professional encouragement.

But as enjoyable as something like university life would be to experience again, the deepest needs I feel are emotional, not intellectual. I need to feel valued and connected to persons or institutions which value me. The problem is that I won't accept horseshit value, the mere veneer of veneration which is so common in these times. Mata's supervisors in Primerica, Ray and, farther up the line, Nash, are phonies of the first order, which may be what they believe the job requires. Everything is wonderful, next month is sure to be better than the one just past, I'm a fabulous person, it's always great to see me. As Bill Murray said in "Scrooged," that may work with the chicks but it doesn't work with me.

Friday, January 23, 1998

In spite of the fact that the Kansas City Chiefs did not make it to the Super Bowl, A.D. Banker had its official Super Bowl Potluck luncheon today, and I won't make any of us ill describing what bagged, canned, and processed products were brought in of the masses, by the masses, and for the masses. I made Cuban black beans and rice, to honor the Pope's visit, and

Keith reprised his Chicken a la King-that-wants-to-be chili from last year. Everything else was packaged.

Last night's messages on the answering machine included one from Bill, saying that he had contacted his attorney at Shook Hardy and that I should fax the man my resume. This was not completely out of the blue. He and Gloria have invited us for dinner tomorrow night, and that usually increases the amount of communication between our houses prior to the date. Gloria had called Wednesday night and we talked a long time. Many of her friends are also un- and underemployed and she seemed to be getting sick of us whiners. I tried to put a good face on it all, but couldn't. American Express now calls us **daily** -- literally -- about our balance, which shrinks with our undersized payment only to be rejuvenated by their punitive interest rates, available only to slackers like us. It's like a sinking ship where the amount of water we are able to bail per hour is exactly matched by the amount of water nature can replenish in the hull. Our arms will tire before nature's processes. Next month it goes to a collection agency which will want it in one lump or my pay will be garnished.

In the course of Wednesday's conversation, Gloria inquired whether Bill had ever set me up with a Shook Hardy interview. I told her he hadn't, and she said I needed to lean on him about it, since he often forgets he makes these kinds of promises. My response was that I didn't like to bug the poor guy, preferring instead to silently and angrily resent him. Okay, I didn't include that last part, but I'll bet Gloria could have guessed it, anyway. Apparently, she did my bugging for me, and I'm to fax my resume to a man named Stan and see what transpires. There was a time when being employed by Shook Hardy sounded like a great idea, but that was back in April, when I sent off the first of my five responses to their Sunday ads. Five letters and

rejections later, nothing sounds like a good idea. A job in a big law office is sure to require a major upgrade in haberdashery, and if the money is not significantly higher, it may not be worth the outlay. Between my flannel shirts, ones of chamois, and sets of khakis, I've got all the clothes I need to write plays in.

Monday, January 26, 1998

The growing scandal about President Clinton and the intern has gobbled up TV air time and forests of newsprint as ravenously as she is reputed to have gobbled up his member. 'Member.' An interesting term to use in reference to one's sex organ, if one is a male. 'Member,' as in 'integral part of a larger entity.' Seen that way, male sexual activity cannot be divorced from the person and who he is, how he is evaluated or judged. I am overtaken with a great sadness concerning it, since the country loses whether the story is true or false, and the perpetrators know that, but cynically press on, regardless. If Clinton is guilty, then it is a betrayal of monumental, though also pathetic, proportions. Perhaps the First Lady should consider a consultation with Lorena Bobbitt. I voted for him twice, and like nearly all who did, I had to weigh the Gennifer Flowers accusation for the first term, and add the Paula Jones for the second. In each case, the decision to vote for him was made easier, as it always is, by the abysmal quality of the Republican opponent. But in addition, I had to assume the rumors were true, and then ask whether I would **still** vote for him, knowing those unsavory facts. One of the reasons I was willing to support him was the hope that those dalliances, if they occurred, were a part of his Arkansas life, and the weight and sobriety of the office of President would mature him. I was also under the impression that presidents do not have a lot of free time on their hands these days.

So, if the charges are true, he has betrayed us. First of all, he has betrayed his wife and

daughter, and that circle of deceit overrides all others. But he has also betrayed all of us who voted for him under some sort of silent dispensation we give when we want to hope for the best while fearing the worst. If it's true, resigning immediately might be the honorable thing to do. But if it isn't, and he has been set up by that shadowy network of Starr-struck Republicans and right-wing Clinton-haters, their citizenship should be revoked. What they have done is deliberately provoke a governmental and constitutional crisis for the shabby purposes of playing a cheap political game, or settling old scores, or nothing more than making mischief with a Chief Executive they abhor. One could also make the argument that the sexual dalliance alone should not warrant either voluntary or involuntary dismissal. This seems to be the view in nations less puritanical than ours, but the American fixation on sex, excessive in both emphasis and denial, leads us to both over- and undervalue sex. Howard Stern and the prurient zealots of bedroom surveillance are two sides of the same coin. And with our tendency toward absolutist answers to complex social problems, we are led to believe that we must side with one or the other of those wackos. They're both full of shit. If sex with an intern was all they had, I maintain Clinton's accusers should have left it alone, since the damage to the republic which would come from its exposure and all the posturing and lying on all sides which would have to be summoned forth to finally put it to rest would greatly exceed the damage done to the country of it happening, unreported. Of course, if the anti-Clinton brigade of brigands is behind it, pious pronouncements to the contrary, their primary interest was in torpedoing a popular president whom they hate, rather than improve the Republic through civic endeavor. Perjury is another question, though, and a much more damaging one. However the Big Story remains sex. When the first splash sounded in media across the land, that was the only element. The inducement to lie under oath,

again alleged, came after we had been given the main course.

My suggestion that the President's infidelities, if they did occur, should not have been reported, will not be a popular one. Particularly with journalists, who wave the hoary old banner of "The Public's Right to Know" anytime questions are raised about their propriety in nosing about in people's lives. There is hardly a journalist to be found who gives even the most minuscule damn about the public's right to know, whatever that phrase is purported to mean. What they do care about, with an intensity bordering on the grotesque, is their right to snoop. Those are different rights, if they are rights at all, but journalism in its most irresponsible moments wants us to confuse the two. It's nothing more than another round of Blame the Victim. It's our fault, we in the great unwashed public, because we want this kind of trash spewed all over our kitchen table each morning as a part of our 'right to know.' It's all spelled out, they say, in the First Amendment, but of course, it is not all spelled out, it is alluded to most generally. While the public's right to know may have been at the heart of the freedom of the press expressed in Article I, it merely guarantees non-interference with the processes of the press by Congress. But that has become transformed into the public's right to leer, to salivate, to snicker, to besmirch. The public doesn't have a right to know **everything**, just as the right to health care doesn't guarantee anything someone believes, in foolishness or fervor, will cure. A person who claims the efficacy of camel's phlegm baths for certain eczemas, running counter to the collective wisdom of the culture in that regard, might falsely regard it as conferring a duty on others to drain the available dromedary sinuses for his pleasure and relief.

The debate over health care has become, in some instances, a debate about what constitutes the care to which we are entitled, and what is less than useful, and maybe even

harmful and counterproductive. That's a debate we haven't seriously entertained concerning our right to information, and it's long overdue. Just as we can't have anything we want in the way of 'health care,' since it might include certain kinds of attention which might leave us worse off -- by design -- than we were before being treated, we need to have some sense of what kinds of knowledge we have a right to, as well as who has the obligation to provide it. Of course, the moguls and practitioners of the press will volunteer for the latter duty, but we ought to be none too eager to grant them license just yet. Most of them appear to be the journalistic equivalent of Dr. Nick Riviera of "The Simpsons."

We need to arrive at a sense of what kinds of knowledge we have a right to, and a worthwhile starting point for the discussion might concern what's in our interest, as a people, to know about figures who are in the light cast by public scrutiny. If I wish to make electoral decisions based upon the aroma of the various candidates's toe jam, it can hardly be Sam Donaldson's duty to sniff the feet of the prominent, no matter how he might desire to do so. What's in my interest as a voter and supporter of the nation cannot be so subjective and idiosyncratic that **any** scrap of gossip, no matter how innocuous or invasive, can underwrite journalistic mayhem at the molecular level.

It's hard to look at what has happened to journalism these days. At one time, it was the profession I wanted to join. In so many cases, the quest for filling the public trough is accomplished by nothing more than unwittingly following the trail laid down by ideologues with an agenda. Twenty-five years ago, newspapers sniffed out and revealed dirty tricks; now they're accomplices.

Wednesday, January 28, 1998

While the President may be mired in difficulties, I've got troubles of my own. Mata has demanded that I listen to a set of motivational tapes to help me. She checked them out of the city library, so at least it's cheaper than therapy, and no less efficacious. She wanted me to start this ordeal last night while she was attending her marathon Primerica meeting, and even brought in a tape player to where I was sitting, with Tape One installed and ready for action. It remained undisturbed all night, but this morning she asked whether I had begun the journey into the self (not her way of putting it, needless to say), so I resigned myself to either listening to it, or the nagging I would receive from not listening to it. I chose the former, and put a tape into the dashboard player for the 20-minute drive to work. First of all, it's hard to take a person seriously when he was named for a fish. This 'Shad' egged me on at Roe Avenue (okay, a cheap pun, but I'll take what's there and be grateful for it) but I endured what I had to endure. It initially sounded harmless enough, filled with hyperbole that must be impenetrable to the gullible, desperate, or uneducated. Mata's office is filled with books, tapes, banners, slogans, and certificates from the motivational network, but her business is as moribund as ever. It's obvious that the business that really makes money is the motivational business. Apparently, inspiration is at best a temporary phenomenon, to be renewed hourly. And unlike other addictive substances which prey upon the weak and vulnerable, you can't reuse a brand once you've ingested it, you must go to a new one for the next hit. This book shows I can write bullshit as well as anyone, but maybe I'm also capable of writing pseudo-helpful, pseudo-insightful bullshit in addition to the morose, self-flagellating brand. Of course, a lot of these people also give seminars and lectures on their subject, which would require looking the marks in the face and not giggling, or feeling remorse, a drawback were I to embark on that course. That would be tough. The key, as in most

marketing, is to find a gimmick no one else has exploited yet, and build a theory of human personality around it which sounds plausible to someone who had a hard time getting through high school. Marx was right about the Nineteenth Century, but wrong about the Twentieth and Twenty-first. Religion is no longer the opiate of the people, it's self-help motivational scams which make people think they can change their socio-economic status by changing their inner person. Neither is going to happen, at least through the efforts of charlatans with tapes out every year, but the narcotic effect comes about through the belief held by the listeners that something will change. It's also an elaborate ruse called Blame the Victim, introduced above. The problem that you lost your job through some greedy bastard on Wall Street seeking a spike in the share price of his stock to attract the institutional investors is not his fault, or the system which rewards such counterproductive and eventually anti-economic actions. Somehow, the recently unemployed have only themselves to blame for their condition. "The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars, but in ourselves, that we are underlings." So instead of seeking direct action against the economic system that is strangling all but the top 1% in this country, we are told that we need to change something about who we are in order to either prosper, or accommodate our failure to ourselves. The latter seems to be Mata's goal with me. To have me accept my failure cheerfully, or at least with less outer turmoil, which tends to upset her positive mental attitude, which some motivational tape told her was irreplaceable for success.

This whole business is through the looking glass. Treatises I've read seem to make the point that one way to curb anti-social behavior in our culture would be to reduce poverty. It's a hypothesis which has some plausibility, but one which is never likely to be attempted in my lifetime. Changing peoples's status changes their attitude. Or at least gives them a sense that

they are of value to society, and this self-esteem can help them rise above their baser instincts. It certainly is no more preposterous than “a rising tide lifts all boats.” But the motivational network of scam artists is clearly in the camp of the status quo. Entrenched economic power wants no extra places where its resources can leak away, at society’s demand, and a concerted effort to remove our permanent, and growing, underclass by methods other than lethal is not likely to meet with their approval. Most members of that underclass are not only permanent, but also permanently discouraged and muted, and can safely be ignored, as long as they don’t have sufficient resources to purchase ammunition. The newly poor, many of whom are literate and looking for a reason for their outrage, are preyed upon by the motivational charlatans with the implied message: ‘It’s your own fault.’ Change your inner self and you’ll change your economic status. A gurgle of joy bubbles up from the bowel of the ruling class. As the witches in *Macbeth* chanted: “Fair is foul, and foul is fair.”

Thursday, January 29, 1998

All of Tape One expired simultaneous with my patience, and my arrival at work this morning. To call this man’s ideas ‘simplistic’ is giving him too much credit. See Spot Run is simplistic; this stuff is the most rudimentary form of simplistic, the subatomic, quark-dimensioned scheme of the simplistic, more simple than which does not exist, even in the brain of an earthworm. His message is founded on the far from self-evident claim that truth is what you say it is to yourself, and you can change truths as quickly as you change channels on a boring TV night. Click! Black is white. Click! Black is back to black again. Click! My mother hates me. Click! My mother loves me. Click! My mother is trying to recall my name. Click! I’m trying to recall my mother’s name. Instant reprogramming is what he appears to endorse, glibly

and calmly, speaking to us on the tape as if we were slightly retarded junior high students who might be startled by loud noises. Apparently, there's no allowance to be made for the strength and resilience of beliefs and facts which have taken up residence in your mind for many decades, solidified by reinforcement and confirmed by years of reiteration and observation of the external world. Hit the fucking delete button! They're outta here. What sounds diabolical in all this is the initial Blame the Victim pitch. If you fail to dislodge seared-in truths, like the Law of Gravity, or the cultural irreplaceability of The Spice Girls, then it's your fault again. You didn't try hard enough; you didn't apply your energies and focus to the task; you allowed negative thoughts to seep into your conscious. Fish-boy skates, of course, since he's already collected your money. You have to live with your failure anew. You wouldn't have bought his tapes or book had you not been a desperate underachiever, the stench of failure clinging to you like tobacco smoke after a night of bar-hopping. If you aren't cured by his preposterous intervention *in absentia*, then your failure is redoubled, and you wander, dejected, through Border's hoping to clutch the faded hope of another author with another promise ripe for the breaking for the price of a bag of groceries.

Yesterday, Steve had an interview at Transamerica for an advertised opening. There are eight finalists for the job, but few could have been dressed as well as he was. My conversation a couple of weeks ago with Cynthia revealed that she and Steve were not on the best of terms. She said that, though she was his nominal supervisor, he was arrogant toward her, bordering on insulting, and didn't think she was in the same intellectual league as he was. Considering the number and quality of anti-Clinton jokes he has been bringing into the office since the intern business broke, he has little room for too much snobbery. She also was of the opinion that, his

excellent educational credentials aside, Steve didn't interview very well, and that accounted for why he remained at A.D. Banker. As Managing Editor, she had comments about his writing, as well, and failed to equate it with Hemingway or Proust. Only the name of Al "Double Talk" Kelly of vaudeville fame was raised as a comparison. I suppose, to be fair about it, I should have lunch with Steve so I can hear his assessment of Cynthia, and bring it back to these pages.

The three pregnant women here have begun to crowd everyone else out of the lunch room. They are bulking up in a major way, and they all take lunch at the same time, comparing sonograms and fetal gymnastics. The room becomes so awash with estrogen that I feel my Adam's apple begin to melt in their presence. In addition, no one's lunch is safe with them foraging there. All sorts of mismatched ingredients get shoveled down the hopper in whatever quantities are available, and I need an extra fork just to ward off their lip-smacking advances. Toward my lunch, of course. Of course, once they squeeze out the little buggers we'll be given incessant reiterations of the birth experience until the next wave of knockings-up overtakes the workplace and a new shift comes on duty with morning sickness and complaints about breast soreness to start the process anew.

Monday, February 2, 1998

My meteorological background should have prepared me, but its twelve-year absence in my life has left me vulnerable to old wive's tales. One of them concerns lightning never striking the same place twice. An experience at work Friday has disproved that old saw. I came in a little early, and paid a quick visit to Kimberly before 8:00 o'clock, primarily to share a few cartoons from my massive collection. For some reason, either morning stiffness in the joints, or some obscure mating display, I felt the need to do a quick and complete deep-knee bend. Without an

announcement to warn her, I just did a rapid vertical drop and, upon bottoming out (heh, heh), I broadcast a loud ripping sound throughout the cubicles. Kimberly's expression was clearly of the 'Oh my God, I can't believe you just farted a 95-decibel fart in front of me' variety, so I tried to reassure her that it was merely an involuntary disrobing courtesy of crotch and butt seams coming apart again. Once again, pantsless in Gaza, and it was another pair of L.L. Bean chinos (olive color this time) yielding to my extra 25 pounds (up from 20 as a result of a doctor's appointment on the 15th). Luckily, this was casual Friday, but it seemed to me that your-ass-hanging-out might not have been in the A.D. Banker book of employee dress code acceptable even on that day. I wrapped another L.L. Bean garment -- a chamois shirt -- around my waist, draped over my vulnerable parts from waist to the backs of my knees, and stayed in my office until lunch time. As luck would have it, my computer was to be given a new power supply and complete reprogramming that afternoon, so I signed out for the public library, and took my tattered wardrobe with me.

Mata also had a recent medical appointment, which included a cursory physical by a physician she had never met. It turns out she has diabetes, which seems to both of us a sobering and serious development. What is more serious is the lack of information and counseling this doctor has given her concerning a malady she will likely have forever, and which is totally new to her. He barely said a word of explanation to her concerning what she needed to do, or what his therapies, if any, were aimed at accomplishing. All he did was load her down with some printed matter from companies which sell diabetes medicine, a few samples of some pills, and dispatched her onto the streets. I felt I got the same general treatment from my sawbones, who's a member of the same four-physician group. A triglyceride count of 437 hardly raised his

eyebrows, and led him to suggest nothing in the way of lifestyle change, if that would be effective, or some sort of pharmaceutical treatment. The brave new world of HMOs. It doesn't have to be this way, though. When we lived in Lawrence, Kansas, in the early 1990s, we were served by a group called Lawrence Family Practice Center, and a more attentive and concerned group of professionals you are not likely to find anywhere. They didn't skimp, didn't waste, and utilized a wide variety of approaches to various ailments, including dietary. We're both going to shop around soon for another group of doctors, this time one which isn't just punching our ticket into the hereafter and collecting a payday from Blue Cross/Blue Shield.

Tuesday, February 3, 1998

I have begun to ponder my attitude toward the job recently. Both my recent attitude, and the pondering, which is recent. After blazing through the first 40-50,000 words of the book on ethics in a couple of months, I have been acting as if each week is my last in the employ of A.D. Banker. This week I've been writing the final examination questions which will accompany the self-study course. They are to be multiple-choice, which is sometimes difficult with conceptual subjects rather than quantitative ones, but I can rip through them pretty easily. But I don't. While I know this place is a demotivating atmosphere in which to try to do anything creative, that's not the whole story. I have already given notice, mentally -- it happened around early November -- and I'm just doing token amounts of writing until my new job starts. The fact that I don't **have** a new job hardly seems relevant to my attitude. I sent off a faxed resume-*cum*-cover letter last night, and will mail two more at noon today. Every week sees a different set of addresses being besieged by my plaintive desperation, and I act as if I'm just a phone message away from \$40K+ a year. Perhaps that's merely my psyche's way of preventing me from

steering the Celica into a bridge abutment on I-435 doing 85 on the way home from a night class. There seem to be other subconscious safety mechanisms at play, as well. This week's *New Yorker*, a constant companion for over 25 years, and a staple in my father's library when I was young, has an article in it about Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes. I'm interested, especially in her, but I know I won't read it. Suicide has been too much on my mind in the past half-year to allow my internal *ubermensch* or superego to take it lightly. Somehow, without my consent, wagons have been drawn in a circle within me. I never heard the alarms go off, but they must have, and odd things have resulted. It's a little like military forces having their readiness status bumped up a notch. The surrounding community might be completely unaware, thinking the extra warplanes taking off and landing at the local Air Force base related to a fuel excess, or unexpected recruiting successes. Only the observant conclude something is different.

Well, I'm observant, and one thing I've observed is that I am not getting any response from my employment attempts. My conscious and subconscious are at war with each other. The empiricist I try to be keeps seeing no messages (other than from creditors) on the answering machine at night, while my internal survivalist keeps telling me to write an acceptance speech for the Publisher's Clearing House people and clean out my desk.

Wednesday, February 4, 1998

On Monday, just as Tom and I clocked out at 5:00 P.M. and 2 seconds, shut off the light to our shared office, and slouched into the hall, I said to him, "Marlon Brando, *Apocalypse Now*." As if at a signal, we both whispered in a hoarse unison, "The horror. The horror." Another work day completed at A.D. Banker.

Yesterday in the elevator out of here, Tom said that he had finished reading my ethics

book, and had some structural suggestions for it. Since he didn't mention that they involved matches and gasoline, I felt encouraged by the news. My writing experience has always needed an editor, but none has ever volunteered. I write gobs of stuff, and most people who read it, like it. But I still end up knowing that I need a critical and trained eye to pay attention to my writing, not just an appreciative one. In my present deflated state of spirit, it might be thought that pumping up was what would do me the most good, and I cannot deny appreciating kind words, sincerely stated. But I am not so far gone into whatever abyss is calling me that I do not recognize that my self-indulgent means of expression could use pruning and sharpening. Cynthia was going to serve that function, at least with the ethics book, but I've twanged that lament already. Tom's duty to the company concerning my book is barely that of a proofreader, so I have little hope that much more than that will come out of his efforts, but every intelligent suggestion is worthwhile, from my perspective.

So where does a writer find an editor? I've been told that agents often perform that function, but my attempts to locate an agent for my Japan book were unsuccessful. Legally speaking, the ethics book isn't mine to shop around, so the only completed manuscript I can use is currently resting from its springtime rejections. Perhaps, if I finish the play I'm midway through, that could prove more attractive to an agent, and for his 15% he'd undertake the role of my critic, as well. I suppose it's possible to **hire** an editor, but money for that kind of luxury can't be squeezed out of our monthly budget. Mata said that next month's mortgage payment will have to be deferred to pay the IRS some back taxes from 1996, and with our lack of income, one month behind in anything means perpetually one month behind in it, unless we choose to make a double payment by falling one month behind in some other area. This is not a sitcom,

with zany antics employed to make all the ends meet by the end of the half-hour. This marriage hasn't had a laugh track attached to it in years, and no *deus ex machina* saves our bacon at the conclusion of each episode. There are no episodes. It's an ongoing dull trauma which wears down our ability to treat daily trials with any lightness of heart. This might be a more interesting narrative were there some dramatic development or flamboyant characters in it to raise it above the mundane, but there it is. This is lower-class life in the U.S. in the late 1990s: a quiet, futile struggle to find a way to keep our abstemious lifestyle intact from paycheck to paycheck.

Remember: we haven't eaten out, gone to a movie or any entertainment (and if you try to describe the weekend with Primerica this summer as 'entertainment' I will personally crawl out of these pages and kick your ass harder than it's ever been kicked before), bought presents for each other (other than a nominal display at Christmas. My big splurge for Mata was a bag of pecans she had to shell herself), or done something special for the grandkids other than a day at the zoo in June when it rained on us. We don't go to the riverboats and gamble, we don't do drugs, we don't buy clothes. The wine we drink comes from purchases I made between two and eight years ago and stored ever since. There is no trick here, no hidden lusts and addictions I am concealing from you. We are the working poor, made poorer by four months of unemployment. When I signed on with this job last summer, I figured that we'd be caught up by this time, but we're not. Little things like a car battery being replaced throws our bill-paying efforts into chaos, and we have just been treading water since then. Mata's decision to drive the Corolla down an icy hill one morning on the way to work resulted in it hitting a utility pole and \$3000 worth of damage. Of course we were insured, but with a \$500 deductible, which we need to come up with in about a week in order to get the car back. One step forward, one step backward. But to a

person who feels like a failure, marking time is failure, too. Like a shark, if we're not going forward, we're in trouble.

A creepy thing happened at work this morning. I was sitting at my desk, reading a reference for my current ethics project, Sissela Bok's book, *Lying*. Through my peripheral vision, I felt someone was standing at the door of the office, looking at me, so I turned to find out. It was the company's patriarch, Leon, and he was just staring at me as if I were a new exhibit in the zoo that he couldn't quite figure out. He wasn't smiling with delight, that was for certain. I just returned his stare without blinking, and a few seconds later, he broke it off and went down the hall toward his office. Not a word was exchanged, and neither of us had a pleasant expression for the other. Spooky. I wonder if he felt the same way about it.

Thursday, February 5, 1998

The Darth Vader building is at a busy intersection of moderate-sized commerce, with white-collar places of work and the lunch places which serve them comprising the major occupants of space hereabouts. The building, at sixteen stories, is the tallest in several blocks, and a pair of artificial lakes were installed at its construction, separating its stern black exterior from the two six-lane divided highways which meet to its immediate northeast. This has been a mild winter, by Kansas climatological standards, and a flock of Canada geese has taken up residence on the ponds, rather than continue migrating farther south. They honk, peck at the ground nearby, and leave their green, gooey droppings all over the parking lots. Still, they are a comforting presence amid the treacheries of business and road rage. My office window looks out on that intersection, and today I saw traffic stop while a line of about eight geese made its single-file plodding, waddling way across the street at 1:30 in the afternoon, from pond to the parking

lot of a bank. Checking on their IRAs, most likely. A pair of red-tailed hawks also has taken up sporadic residence on the roof of this building, which is just one floor above us. It's a startling thrill to see one suddenly glide down past my window in search of the careless rodent below. During the few days when the Monarch butterflies were migrating, a few of them flapped resolutely by the window, propelled more by the eddies of wind caused by the building's architectural protuberance than their own locomotion. And in the summer, other birds along with the hawks will often find an updraft from the heat of the dark pavement beneath, and ride it in circles far above my vantage point, wings as rigid as the Wright Brothers's. These events don't have any particular meaning for me, at least not one which is identifiable or easy to label. But I know that a glance out the window, in any season, would be a lonelier thing without their presence than it is with. I thought about bringing some corn for the geese, but I'm ambivalent about encouraging them to hang around, contrary to their historical instinct. As much as they add to my day, I feel they ought to be off somewhere being geese, not walking (and seldom flying) ornaments to Kansas commerce.

On my most recent call to my former student, Shelby, at Andersen Consulting, she tried to disguise her voice to avoid speaking with me. Well, not quite, but it's just a matter of time. Apparently, that company is undergoing some sort of mitosis into two semi-behemoths, and her half is not the one which does ethics work. This afternoon, as I came back to my office after a foray into the crapper, I noticed that Tom's name as well as mine were permanently etched into the burgundy tablets which adorn the doorways of all offices where 'permanent' employees stay. I was shocked, figuring that the company wouldn't spend the bucks on a malcontent like me. I guess the main purpose was to keep the doors and walls uniform, since ours was the only office

entrance without those plaques. Still, it makes me shiver with foreboding. Is this place my vocational final resting place? Shoot me now.

Monday, February 9, 1998

That last question was answered quickly this morning. I was fired. Dennis called me into his office, asked about where things stood with the ethics book. When I told him that Tom had returned it with corrections and comments, and that I figured it would take two more weeks to do a mild rewrite and finish up the final exam questions, he said that sounded all right. I would be given three weeks, and then my services would no longer be needed. While it's hardly surprising, and not a moment of great sadness for me, it still comes with me having nothing to go to next, and that is worrisome from a financial point of view. As difficult as it is to keep the mongols off my back on what I currently make, there's no telling what it will be like when real poverty hits me in the face. One thing is certain, I will look through Sunday's employment ads more carefully than I did yesterday.

While there is no hiding my disdain for this job, I still feel a sense of rejection concerning my departure. I wanted to reject them, which they may have felt was no secret, though I only told a few thousand of my closest friends at work of my feelings. Though genetically predisposed to paranoid interpretations when more reasonable ones are available, it could be exactly what it seems to be. As Dennis explained it, they had never undertaken to write their own texts and courses, choosing instead to lease materials from their competitors. Now that they had two books finished, though it took more than one-half year to squeeze the words out of us, he wasn't certain that he wanted to commit to more books from us until he found out whether these were going to sell. Fair enough; a conservative business decision. Of course, Tom hasn't been

cashiered, but has been assigned a new book to research and plunge into. Perhaps Dennis could justify keeping one writer, and chose to keep the one who works cheaper. Or the one who writes in a more businesslike manner. Or the one who can keep his pants together without requisitioning a hundredweight of safety pins.

However, I have been provided alternative explanations by my ever-helpful colleagues. Several have mentioned that Leon has an aversion to facial hair well over the line into punitive, if not pathological, and I am the only male employed here who flaunts the fecundity of his follicles. A few make timid, temporary attempts at mustaches or goatees, but I'm the only completely unshaven one on this floor. While that seems unlikely to be the whole story, it certainly can play a substantial supporting role. Tom's face looks cleaner than it did *in utero*, so he is a natural choice to remain.

Wednesday, February 11, 1998

*War is Peace*

*Freedom is Slavery*

*Ignorance is Strength*

To the best of my recollection, those were the three slogans of the totalitarian society of George Orwell's *1984*. Orwell's chronology could easily be faulted, but not his fundamental insight. It could also be said that his target -- a repressive, controlling government-dominated society -- was also askew. With the disintegration of the Soviet Union, it seems that today's commerce-driven society is slowly fulfilling the nightmare imagined over fifty years ago. This is not a reflection on my current short-term employer, either.

In December Mata went to Primerica's annual national convention in St. Louis, and came

back briefly pumped. Like other products of the motivational biz, it lasted about as long as the pain relief from a baby aspirin. She pledged to me that she was going to take us to Hawaii this summer on the basis of the contest *du jour* announced at the convention. Her productivity has been nil since that day, so I can only imagine that she plans to stash me aboard the wheel well of a United 747 bound for Honolulu, where I will arrive frozen solid, to be sectioned and sold off as a daily special at one of Roy Yamaguchi's restaurants. I seldom pay any attention to any of the "literature" she brings back from these functions unless she demands it, and then I cast no more than a surly glance over it. Yesterday morning, arising my customary hour-and-a-quarter before her, I happened to glance into her office downstairs and saw one of those enormous, 3-foot foam hands with extended index finger favored by sports fans nationwide. Apparently, thousands of these were waved at the convention as speaker after speaker attempted to raise the collective systolic. On the hand was a slogan which immediately brought to mind the words of George Orwell which began today's entry. The hand said, "*Ignorance on fire is more powerful than knowledge on ice.*" It's hard for Primerica to stun me any more, so it was good to know they're still capable of reaching low enough to offend me further. And it was also gratifying to know that I was still able to recoil in horror and distaste at something they espouse.

So is that what they're trying to cultivate? Ignorance on fire? And are those the only two options available in this world: fired up ignorance or passive knowledge? Apparently, the Wall street-savvy Big Cheeses at corporate headquarters have made a calculated decision to excuse, if not encourage, ignorance of the financial services business on the part of its representatives, as long as their people remain on fire. What is ironic about this is that the company continues to trot out new gimmicks, products, and nooses to snag the unwary. It's not just about selling term

insurance any more and dealing a few mutual funds with the up-front savings. It's marketing tier after tier of products in every conceivable area of a person's economic life, and the complexity of any given combination can require serious pause. But rather than requiring its agents to concentrate on understanding these complexities and grasping their potential impact on a client's life, Primerica only requires their fired-up ignorance. After all, ignorance is strength. Let me check the date on the bottom of this computer screen. Without cleaning my glasses it could be mistaken for 1984. And in less than three weeks I will become an *unperson* with A.D. Banker.

Monday, February 16, 1998

While today is the official celebration of Presidents's Day, the only way I will be able to receive my ration of Dead Presidents for this day will be to show up at work. Which I have. However, I take home what amounts to **less than** three (count 'em!) Dead Jacksons per day. What appears to be a mammoth job fair is scheduled for later today, and a convenient couple of blocks from work. I'll come in early for the rest of the week in order to spend as much time as I can distributing resumes for the shredders of human resources departments both near and far. There will be a report later in this program and film along with a complete wrap-up at 10:00. The help wanted section of the Sunday paper was so discouraging that I am applying for an advertised position at a hog-processing plant in Ottumwa, Iowa. The title is 'Trainer,' though my many years feeding on ribs at Arthur Bryant's trough should count for something. There certainly seems to be a bias against academic teaching experience when applying for these kinds of industrial teaching jobs. I surmise that from the fact that I have been teaching a variety of subjects in a plethora of venues since 1966. The total amount of teaching time I can document as full-time employment in that field is 20 years. Yet I have applied to a dozen or more positions

which call for that ability and have yet to get an interview. My best guess is that human resources wonks have a narrow, stereotypical concept of what a college or university teacher does or is capable of doing, and that misconception contaminates their ability to see someone with my experience as qualified to such a position. I suppose to them a professor is some withered old crone, sagging behind a podium droning on from lecture notes he hand-wrote while Gutenberg was still sitting in a sandbox, drawing letters with a stick. Shelby, from Andersen, might be a paradigm case. She is very attractive, with an easy-going, non-threatening demeanor and a slightly skeptical way of responding to the world which some might interpret as slow. At Baker University, she seemed much more attune to social excellence than academic achievement. In business she would probably be described as a 'team player.' However, she and her clones in the human resources cubicles in the world of commerce are deciding my fate. In some companies, I have discovered that resumes are no longer read by a semi-functioning human. Instead, they are scanned by a computer for certain key words and discarded in the absence of them. It's hard to know which is worse. For me, they both amount to the same thing: no luck.

A few months ago, when I was marveling at the large number of hours many employees work at A.D. Banker, I discovered that Steve's 'due in-due out' times were merely the window for his eight hours. But at least one employee **does** work 10+ hour days, and is apparently salaried. It's Craig, one of the design editors, and he certainly seems to be as dedicated a worker as this company could find. He's also as kind and decent a person as I have met in a long time, which may not be due entirely to the fact that he's also an alumnus of the U. Of Kansas. Craig appears to be a 24 hour-a-day Christian, which might be a more likely source of his decency than his degree. He attended the Million Man March last year and he signs all the greeting cards sent

to employees on their birthdays with a suggested Bible verse, perhaps relevant to his estimation of their own private level and species of depravity. He seems the apotheosis of the loyal company man, which is why I was shocked to see him at the job fair this noon, blue suit and stack of resumes just like all us slackers and cynics. Is nothing sacred? Well, I didn't try to hide from him, and we exchanged good-natured pats on the back before separating into the sea of hopeful humanity.

The fair, or expo, was no different from any of the others, and no more fruitful-seeming. At Health Midwest, a hospital/HMO conglomerate out here, I tried to explain in about four sentences my medical/business ethics hypothesis, with a tag line about how only I, in the history of human consciousness, had both those backgrounds plus the skill to teach it. By the beginning of the second sentence, the woman I was addressing didn't even attempt to feign interest and allowed her eyes to wander over the crowd behind me, as if to say, "Take him out and throw him in a dumpster." So I went out and threw myself in a dumpster. Andersen Consulting was there, and I was able to learn more about the part of the company I need to contact than I already had from four months of phone tag with Shelby. Network, shnetwork.

Tuesday, February 17, 1998

The dread I feel which issues from my financial condition is not the fear of answering the phone at night or listening to the messages which have accrued during the day on our machine. It is the fear of it never changing. Sleep eventually comes to even the most distressed insomniac, and death awaits us all, even those most desiring its oblivion. But solvency is not assured, either by the laws of the universe or of the humans who think they run it. It **might** always be this way. Temporary job after stultifying temporary job, wearing down my own estimation of my abilities

just as it wears down the remnants of those abilities. Before long, the jobs are more menial, like being a “greeter” at Wal-Mart, and my dinners come out of a dog food can. It’s a plausible scenario, made more so by a country’s moral concern for the down-and-out which could fit on the head of a beer, and last not quite as long. As recently as the evaporating fame of William Kennedy it could have been thought a positive thing to be broke, on the skids, and articulate enough to express something about it. But now people want to read about rich lawyers and their richer clients, courtesy of Scott Turow and John Grisham. Even what might have been that most populist of art forms, the movies, avoid any story which might question the economic stratification of this country and what happens to those at the bottom. Of course, we’re dying to know what happens at the top and Gordon Gecko’s saga and its permutations satisfy that seeming need. But no one wants to be entertained by people struggling to make the nut. This morning, as I left home to go to work, Mata gave me her paycheck to deposit. Mine will go with it. She told me, “If you can make a deposit of \$1800, we can pay what we owe this month.” As she knew, we only have \$1200, provided we don’t buy gas for the cars or food for the table. All the statistics say that there are a lot of us out there, but we don’t have a voice. We certainly don’t have one in the cushy boardrooms or the arrogant halls of political power or newspaper city rooms with ostrich-like journalists lolling about. Some of us may own a pittance in mutual funds, but we don’t even have any influence there, either, since the fund managers extort short-term stock gains out of corporate managers upon threat of taking their (or **our**) money and invest it somewhere else. In order to show those stock gains, a company reduces expenses by eviscerating jobs and thereby tarting up the bottom line. Extend that practice over a decade or so and you get a lot of poorly paid jobs that are unable to support continued participation in some

retirement/IRA/mutual fund scheme. The Wall Street apologists like K.C. *Star* financial columnist Jerry Heaster claim that the bull market is fueled by and enjoys the participation of the small investor in retirements and IRAs. For as long as I have been able to stand him he's been full of shit, smelly ideologically-driven shit at that, but this is one of his most odoriferous droppings: the claim that the working class is benefiting from our last ten years of economic "prosperity." No one I know has a job in which there is any company-sponsored retirement, and hardly anyone makes enough to contribute to an IRA on their own. This is primarily due to the fact that jobs in the last decade or so have been pared down to the lowest possible wages and nothing more. I'm beginning to miss Communism, which is not a good sign. The Soviet Union and all the states which were influenced by it must have been among the most ghastly places a person could have lived, and their record for poverty and cruelty is nearly unmatched in the second half of this century. I'd never wanted to go there, but I do wish there were some sort of political alternative in this country which took the financial impoverishment of its citizens seriously. One of the reasons for my hopelessness stems from the knowledge that the system has no arch nemesis anymore and therefore no motivation to keep as many of its constituents satisfied as possible. No one, no party, no ideology -- and I **hate** ideologies with a hate that makes me fear that it may come from another ideology -- is willing to stake its agenda to our slowly sinking fortunes. The Democrats and Republicans these days are the political equivalents of Dumb and Dumber. The Democrats treat us badly, and the Republicans treat us worse. And Sandy Weill is likely to reap an \$85 million bonus this year if he can spike the share price of Travelers stock some time in the next eleven months. That'll likely be seen as proof that the economy is healthy, yet the 20 million or so of us who fall \$200 further behind every month

won't get factored into that clinical prognosis as a contraindication.

A couple of weeks ago, I noticed the first sprouting of our late winter/early spring flowers. When we first moved into this house in 1993, I planted a large number of bulbs all along the edge of the driveway. Though only a few made it up that first spring, they persevere each year, and maybe I should take a lesson from them. I planted snow drops, crocuses, anemone and many colors of tulips. The snow drops are real soldiers, marching against gravity and the privations of the season to rout the winter's gloom in our hearts. It has worked every year but this one. It is great to see them again, since it means that heavy coats and smothering blankets will need to find other accommodations in a few weeks. One of my favorite albums is Bill Evans's "You Must Believe in Spring." While I agree with the sentiment, its admonition sounds more like 'you must brush after every meal.' Why should I? The threat of dentures in a glass by the bed holds no terror for me. What is spring anyway? Floods and thunderstorms, lawn mowing and tree-trimming. Not even sex with Michelle Yeoh could make me believe in spring.

Thursday, February 19, 1998

What hath Al Bell wrought? In a roundabout way he wrought answering machines, wherein, last night, I discovered a message from someone at Shook, Hardy, and Bacon wanting to interview me for the position of Analyst. This call is surely a direct result of Bill's intervention and the curious letter I sent to his man, Stan. The last time I applied for an analyst position with them was in August. I was rejected then, and I have declined to waste the paper and stamps on subsequent enticements. They had some sort of training position which they advertised in September, and I tried again, just as Charlie Brown tries kicking the football out of the deceitful hold of Lucy. Again, Shook, Hardy played its Lucy role flawlessly and I was on my

back within a couple of weeks. Since their ads also request a minimum salary figure, I checked to see what I had thrown at them in August. It was \$35K, which I would be pleased to accept, as you know full well. If the money was their main hesitance in previous applications, perhaps they're going to try to whittle that number down in tomorrow's interview. Last night I dreamed about working there and it was not an unpleasant experience, though the gas from the red beans and rice for dinner was. It sure would be nice to leave here knowing that I was heading for about \$1000 more a month.

Monday, February 23, 1998

Tomorrow is Mata's birthday and the best I could do was corner the market in marked-down, stale, previously shelled pecans at Piggly Wiggly. When I gave them to her Saturday she said they were nowhere near as foul-tasting as she feared, and encouraged me to buy up as many as my dwindling resources would permit. It came to about three pounds of nut fragments and dust.

Friday was the Shook Hardy interview, and it seems to me that little will come of it. Apparently Stan had sent a memo to human resources concerning me and they were merely responding to it by ascertaining whether, in fact, a prize tuna had slipped through the net. The interview was with two people: Holly from recruiting, and Pam from Tobacco. I had given thought to taking up that noxious habit for the day, in hopes of showing that I had some sort of empathy with their clients at RJR. It seemed like an awfully dangerous step to take -- risking readdiction -- just for the hope of a job. But if my ethics background was a drawback in their eyes, perhaps the smell of stale smoke on my person might assuage their fears. I decided that a compromise tactic might be to sit in a bar for a couple hours to soak up the tars and midday

disillusionment, but there wasn't enough time when I arrived at the parking garage. I rode to the 29th floor smelling like an innocent.

Holly started me off, talking about the company, where its offices were, what kind of work it did. She also asked me to talk about my experience in Japan, and I restrained myself from doing my sumo exercise and grunting routine. In fact, I was on my best behavior, which Holly and Pam might be shocked to read never the less. Pam slid into the interview and Holly slid out like a well-choreographed *pas de deux*. While it wasn't precisely 'good-cop, bad-cop,' Pam got down to business quickly. The bottom line was that there was no current vacancy.

While their advertisements are written in the most general terms, they are looking for people with very specific skills, education, and background. Those include corporate organization, economics and statistics, law, and biological sciences. Trying to hit one of them was like trying to catch up with a Roger Clemens fast ball. I tried to make a case for my analytic ability and writing expertise, and to be fair about it, Pam certainly seemed to want to give me every chance to make a case for my abilities. But when it came down to what they wanted and what I had, the twain could not be made to meet. Interestingly enough, though they claimed to have no opening for an analyst on Friday afternoon, they advertised for one in the Sunday paper. Hmm.

Friday, February 27, 1998

Yesterday I finished up the last details of the ethics book and delivered them to Julie, so today seems to be left to final socializing and Microsoft Hearts. Warren has asked if I would consent to a lunch out for my last meal at A.D. Banker with all the colleagues he could corner. It's unlikely we are talking about anyone other than him and me, though he asked Tom to join while they were both in my presence and the poor guy had no choice in the matter. Jodi will

probably feel guilt-stricken enough to attend, since I recently gave her a bottle of wine of her birth year (1967 Chateau Cantemerle). But we have some special visitors in the building today and I would guess the company is planning some sort of attendance-mandatory feeding frenzy for all employees who want to show that their jobs mean something to them. I had my exit interview with Cindy in Human Resources, but I had nothing for her: no door keys, no secret codes, no classified material or projects to be locked away until a replacement is found. I am doomed to be a stealth employee: undetected by anything other than the radars of creditors, and unpersoned from the collective memory before the elevator doors close behind me.

Since it was my last day, Craig came by to inquire about my personal relationship with Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior, and I had to confess its absence. It is unlikely that you could be unaware of what followed. To be fair, Craig has always been exceptionally kind and decent to me, and he continued that tradition in his urgings to find a way to open my heart to God. I'm not recalcitrant, and I even don't think I'm doomed to perdition, but there's nothing I've seen yet to nudge me off disbelief. He asked me to read the Gospel of John, and I will, out of respect both for Craig and the fact that it's been quite a few years since I cracked that book for any purpose other than to look up a reference or a quote.

I'm also acutely aware that I have no money coming in after my final check gets mailed next week, and that familiar feeling of dread came between me and sleep last night. I had thought that a stint of being paid to write for a living would make a difference on my resume but it hasn't. Yesterday's mail contained a letter from Shook, Hardy **confirming** the fact that they had no job for me. Since I took that unequivocally from the interview(s) of last week, why did they feel they needed to indulge in an overkill of the spirit? I guess they wanted to be certain to

purge away any residual illusions I might have stubbornly retained in my naivete.

At 11:30, Warren dragged Tom and Julie into his car with me and we hit the Chinese restaurant at 119th and Metcalf for lunch. To my astonishment, 16 people were there (including us) and we had our own private room. It was touching, I must say, and they actually **did** pay for my meal! As we drove back, Warren said this was the largest gathering of A.D. Banker employees he had ever seen outside the 16th floor of the Darth Vader building. I think it's a tribute to the fact that I spent so little time at my desk actually working and a lot more wandering about in other departments on social forays. There might even be some connection between that habit and my premature exit from this workplace.

Monday, March 2, 1998

Another month, another job search. Even though all four of the partners were in the building on Friday, none of them had the kindness or class to speak any words of parting to me. None of them came by to say that it was pleasant having me around, or that they enjoyed my originality and uniqueness, or that they appreciated my contributions to the company for the brief time I was with them. Nothing. Of course, it was likely to have been false, as would have been my rejoinder of how much I enjoyed the work atmosphere there, but insincere schmoozing is the bedrock of business communication in this country. Or were my observations at the numerous job fairs faulty? None the less, that arrogant, self-absorbed family which makes its pile off the A.D. Banker company remained in character on Friday.

Today I was going to hit another job fair, this one sponsored by Station Casino on the Missouri River. I have no idea what I could do in that respect, but it might be possible for me to work afternoons and evenings, leaving my mornings free for writing. I'm never likely to know,

since Mata left me with her car, which, as expected, has no gas in it and my total cash in pocket amounts to 66 cents.

Friday, March 13, 1998

Today concludes two weeks of unemployment, though I have applied for over a dozen actual advertised jobs in that time, to no apparent avail. We played grandparents last Saturday night with Malcolm, who turned out to be a voluminous phlegm factory. He seemed to enjoy his time, as did we, but the residual effect has been a bad cold for me all this week. The blizzard and record low temperatures (2 degrees on Wednesday) this week have not encouraged recovery, nor has the porous condition of this house, which seems to keep out arctic blasts as effectively as mosquito netting.

Yesterday, someone from the human resources fen of American Century Investments called to ask me to resubmit my resume to them. It sounded like cheering news at first, except that I couldn't recall having submitted one in recent months. A check through my WordPerfect files revealed the last job I applied for with them was dated June 16. The reason for the resubmission, as explained by the clearly put-out personnel clerk was that my resume fried the circuits of their scanner because it contained words in (gasp!) *italics*. Apparently, she didn't think that having an actual pair of human eyes read and evaluate it was the solution. Instead, I am to redo my resume for them, eliminating italicized words and some of those Commie fonts I like to slip in to demoralize the proles in HR. This has led me to wonder many things. Are all resume-scanning machines like the one used at American Century? If so, then it could be the case that most places merely shit-can those resumes that don't easily scan. That would include 100% of mine. It is bad enough for me when a sub-literate HR zombie tries to make sense of

how a philosopher could fit into their simplistic recipe for corporate success. But when a machine won't evaluate you because of the typeface of your resume and you fall through the cracks thereby, the heart sinks. My guess is that an agency I went to last week submitted one of the resumes I had left with them to American Century, since a review of the resume I had submitted in June revealed that it had no italics in it at all.

Since this journal purports to be dispatches from the employment front, I thought I'd forward one from someone other than myself. Mata's son, Michael, had just taken off last weekend for a several months-long training opportunity in Albany, New York, with a new company. The promise was of more pay and greater advancement than his previous one installing cable service for a local provider. He called last night, distraught, to say that he'd been fired 4 days into it. Mike is as personable and sincere a young man as you'd ever want to meet, and anyone who is looking for a person to get along well with customers could hardly find a better choice. But he has what seem to me two major flaws which short-circuit that potential, and one of them seemed to be in effect this time. The circumstances of his firing were relayed this way. In this training program he is actually out in the community dealing with customers, and one of them apparently took offense at Michael's friendliness and called the company president to complain. The president, in turn, called Michael in and canned him. It all sounds like a lot of unnecessary overreacting was going on: Michael trying too hard to be likable, a customer mistaking affability for something else, and a company president too eager to pull the trigger on someone before he knew what Mike could do for the company.

I can state from experience that his sincerity comes across, at first, as contrived and smarmy. No one could be that nice and friendly, but it turns out that he is. He also has a

tendency to leap-frog conventions and formalities in order to try to establish a close rapport with someone quickly. Many of those conventions concern elapsed time and a progression of events and forms of contact which cannot be hurried along. His desire to bypass them by force of his own considerable personality often comes across as being **very** pushy, though in a low-key, soft-spoken manner. Compound that with the fact that he was encountering Eastern attitudes which value a sense of distance, decorum, and personal restraint, even from people well-acquainted, and interstate cultures are bound to clash. That sounds like what happened in Albany, but there's at least one other element which has to be factored into this. He is a young black man, and that always, **always** counts against him, even with other blacks upon occasion. With many whites, being dealt with professionally or commercially by an assertive young black male sets off alarm bells of the psyche in various decibels, depending on the individual. Often the black man/white woman interaction brings this on, but whatever is the case in Albany, it seems as if racial stereotyping and resentment might have played a contributing role.

The other flaw I mentioned above is parasitic on the first one. As a fundamentalist Christian of unceasing enthusiasm, he also has a tendency to lay his religion on people in a very personal manner. If that is included in an approach which seeks intimacy too soon with someone, many people could be well put-off by it. That seems to have been why he received a sudden and involuntary discharge from the Air Force around Christmas 1994. He was charged with sexual harassment against a young white woman in his outfit, and both of these elements probably played a part in his final disposition. It seems clear that he didn't harass her sexually, since he had previously taken a religious vow of celibacy until marriage which he gives all indications of honoring. But he did imply he was "ministering" to her on behalf of his Lord, and

she may have either misinterpreted it or cynically concluded that sexual harassment regulations would be the legal means most effective in getting him out of her sight. One reason I am unable to give a decisive account of either incident is that the family systematically keeps me out of the loop of family happenings. There may be a racial element in that, as well, since I might to some represent the hostile white world without, and that is a world with which you do not share family intimacies. So my information is fragmentary and my conclusions conditional.

Thursday, March 19, 1998

Today marks the 1998 graduation ceremonies of Shoin Women's University, in Kobe, Japan. Literally dozens of young women I love and admire are graduating today and I couldn't pay for a bus fare across town, let alone a flight to Kansai Airport. Last year at this time, saying my farewells to them, I pledged with all my heart that I would, like MacArthur in the Philippines, return. I have not. Shoko e-mailed me today, saying that she'd try to get good pictures and send me copies, but we both know that's only second-best. Soon the *sakura*, or cherry blossoms, will be in full bloom across Japan and another of my promises will erode in the minds of those to whom I made it. The person who said money can't buy happiness would have been more accurate saying that lack of money can certainly purchase unhappiness.

For several weeks now the *Star* has carried ads from temp agencies for a 6-week gig in Lawrence, Kansas, grading test papers. The announced wage -- \$9 per hour -- and long drive each way kept me from applying. Last Sunday, the ante went up to \$10 in a few of the ads simultaneous with a lowering of my hopes and expectations, and I applied at one Signature Staffing. The interview was quick and efficient, and I was scheduled to go to the workplace yesterday for a pre-employment test. I wasn't informed whether I would be required to hit a

bottle with my erratic urine supply or prove a modest level of literacy. It proved to be the latter, and ‘modest’ is giving it a lot. The job required a 4-year degree, though I kept mum concerning how long it actually took me to get my B.A., since I got the impression that speed was a valued trait in this assembly line of blue book readers. I can tell **you**, of course: 26 years from first college credit to degree. It may not be as impressive to tell you those were not continuous years of study. The test included a one-page contest of compositional triteness which required that we write a page-long answer to the query: what is a team and what makes one successful? Okay, that’s two, but it can be made into one self-serving platter of banality with little or no effort. We were given 15 minutes and I was done in 6, even allowing for the fact that I actually tried to write legibly. Next, we had another 15 minutes to classify written responses to a question in one of nine pretty obvious categories. After that arduous regimen, we were given a break. Those few of us who had survived thus far set about to help revive the others of our number who had previously passed out from the effort required to keep up with the brutal pace. Finally, we were given an unlimited amount of time to spot the 5 pages of grammar and spelling errors that even graduates of some southern schools would have found. I was the first one (of 27) finished, as usual, and was therefore interviewed first. The interviewer wanted to know whether I wanted to be considered for the hallowed position of “Table Leader.” It paid an extra dollar an hour, and permitted me to carry a scepter and order summary executions for slackers. My kind of gig. Of course, I said sure. They’ll call on Friday to let me know, but the interviewer said that I was certain to get **some** kind of a job. Just like my A.D. Banker experience, at the intersection of two paths of desperation an opportunity arose.

Saturday, March 28, 1998

Thursday was the first day of Table Leader training at NCS (National Computer Systems) in Lawrence. The building is low and wide, reflecting the cheap land prices in those former meadows east of Lawrence. From the east windows I can see, less than a mile away, another prime reason for taking this job at this time of year: Pendleton's Asparagus Farm. In about a month, the first sprouts will be ready to snap off and steam and I'll be close enough to count the spears. I'll also have sufficient ready cash in my pocket, thanks to the \$11 an hour NCS is giving up for my overeducated help. The asparagus season will conclude about the same time as this assignment, which is as close to divine intervention as I have seen in quite a while.

Eleven of us gathered around a conference-sized table. Three of them were from the NCS facility in Iowa City, Iowa to oversee the project. The state of North Carolina has engaged the company to score essays written by its 4th, 7th, and 10th graders. Over 300 people have been hired to accomplish the scoring at what would appear to be tables of ten. Our group will be in charge of 4th graders. At first, I felt a little put out that I wasn't assigned to a higher grade, but then I discovered that the higher grades have more subtle and difficult scales on which to evaluate and classify. In addition, upon first reading of the sample essays, there is a lot of unintentionally hilarious material there. Yesterday, we took three "qualifying" exams. North Carolina apparently has some sort of criteria for who will be allowed to be a table leader, and one of them is that he or she receive a grade of 80% on any one of the three exams. The essays, some barely one hand-written page in length, are classified on a four-point scale. There is also a classification for "impossible to score." All the papers are actual student papers from North Carolina, complete with incredible quasi-phonetic spelling, e.g., "Fateville" for the city of Fayetteville. I got the highest score on all the exams: 80, 85, and 95. Two of our group who

performed at a sub-par level were demoted to being grammar and spelling checkers on the 10th grade papers.

There can't be more than 100 other employees in the entire building, all working on different projects from ours. When over 300 people arrive on Monday to clog up the plumbing and drain the few coffee pots there will be hell to pay. I can compliment the management already on their choice of hand soap in the rest rooms -- a major improvement over the pink grease in the Darth Vader building.

Two crocuses have bloomed in the front yard, and the tulip leaves have begun to inch their way out of the dormant winter soil. Last weekend I bought 8 blue iris bulbs and planted them, and hope to turn over a lot of soil later today in preparation for a major planting project near the house. I'm as broke as I've ever been, spending my last \$3 yesterday on sad specimens from the marked-down death row of vegetables at Piggly Wiggly. But spring has begun to lift my spirits, as it always seems to at this time of year. I want to plant seeds and see them flower. Every day I walk in the backyard to check the progress of the cherry blossoms. Nothing else about my life has improved but the page on the calendar.

Thursday, April 2, 1998

Yesterday we concluded our training as leaders and began sitting in while our graders were trained. Since the regimen will be identical with what we received, we can approach the experience as either reinforcement or redundancy, depending on the yawn count. I suppose the positive side of it is that the six table leaders are still being paid for our diminished services. We are also expected to disperse ourselves among the 90+ trainees, pacifying the outraged and enlightening the befuddled. Since this training is being held in a different area of the building

from where ours was held, new sights and sounds were available for the observant. The training is held in a roomy area adjacent to another open space with a bank of about 50 PCS and their operators. At 2:00 P.M., all the computer wonks arose from their chairs and migrated to a large vacant part of their general workspace and were led in some sort of stretching exercises. It looked refreshing and I envied them. The NCS people who are supervising our project are not particularly trim and do not appear to place a very high value on physical well-being, so it is unlikely we'll get the same opportunity as a group. But in talking with another table leader, Carole, we both felt our individual tables could participate in such an activity if everyone was in favor of it.

I am a little disturbed by the process used to decide which readers will be assigned to us. About 200 potential scorers received preliminary training in scoring the 10th grade papers, which are evaluated on a 6-point scale. Those scorers who received the minimum acceptable accuracy score were selected to work the 10th grade essays. All the losers were given to us. While they all were required to show proof of having earned a degree, several seem to be living tribute to the leniency of the modern educational system. It is not clear whether we are required to use all the scorers who complete the training, no matter how abysmal their abilities, or whether we can send the worst out the door.

Sunday, April 19, 1998

The annual tax self-immolation has prevented keeping this journal current, though other events have also intervened. The cherry trees which I bought last year at Home Quarters to give me a taste of *sakura* ambiance while apart from my beloved Japan have finally blossomed. And they are **not** producing cherry blossoms! I don't know whether I am more heartbroken or

angered. While I haven't been able to locate a decent bottle of *sake* hereabouts, that's easily finessed. But cherry blossom time with cottonwood blossoms (or whatever those pink things are scattered about the branches in the back yard) is a non-starter. Can I get my money back? It would be a serious difficulty, not to mention effort, to dig the saplings up, but there is no more room in the backyard for another tree if I let them stay.

On the positive side this week, asparagus has begun to be harvested at Pendleton's Farm - - my official sign of spring -- and is delicious. I also received two 8-hour videotapes of sumo from my former colleague in Japan, Katrina Watts. I had begged her, and several other correspondents over there for tapes of a recent set of matches, or *basho*, and Katrina finally came through with the March *basho* in Osaka. It will be difficult for you to understand how meaningful it is for me to be reunited with sumo, no matter how exhaustive my explanation.

So instead, how about some job news? We've completed about 10 days of full-time work on the project, and it has become heavy shaded with political overtones. Very few of the scorers have been weeded out, though some have opted to discontinue. My table has six people who come in regularly, two who are sporadic, and one who quit coming over a week ago. We have no apparent personal conflicts, and I try to keep the tone light and sometimes absurd. That latter feeling is not difficult. After about three days of full-time scoring, the person from the state of North Carolina, who oversees the project from a fax machine in Raleigh, reportedly blew a diode over the low scores we were giving the student essays. My feeling was that the scorers have been exceptionally assiduous and accurate, and the papers received the scores they deserved. I still think that. Our keepers from the NCS Iowa office were caught in a bind. They had taught us very well what the criteria were and we had internalized them. The training process NCS

devoted to the project was very thorough and very expensive, considering how short a time we would be employed following the training. I feel they did an exemplary job, but they're now getting squeezed by bureaucrats from the North Carolina educational establishment to subtly whittle down the criteria so that we give fewer 1s and more 4s. Whenever I am tempted to be overly generous with the writing I am given to evaluate, I remember that this is the state that has reelected Jesse Helms *ad nauseam*, and there may just be some genetic explanation for both phenomena: Helms's extended tenure and the inability to write a cogent, correctly-spelled sentence by the age of 9. No need to pretend about either one.

The bottom line, both for NCS and North Carolina, seems to be money. Apparently, politicians in N.C. who are opposed to spending tax dollars on educational projects like the expository writing one want to see some proof that it's doing some good or they'll rescind the funding. When that happens, the handlers with the rapid-fire fax will be out of a job, or at least out of one they seem to want to milk for as long as it is worthwhile for them. So it is in their best interest to come up with some way to demonstrate to the Tar Heel politicians that the writing project is working. How do you do that? Simple. Show improved test scores over last year. And what if the writing isn't actually getting better? No problem. After all, the question wasn't whether the writing was getting better, or whether the students were improving, it's whether some easily manipulable index appears to indicate that the students are improving. Of course, those are two different quantities, and can be made to bear nothing more than a coincidental relation to each other. I've come to like, admire, and respect Barbara, Jean, and Linda -- the NCS people who are directly overseeing this project down here. They put in horrendous hours hundreds of miles away from home, and they are obviously in a triple bind at this point. Many of

the scorers are either confused or resentful at the appearance of dumbing down the standards to make the political predictions easier to achieve. In a scientific framework, this is a scandalous tactic: if the data doesn't fit the hypothesis, fudge the data rather than revise the hypothesis. Plus they are pushed every day, twice or three time a day, by North Carolina to make the numbers rise as if leavened. And finally, if North Carolina doesn't get what it wants from the NCS supervision of this project, i.e., higher scores no matter the quality of the writing, then it will look for another company which will provide the numbers they want, which means NCS will lose valuable revenue, endangering the positions of Barbara, et al. It's a nasty situation, and of course some of the shit travels downhill to the table leaders, since we are expected to enforce the standards at the level of the individual scorer. While I take it seriously, I don't internalize the (occasionally) near-panic atmosphere which prevails following a blistering fax from Raleigh. I also try to insulate my table members from the seeming mood swings of the project's orientation from day to day. It seems to have worked, since the daily stats which are published on each individual scorer show my group consistently at the top of the standards the company is trying to achieve. I owe it all to Funny Hat Day, which I instituted one day last week for all table members of my group. We all wore strange headgear all day (mine was a very appropriate pirate captain's hat), and seem to consolidate our attitude as the most unique group of people on the project. We are, and we're proud of it.

Sunday, April 26, 1998

The contradictory relationship between accurate assessment of the essays and giving North Carolina the statistics they crave was demonstrated in microcosm last week. One of the scorers at my table has arranged to work only three days a week, but has averaged only a day and

a half of actual attendance. Periodically the project circulates the infamous “validity packets,” which are actual 20-paper groups of genuine student essays for the scorers to evaluate just as they would any other packet. All the essays in each packet, however, have been previously evaluated by seeming experts, so there is a known score for each essay with which to compare the scorer’s grade. The person from my table who is frequently missing has managed, in her few working hours, to compile enviable statistics, i.e., minimizing 1s and 2s, maximizing 3s and 4s. She may have the score distribution most admired by the pencil-pushers and number-crunchers in North Carolina, but when she had to score a group of papers which already had an assigned value, she got only 15% of the scores right -- the worst “validity” score yet recorded. Yet she has stats we are all encouraged to emulate.

While I am fairly securely devoted to a belief in the randomness of events in the universe, that belief has come under question with two seemingly unrelated events this week. On Monday night I worked an hour overtime. The 7th grade essays are scored by a large group which works from 6:00 to 10:30 P.M. at the same table we use during the day. As I was catching up on some residual paperwork, I noticed with my peripheral vision a truly lovely young black woman walking to the opposite end of the table adjacent to mine. A vision such as that seldom stays peripheral for long, and I chanced a glance at her. She looked familiar, and not in that stereotypical “we all look alike to you white people” way. I was sure I had known her in the past, and I was certain it was as her teacher in an ethics class at the University of Kansas earlier this decade. I couldn’t come up with a name from my memory, so I went back to my work, resolving to disturb my student records some night soon to see if I could bring her back from the past. I did so that night. Her name was Robyn, and she had sat on the front row of class in spring of 1994,

earning an 'A.' I recall she was delightful though a little harried by a desire to overachieve. While most of my students of that era would enjoy meeting after class at Free State Brewery to hoist a Copperhead Pale Ale and talk about the problems of the world, Robyn would usually seem preoccupied with a paper, test, or some other academic duty. That is hardly a criticism. On Wednesday, working late again, I confronted her with the incontrovertible evidence that she was indeed Robyn McDaniel, and she confessed abjectly. Well, that's not entirely true, but she did seem genuinely happy to see me again, and we talked a long time about our lives in the intervening years. I had stashed a few thousand pictures of my grandchildren on my person in case she wasn't horrified that I remembered her, and she was suitably charmed. She had married since graduating, and now has a daughter, Alyssa, just a couple months younger than my granddaughter, Madisen. We have already arranged to get together with progeny and grand-progeny for a few hours in the park.

Then, in a phone call this morning, my old friend Inga informed me that she had accepted a job offer from a place near Tucson, and would be leaving in a couple months. She and I have been as close as two people who haven't exchanged spit could be, and it will be a sad day for me when she departs, since I know our contact will drop off dramatically at that point. Somehow, I need an Inga in my life, and maybe Robyn is there to replace her. That's a rather cold and mechanistic way of treating human relationships -- as if they were interchangeable parts from an assembly line -- but the appearance of Robyn on the scope less than a week before Inga tells me she's shipping out for dry skin and 90 year old Republicans is at least fortuitous. I dare not think it is more.

Monday, May 4, 1998

Saturday was supposed to be the day I photographed Inga and her two children, but when I returned home after a half day of overtime at NCS, a message on my machine from her canceled the appointment. This was not the first such pull-out but I knew that the weeks were running out on the portrait project and I called her back quickly. It turned out that her kids had been unexpectedly hijacked to a birthday party, and Inga offered to buy me lunch instead. We ended up in Brookside during the annual spring art fair, and dined in the open air at Joe D's. Her final project gets handed in on Tuesday and then she ends her academic life by graduating on May 17th. When I met her she was a sophomore in my class on Ethical Theory and now she's about to get a graduate degree and a decent job. We had a relaxed, easy, meandering conversation over lunch, and then wandered up and down 63rd Street a little aimlessly. On my part, I was so happy to get a little time with her that I had no interest in concluding it by running out of things to do or places to visit. She needed to buy a Thank You card and I guided us into the book shop owned by two friends of mine, Roy and Sandy. I jawed with Roy while Inga scoured the card racks. A poetry reading was scheduled at that hour but Inga and I were the only patrons in the place. Rather than waiting to fill the house, the poet ushered Inga and I into seats, plopped on a stool, and treated us to a private recitation. I normally find little use for readings of any sort. Images meant to be lingered over and savored speed by in a blur, immediately replaced by others equally indistinguishable. I remember his first poem -- it depicted an experience I have often had too -- but ten or twelve more followed too quickly into a shallow and confused grave.

Of course, a reading in a book store means only one thing: books by the reader are for sale, and this was no exception. I bought us each a copy and the poet graciously inscribed them with some kind and generous words. We left feeling as if we had visited a secret place made just

for us on that day.

Today at work, one of the scorers at my table remarked that the job affords an acceptable living provided you work 55 hours a week. True, I answered. But you are forced to trade a living for a life. That's the employment situation for an enormous number of Americans today. You must choose between a living or a life. In opting for a living these past five weeks I have abandoned my life of writing and thinking on paper. The bills are paid, but I feel like a subhuman, albeit a temporarily and superficially solvent one.

Saturday, May 9, 1998

By the end of the day on Wednesday it was clear that the project would have no more work left after the next day. We made our way slow-motion through most of Thursday and then said our farewells to the scorers at our tables. My group was sad to lose gainful employment, but we all parted on up notes.

Thursday, May 28, 1998

For table leaders, however, nearly a week of work could be squeezed out of the company. Another project from another state required a couple dozen readers and scorers and after cleaning up the workplace on Friday, we all returned for four days of the next week. No heavy lifting summoned from any of us, and by Thursday noon we were all out of work again.

Then, last week a contact from the agency through which I signed on to that project, Signature Staffing, called to say that I had been requested for a one-month project of the same sort beginning June 3. The time off has not been spent profitably. While I've continued to apply for advertised positions where my qualifications appear to blend, not even rejections come my way. Silence, as always, is its own rejection. Bill and Gloria invited us to a birthday party

honoring Gloria last Saturday, and I found that “unemployed” as an answer to the question, “What do you do?” is not especially favored. Among these idlers with independent sources of support, that’s a response which brings them too close to an unpleasant reality about the world. They much prefer to know that one is working on a novel or a play or a symphony. Hell, building a bomb in your garage or brewing up methamphetamine in the basement is more likely to gain approval, but I was feeling recalcitrant that night, which also meant I would feel alone, since no one was interested in sitting next to the leper of vocational ineptitude.

Last week also marked the first meeting of Madisen and Alyssa (Robyn’s daughter). We went to Loose Park but neither child was in peak temper. Mata and I brought along Maddy’s younger brother, Malcolm, and three adults for three under school-age children was gross understaffing. I had fixed a picnic lunch, including my own, blender made strained food for Malcolm, but any chance for a pleasant, leisurely and civilized luncheon *al fresco* died with the first temper tantrum and skinned knee. This was compounded by the fact that Malcolm still doesn’t recognize me and Madisen was going through a period of amnesia concerning my identity. The result must have been suspicions on Robyn’s part that I had rented these kids for the day just to impress her.

Wednesday, June 24, 1998

This journal began a year ago to the day, but the concerns which set it in motion are as pressing today as they were then. Will it become a *de facto* autobiography of the last years of my life? Nothing in the events of the past twelve months leads me to dispute that likelihood. Last week I finally located a buyer for most of the wine I was willing to part with. I settled for a price -- \$6000 -- which was well under retail for about 120 bottles of (predominantly) high-class

Bordeaux, but the plumber is already on our premises to spiff up our dumpatoria, and I hope that a fenced backyard and affectionate hound are not far behind.

The NCS project ends on Friday and another one begins the following Monday, so I've been promised employment through mid-July. Eventually, we'll run out of states of the union, and the offers will cease, at least until next spring. Last week I interviewed for a trainer position with Aerial Communications, but I didn't get a good feeling about my appearance there. For the entire spring and summer (up to that point) I had let my hair grow, much to Mata's appreciation. I have to admit that I enjoyed its length as well, but a job interview requires serious conformity to grooming standards, and I got trimmed a couple of days before. Unfortunately, I haircut-shopped strictly by price, and I ended up looking like someone besieged by epilepsy had taken to my scalp with a Black and Decker hedge trimmer. I went into the interview looking recently electrocuted.

Early in May I had signed up in a play writing seminar with highly esteemed Kansas City playwright, Frank Higgins. Apparently, not many people had enlisted for the experience and the seminar (at UMKC) was canceled. I was able to contact Higgins by phone and we arranged for him to read the first act of a play I had begun and he would comment on it for 50% less than the cost of the seminar. When he finally got around to reading the whole thing, his comments were harsh, vituperative, and completely destructive. He even went to the pains of calling me with rude, snide, and disparaging comments before he was even 10 pages into the manuscript, rather than waiting until he could stomach the entire 30 pages. Apparently, he has a venom monitoring device which requires he discharge a certain amount when the buildup becomes too great, and the first 10 pages of that play set it off. It was a truly discouraging experience. He only acknowledged that I had written **one** decent line in the entire act, and that one, he was certain, I

had put in the wrong place. I haven't been able to look at the manuscript since that last call of his.

One avenue of escape I have been contemplating, other than the 100 MPH meeting with a bridge abutment, is going into private consultation as a philosopher. It is apparently catching on, as much as philosophy has ever caught on, for people who are finding their lives empty and devoid of meaning. No one seems to exist any more to talk with other humans about the deep issues of existence without trying to sell them a covert or overt agenda, e.g., religion, dianetics, herbal relief and crystal vibrations, Primerica, etc., etc., etc. In practical terms, I've been there. I'm still there, if it comes to that. The only axe I have to grind is the need to look at yourself and the human condition as free from ideological blinders as possible. I have a lot to offer to people who want to talk about the philosophical bases of life. But I also need to approach this venture as a business, which means I need some sense of the expenses I can expect to encounter. In addition, I need an office where I can hold the sessions, a manner of obtaining clients, and a price structure. Much to ponder. Of course, that's what a philosopher is supposed to do.

Wednesday, July 8, 1998

Yesterday afternoon at work, Linda -- not known for interrupting the flow of commerce for mere personal information -- got the microphone and P.A. system to work and announced to all in attendance that I had become the grandfather to an "8 pound **20** ounce" girl. Of course, no one was more shocked than I, since I couldn't imagine who could have been pregnant. Then, I realized she had said **grand**daughter, and I felt a little more relieved. Jake's wife, Terri, was expecting, and I had been keeping tabs on her progress. Jake is father to a girl, Heather, from his first marriage, and he really wanted a son to carry on the Lowden name. That's certainly not a

priority with me, but he feels under some sort of internal or genetic pressure to produce a male offspring. I guess I'm puzzled both at why it's so important to him and so unimportant to me. The line seems to be struggling along, though at far less than Mormon-esque numbers of offspring. My scanty contact with many member of my family makes a hard count impossible, but the branch of the tree taking off from my father's loins has net been especially notable for producing male offspring. My younger brother Bill, in particular, appears uninterested in producing lineage of either gender. Of course, his being gay certainly excuses him from those duties from my point of view, though others of our clan might not be so lenient. My youngest brother, Phil, produced two girls in his first marriage and has adopted a boy, Jeff, in his second. That counts. My father's brother, Howard, had a son, Jim, and while I know he's married, I have no idea whether he has gone forth to populate the earth, and if so, whether any of them are boys. That's just the fuzzy head count of legitimacy; it would be no surprise if my father had supplied the population base for an entire small town somewhere in New Jersey. The rest of us, I would wager, were no slouches, either.

Terri already has a girl from a previous marriage, and has told Jake that this was his only chance. She plans to shut down the baby-making facility for the duration after this one. A sonogram a few months ago told them the bitter truth, and I'm not sure Jake has accepted Terri's decision wholeheartedly. The future may be entertaining.

None the less, Hayley Renea Lowden arrived yesterday and I can testify for the soundness of her lungs and vocal apparatus. Part of the wine money went toward my first camcorder, and Hayley was my first subject. Some time this year I hope to be able to put together a composite tape of my life and family in the U.S. and send it off to people in Japan, like Kazuko, Shoko, and

Aya, who have been such faithful correspondents and who want to know more about America and the people I know here. Only Kazuko has sent a video to me, though the other two, plus Chisato, have sent audio tapes to me, sounding dreadfully rehearsed and, in some cases, read aloud rather than just spoken extemporaneously. Ah well: even a stilted voice from one of those treasured women is preferable to silence.

Thursday, August 6, 1998

Unemployment and a desire to overachieve in **some** area of my life led me to plant over 35 basil plants this year. Now I am up to my hocks in pesto ingredients. I use an imported Pecorino Romano as a part of the cheese component, and Scimeca's Market, on Independence Avenue, has a supply of it in perpetually @ \$5.98 a pound. What few cents I have left from the great wine sale can stash a few pounds away. I continue to apply for likely-sounding positions in the paper, but job fairs are no longer a part of my regimen. Even if I **wanted** a job in telemarketing or customer service, it's improbable that I would look like a person with the background a recruiter is looking for. Perhaps you see this as a defeatist attitude, but it's merely a reflection on a continuity of past experience remarkable in its uniformity. At every job fair I attend, smart money wagers that I am the oldest, hairiest, best-educated (i.e., most college credits on his transcripts), and demonstrating the widest range of job experience. I am also the first person to be mentally written off by all hosts in attendance.

Friday, August 21, 1998

Today I received a strange and wonderful little note from someone I have never met. When Inga left town for Arizona, she bought a few reprints of the pictures I took of her and her kids in June and asked me to send them to various relatives. I did, with a little note explaining

why it was I who was sending them and what my connection to Inga was. Today, her younger sister, Jessica, wrote back with some lovely compliments about my photography and a blatant hint that she had a fine-looking 2 year old son who would be happy to be photographed if I needed practice. What goes on here? First she praises me like I was the reincarnation of Ansel Adams and then she suggests I need practice. Sounds like Inga's sister, all right. Her letter showed an e-mail address with Sprint, so I'll use that to reply. Robyn has proven to be incommunicado this summer in spite of her protestations of wanting incessant contact, and Inga has only written once. Why do I appear to need some alternative focus, innocent though it may be, for my male attentions?

Friday, August 28, 1998

No work in over a month and the money from the wine ran out quickly. So did the contractor, or so it seemed, and I hit up my IRA for a 60-day loan. The contractor, who lives down the street but is as easy to locate as Michael Jackson, has made minute progress on our bathrooms. Only one is usable and he seems to be using our already paid-for work to finance his supplies for other jobs. He promised to fence our backyard for free if we'd lend him some money to buy stuff for another job and we took him up on it. There really wasn't another option. He would probably be equally slow either way we took it, and at least in one of the ways we'd get a free fence job. It now seems like its schedule will be mapped out in geological time periods.

In my time off, I've decided to catalogue all my remaining photographs. Hundreds of slides, negatives, and prints, were destroyed in floods of my cellar in the early 1980s, but tens of thousands remain with only the ones from Japan in any kind of order. It has resulted in a

bittersweet trip down a musty memory lane. I remain proud of the pictures I made during the Vietnamese refugee operation in 1975 on Wake Island, as well as the Kansas City jazz musicians I shot at work in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Most everything else is snapshot quality.

Today I got an e-mail from Doug Frost, who bought the wine back in June, asking whether a case of 1977 Torres Black Label cabernet was included in his purchase. I had offered it originally, but he turned it down, along with a case of 1984 Pine Ridge cabernet. I wonder what he's up to? It would only take a review of our e-mail messages to clear it up, but perhaps he's hoping I keep sloppy records and could be coerced into giving it to him under cover of a his version of a misunderstanding. Of course, I shot back a correction to his misapprehension, citing dates and times. But then I began to wonder. Is he interested in buying it? Maybe I should shoot him a price and make a couple of hundred for the week. Just as I was about to do that, I decided (being in the cataloging mood) to go through all my wine to see whether there were other items I could interest him in. I did, and set an asking price of \$5000, which I felt would be fair to him and advantageous to me.

Sunday, August 30, 1998

Doug countered with \$4600 as a final offer and I take it over to him tomorrow. There are probably not many more attractive bottles in my cellar, except to my own palate, so I fear that source of income has evaporated. Some of the money will go for a new laptop, with which to continue this journal. The hinge on my old one has broken, leaving it open permanently. And that makes it the world's slowest and least-flexible desktop computer. I was going to give it to Melanie to use with Mikey and Madisen, but she's not ready for it. In addition, the old 286 model I gave to Jake, and he gave to Heather, is nothing more than a clumsy doorstop, and she

could use something a little more up to date.

While I haven't visited any job fairs recently, I did answer an ad for the Census Bureau to work on the next counting, but as a supervisor. There was a test for the position, and last week I got a letter informing me that I had qualified for the job on paper. The people they want to interview will be called next month. While at Missouri Job Service, I was introduced to several web sites for job hunting and have decided to make a concerted Internet job search when I get my new computer. While I have no idea whether anyone actually gets hired that way, it is likely to be free, since the computer will certainly have free offers from several Internet providers consisting of 50-100 hours of free surfing time. I am doing everything I can to avoid going back to an agency for temp employment.

Sunday, September 6, 1998

Last Monday I finally had another interview for a position as trainer. My last one had been the debacle with Aerial Communications, in which I was twice the age of the other applicants, and three times as old as the building in which I would work. I tried to act 'young' and energetic, but a gray beard seems to cut through all those pretenses. It seems like I'm in a bind in which nobody wins. Mata cannot abide me without my beard, which may not be as bad as it sounds. But shaving it might go a long way to counter the appearance of my dotage, thus helping me snag a 'real' job. She did ask whether I had ever considered coloring my beard, since the hair on my head remains predominantly brown, and I had not. It was shocking to hear her suggest it, come to think of it.

This most current interview was with an organization called Mid-American Payment Exchange. They seem to handle electronic financial exchanges between banks and other

financial institutions. It's an area where I have no background whatsoever, but few people do. That is not likely to be a drawback unless a disgruntled former Federal Reserve employee pops in to vie for the same job. I felt the interview went quite well, and I tried to convey flexibility and a superior ability to learn new things. The vice-president interviewing me had just arrived from a business trip and seemed a little distracted, though affable. I felt we parted on very optimistic terms, but in today's *Star* the position was readvertised. Apparently, interviewers aim to create a feeling that you've done a fabulous job on the interview and an offer of employment is a mere formality. Even the Aerial people grinned and mugged with me like photographers trying to pry a smile from a sullen child, though I felt a patronizing undercurrent from them. In contrast, the women at Shook Hardy were professional, straightforward, and left no crumb of encouragement on my plate. If it has to be thus, I like it that way.

Monday, September 21, 1988

A post card from the Census folks let me know I would not be toting up the uncounted millions in 2000. My attempts at Internet job-hunting have been difficult to fathom. There have been a few ethics positions advertised on the various job boards, and I've applied for them, though I found it curious that the kind of background they want for an 'ethics' officer is either Human Resources or the Law. The former is understandable, since obviously HR folks are writing the job descriptions and/or advertisements, and they have a class interest in expanding their empire. The demand for lawyers in ethics positions seems totally misguided. This is not evolving into a stereotypical example of lawyer-bashing, but if you've been admitted to the Bar, you might want to take your blood pressure medicine before reading farther.

Lawyers are advocates of a particular person or abstract collective, in the case of "the

people,” and they are expected to do whatever they can, within the law, to represent that person’s interests. They attack the opponent’s position, evidence, witnesses, credibility. It’s very much a surrogate military occupation, consumed by attacking and defending. It is also an occupation of extremism; nearly nothing is too bizarre or off-the-wall to be eliminated as a possible tactic if it might result in victory. Winning is everything.

In contrast, dealing with ethics in a professional capacity requires a skill in what today is called “consensus-building.” At its most fundamental level, ethics can’t be coerced, they must be internalized standards which compel a person from within. Working as an ethics officer requires empathy and understanding for the person who transgresses, not a desire to destroy him or her in a withering cross-examination. It also must include an ability to teach ethics as an instinctual activity rather than a following of certain simplistic, sanctimonious rules imposed by an authority structure. The ultimate authority structure in ethics must be the authority of one’s own conscience, and that’s an internal aspect of who and what we are. An ethics officer must be able to generate genuine trust in others so that they will feel comfortable revealing the state of their moral intuitions, and if a person is seen as a zealous advocate for the power structure it seems unlikely that anyone will open up to him or her. But however my analysis may be convincing (to me), the reality of the situation is that my deep and rich background in ethics is unlikely to ever be put to use in a business context. This is not because I try to hide it on my resume or in my cover letter. It is because the business world, long hostile and resistant to incorporating ethics into its daily life, has no real idea what ethics is.

Curiously enough, my web-surfing has resulted in me happening upon an outfit called Hire Ethics which had a site for me to visit. If this place can’t get me anything, I’m really

doomed. I left an e-mail message for a 'Gregg' who seemed to be some sort of honcho over there, and he responded quickly and enthusiastically. He wanted me to send a run-down of my background and set a time when we could talk on the phone. Cataloging pictures of old girlfriends had to take a back seat, for once. We talked a week later and he sounded very optimistic. He also relayed news of a recent placement he had made with a prominent financial institution in California, Union Bank. Gregg said he felt that with my background he would have a lot of success with me, too. He said he wanted to send me a more detailed explanation about the company and what it does, and I began to hear a voice inside me saying "Hang up the phone, asshole!" My first hint that any ride I took with Hire Ethics would not be a free one came when I mentioned the Bernard Haldane experience disparagingly and heard not a murmur of sympathy from the other end of the line. I told Gregg I was looking forward to looking over the material he was sending and we ended the conversation at that point.

The large envelope arrived this week, and it was as I feared. A thousand bucks. I e-mailed Professor De George asking whether he had ever heard of the company and he responded that he had not. He also said he didn't think I should have to pay for those services. Have to? I couldn't pay for a stamp to tell Hire Ethics they weren't going to do anything for me. But I am beginning to wonder: have I reached that point of hopelessness that it is literally impossible for me to find myself a meaningful job? To me, it's a little like paying for sex; an open admission that you can't compete in the open market with your own credentials. Must I hire a pimp?

I did receive a call today from Lisa at Signature Staffing. They were the people through whom I went to get the NCS job. I had called with the information that NCS had scheduled another project in the fall and I wanted to be included on it. Lisa said she hadn't heard a thing

from HR concerning it and wanted to know the source of my information. Two of the NCS supervisors, Linda and Jean, have kept sporadic e-mail contact with me, and it was through them I got word of new essays to read. Lisa thanked me for my information and inquired whether I was interested in going back to work on a different project with Signature this week. I hadn't thought about it, though I have noted the rapid dissipation of the most recent wine funds, so I asked her what she had. It turned out she needed a proofreader for an evening shift a half hour's drive to the south, in Gardner, Kansas. I've always liked evening shifts of the 3-11 or 4-12 variety since I could make good use of most of the day without having to sleep too late in the morning in order to maintain myself. This, however, was 4:00 P.M. to 2:30 A.M., 4 days a week. The prospect of driving back from Gardner at nearly 3 A.M. didn't thrill me, but a three-day weekend did. And the pay would be \$11.50 an hour, which would address the pressing issues of body and soul. Or at least the former. She also had a customer service gig much closer to where I live at \$10 for the 3-11 shift, though the other 3 shifts were also available. I guess it was just time to get back into the workforce rather than waiting for the good jobs which younger and less experienced people were being awarded, primarily by virtue of their birth certificates. I told her I'd take the proofreading job, which at least would involve reading some sorts of texts. Who knows; I might even learn something interesting.

Lisa called back less than 30 minutes later. Someone else had been accepted for the job. Would I still be interested in the customer service one? Sure; why not? Training on it started Wednesday and she gave me the address. It looks like I'll be answering phones and misleading customers in just a matter of days.

Tuesday, September 22, 1998

Another call from Lisa. She faxed my resume to the company in Gardner and they want me instead of the other person. Another victory for the principle of not putting any indication of age on your resume. Could I start tomorrow night? Of course.

Thursday, September 24, 1998

Proofreading my ass! The company is called TradeNet, and it's an overblown printing factory (the stench of ink penetrates everywhere) which makes most of its money printing refrigerator magnets for real estate and insurance agents. My proofreading duties are literally the 'reading' of proofs prior to their being given to the Neanderthals at the presses to crank out a few hundred for someone from ReMax. I check that telephone numbers are correct and names are spelled correctly, as well as making certain that everything the customer specified is being given to them, no matter how cheesy and tasteless. Quality control might have been a more accurate title, and I probably still would have accepted it.

Other than the smell of ink and a lunch room that would not have been out of place in a Jimmy Cagney prison movie, the job is not bad. Like so many menial positions, it's merely a matter of getting the routine internalized and then going on auto-pilot for 10 hours. I didn't come close to falling asleep at the job on the first night, and I also didn't come close to falling asleep after I got home. Acclimation might not be immediate.

Tuesday, September 29, 1998

I'm nearly up to speed at TradeNet. The job is boring, repetitive, and I still can't get used to the smell of ink. Still, I can do it without a sweat and it'll keep the bills paid until something better comes along through want ads or Internet. Maybe this journal should be called *I've Never Found a Job I've Liked*, by Malcolm Tent.

Lisa called today to see how it was going, and I told her I was bored but competent and also asked her if she'd heard anything about the NCS start-up time this autumn. She said she hadn't, and I reiterated that I wanted to be included when they round up table leaders for the project. I've also decided to call NCS in Lawrence directly to get my name on their list too.

Monday, October 5, 1998

At about noon today Lisa called again. She left a message on my machine Friday afternoon, but I hadn't returned home until after she had left the office for the weekend. She told me that TradeNet had fired me. I was thunderstruck, since I felt I was doing the job in an exemplary manner and would likely be the best "proofreader" they ever had. Why had they dumped me? Lisa said that it was clear to the ownership that I couldn't make a commitment to the company on a permanent basis, and they wanted to look for someone who would. And how could they have gleaned that information, seeing that I had never set eyes on any of the owners or top management to express my ennui? Obviously, Lisa was the snitch, which is probably a part of her duties. Us workers are just raw materials for the companies that outfits like Signature pander to for contracts. The agency's loyalty is to the employer, exclusively. Unfortunately, I find my naivete in the world of commerce again a liability which directly affects my pocketbook. Unemployed again.

But not for long. Fifteen minutes later Pam, another Signature Staffing Judas Iscariot wannabee, called saying that the customer service job I had turned down for the TradeNet experience still needed a warm body. Would I be interested? The only shift available was 7-3, and it only paid \$9 an hour, but I said what the hell (not to Pam of course, having learned my lesson with Lisa only a few minutes earlier). Training started on Wednesday, so my time off

would be little more than a long weekend. There seems to be something of a slow, graceful, downward spiral in my job history. Can greeting people at Wal-Mart without my upper partial in be more than a year away?

On what may be the only positive note in my life, a dog seems to have adopted me. A few weeks ago, while I was unemployed and could spend an hour sitting on the front porch examining the morning paper, a very friendly honey-colored, part-Labrador looking dog walked up on the porch and began licking my hand. The dog was handsome, well-mannered, and in need of companionship. He also had no collar, nor signs of starvation and abuse. He stayed as long as I did on the porch and after I went in he leaped up in the glider and took a nap. Luckily, we were having a rib roast that night and I saved the bones for him in the chance that he would pay another visit. He did, and the beef bones seem to have seared our address in his mind. Since then, he spends some part of nearly every day on our porch. When I was out of work, he'd be sure to arrive during the newspaper reading and after only a day's hesitation climbed up in the glider next to me and put his snout on my lap as I read. He's truly an amazing creature. He makes nearly no demands of me other than companionship and affection. It's not necessary that I throw a ball or take him for a walk, though I would like to. As long as I rub him and let him be close to me, he seems content. My major fear is that Animal Control will hear about him before the fence is in place and I'll have to bail him out of death row. It's amazing what coming home to a dog's wagging tail can do for my spirits.

Thursday, October 8, 1998

Yesterday began my training for the customer service job for a company called Renzenberger. If I work there very long, I may have to find some easily typed abbreviation for

that name. The customers we are serving are the railroads of the western half of the U.S. The company owns thousands of vans which are used to transport railroad crews from one place to another. Our job will be to take a trip order from a railroad dispatcher, contact a driver in the area, and let nature take its course. As it turns out, there's a lot of call for this kind of service, which only goes to prove that there is no niche so obscure that someone has not discovered out how to make money by serving it.

There are 15 of us in the training class, though the workforce on any given shift barely numbers that. What will we do? Are massive firings planned? Apparently not. The company is having its operations computerized, and we are being hired to both answer phones and enter data into the computers, the latter to test the software under quasi-operational conditions. After the test is finished and the computers are all up and being used in real time, some people from the class will be offered permanent jobs with the company and the rest will be let go.

The class of 15 is comprised of 8 black women, one black man, 2 white men, and the rest white women. The class material is pitched at an exceptionally rudimentary level by the instructor. One of our big practical exercises involved converting times from one zone to another. Time zones, for Christ's sake! What the hell does it mean when it is a challenge for new employees to add or subtract either 1 or 2? Attrition has already begun. One of the brightest of our group, Heather, was also one of the most outspoken. She was also the most beautiful by a margin by which distances between galaxies are measured. Perhaps my paranoia is being projected onto another, but a beautiful black woman who does not curb her opinions being shit-canned by a doltish, dumpy, middle-aged white woman does raise questions in my mind. Heather was not an 'attitude' problem; her spirit was ebullient and playful. It would seem like

someone with that kind of personality would be a natural asset in this operation.

The training is going slowly, and not entirely because of the student quality. The trainer is waiting for a call concerning her ill father, and has also given notice. Tomorrow is her last day. The 15 (now 14) students have to share 6 computers, and 3 people don't even have a desk upon which to write.

Saturday, October 10, 1998

Training ended yesterday. After a lot of jostling of the schedule, I have Tuesday and Wednesday off, which means that today is a work day. We were given absolutely zero training on the phone system, which has more buttons to comprehend than a NASA control panel. And the phone is the primary nuisance of the workday. There are about 12 dispatchers, each with a section of the country under their control. They take the phone orders from the railroads, call the drivers in response, and handle the periodic reports from drivers en route. Any calls which come in to a particular dispatcher while on the phone are put in a queue and routed to one of the phone assistants, which is what we will be. It gets hectic in bursts, punctuated by sporadic lulls. My first day, however, was entirely data entry. Again, this is a boring and simple job, but now I'm smart enough not to share that opinion with anyone.

Friday, October 16, 1998

This is a business which runs on precise time. There are company rules concerning how much discrepancy there is between what the railroad claims as the time they place an order and the time showing on our clock at the for the same event. And likewise, drivers have to report time very precisely and produce reasons for even small delays of the schedule. And, of course, there are government regulations concerning how long a railroad crew can work and how long

our drivers can be behind the wheel. Finally, there is a system which monitors how quickly phones are answered in each district, with an average ringing time shown on an electronic signboard with continuous updates given.

Renzenberger has 9 clocks visible to the dispatchers and phone tenders and they **all** display a different time. Of course, there are time zone clocks of each of the zones of the continental U.S., even though we have no vans and no customers in the Eastern Time Zone. The 4 time zone clocks hang on a wall over a row of dispatchers. There are 5 other Central Time Zone clocks: in the break room over the sink, the time clock on which we register our attendance, on a pillar by the receptionist's station which is the clock which governs our breaks, the time displayed on our telephones, and the computer clocks. Every clock shows a different minute, even the 6 Central ones! When it's (for example) 10:06 EDT, it's 9:04 CDT, 8:07 MDT, and 7:03 PDT on the wall, it's also 9:08 over the sink. 9:05 on the time clock, 9:10 by Dana, the receptionist, 9:09 on the telephones, and 9:12 on the computers.

Monday, October 19, 1998

It seems self-evident that a business which operates in an atmosphere of constant panic is one with poor training, poor planning, or both. This morning at Renzenberger was a prime example. It may also have illustrated a salient principle of business: the smoothness and efficiency of an organization at any given time are inversely proportional to the number of managers in evidence at the time. In other words, the more managers there are within hailing distance of any work process, the less smoothly that process is likely to go. This morning we had 4 of them on a floor space of about 25x25 and it couldn't have been any less chaotic had anthrax just been detected coming in through the air vent. Of course there's pressure on this job and

deadlines to be achieved, but managers are the ones the workers look to for hints about the severity of the situation. A group of managers who panic for little reason feed the latent panic of the impressionable and before long the place is paralyzed with undifferentiated fear and confusion. Supervisors should be chosen for their calm under fire, among other attributes, and these clearly were not. And when an entire group of managers behaves in this way, an organization would do well to examine the criteria used for promotion into that position.

Wednesday, October 21, 1998

On my last day off this week it looks like a frost tonight, so I have decided to harvest all the basil. The amount I ended up with was staggering: literally a bushel basket full of leaves. It all went into a kitchen-fouling pesto orgy which yielded slightly more than a gallon of the sauce. There are probably Italians from Genoa who haven't eaten a gallon of pesto in their entire lives. Maybe the dog will like it.

The phone also brought pleasant news today. Raquel, yet another Signature Staffer, called to say that NCS had sent them a staffing request which included my name. The projects for this fall begin the first week of November. Mindful of my rapid dismissal by TradeNet once they felt I wasn't willing to take the pledge and answer the altar call, I asked Raquel how this was going to be handled. This was important because she wasn't the person in charge of the Renzenberger account, and if word leaked over to Pam's desk that I was about to bail out for the NCS project, I might have another week and a half of unexpected unemployment. Renzenberger isn't true love, it's not even a mild infatuation. It's just a one-night stand with someone ugly but serviceable. I've been on both sides of that situation and it's like a flu shot; get it over with and it will do you some good eventually. All right, Metaphor 101 is closed for the semester.

Rachel said that Pam is understanding and would not jeopardize my job, but it would be well for me not to mention my imminent departure to anyone at R-berger. Since the NCS work begins on a Thursday, I'll just work the Monday before, take my usual Tuesday and Wednesday off, and never come back.

Thursday, October 22, 1998

My first day back after a two day break continued a workplace tradition I began a year ago. Less than ½ hour into my shift, I performed a deep-knee bend for no apparent reason and ripped the seams out of yet another pair of L.L. Bean chinos. This is not a social workplace like A.D. Banker was and therefore no affectionate chuckles of understanding greeted my *coup de butt*, even though it was performed in front of the entire shift. Hardly anyone knows me, and many don't even know my name. Workers on shift get a form of tunnel vision which precludes getting to know your colleagues in the workplace. While we are mandated to arrive 10 minutes before a shift to receive a briefing, most people just stagger out, exhausted, at day's end and hardly make eye contact. It takes empathy to accept someone's peccadillos such as involuntary disrobing, and that only comes with acquaintance.

We also get no lunch hour, and are lucky to squeeze in two 10-minute breaks in 8 hours. Most people gobble something at their desks while hoping the phone remains silent while their mouths are full. In addition, or perhaps as a consequence, I have spied quite a few of the dispatchers with prescription pill bottles at the ready. There is a company rule that no customer (in other words, a railroad dispatcher) is **ever** put on 'hold.' Thus calls pile up quickly and it sometimes seems that each phone is continuously ringing for an entire shift.

Saturday, October 24, 1998

Motivation was enough of a problem with this job. After today it might be a lost cause. When we came on shift this morning, the man supervising us novices, Rod, was met by his very angry counterpart from the graveyard shift. I only caught a few phrases of their conversation but there was some computer problem which this woman said was interfering with the work of her charges. Her solution appeared to be to leave no new data from each shift for the new one. That hasn't been a problem in the past few days, and she certainly is not one of the three resident computer wonks of the company, so I'm guessing her solution is speculative at best. However, it sure convinced Rod, though 'intimidated' might be a better term. It was simultaneously discovered by the overall shift chief that there were more people on hand than were needed to assist the dispatchers and Rod, being the senior of them (or us), was given the rest of the day off. Before leaving, however, he gave us all our instructions for our shift. Lesley was to continue her exemplary work on the phones (she does have a lovely, animated voice and a pleasing telephone demeanor) and I would enter data. It is not a task requiring a degree, or even a consciousness. I am already more proficient with the software than all but about 15% of the permanent employees there, and more practice of the same boring routine will do little more than demotivate me further. Near the end of the shift, said Rod, perhaps around 2:15, I was to take all the dispatches I had entered and saved and, one-by-one, delete them! Any evidence that I accomplished something on the job today vanished without a trace. I woke up at 5:00 A.M. on a Saturday morning for that? Since Rod is off tomorrow, I presume those will be standing orders until the systems people who work banker's hours show up Monday morning.

The futility of the work reminds me of the military, as does the reluctance of those who know anything about what we're doing to inform those of us who follow their commands blindly.

If there is a purpose to my deleting all the dispatches I've entered on a shift, it certainly hasn't been hinted at, other than pacifying an angry white woman. Been there; done that. Other activities connected with computer operations are also shrouded in mystery while we dutifully peck away like barnyard chickens.

Tuesday, October 27, 1998

I haven't seen the dog in a week. I've been saving meat scraps in the refrigerator and Mata uncharacteristically bought a small bag of dog food a few days ago. Last week the contractor gave us a tentative date for beginning the backyard fence project: November 9. It sounded like seasons away. Last week I finally finished watching the sumo tapes sent to me by my dear friend and former colleague, Katrina Watts. She taped all 15 days of the summer *basho*, or grand tournament, in Nagoya on the bilingual channel of the Japanese network NHK, for which she is a commentator. As with previous tapes she sent, I was very stingy with my watching, only pouring out little dribbles every night or two so I could savor it for a long time. In the extra time she had left at the end of the last tape, she added a special program, the retirement ceremonies of Konishiki, the great Hawaiian competitor. The final act of leaving sumo as an active *rikishi*, or wrestler, is the removal of your top knot of hair, typically done by snipping a few strands at a time by friends, family, and colleagues invited for the honor. In spite of his fearsome 600+ pounds, he always acted with kindness, deference and even gentleness towards his opponents in the ring -- after vanquishing them. In this ceremony he proved to be a real creampuff as his head became slowly shorn of his insignia as a member of Japan's highest attainment in sport and culture. He sobbed and bawled like a baby, and, alone in my living room with Mata at one of her Primerica meetings, I joined him. Of course, I wasn't crying for him.

He's set as an *oyakata*, a coach and developer of young *rikishi* and makes plenty of money in TV and magazine ads to boot. I was crying for my fading dreams of returning some time to that country and the people I love within it.

Last week I also received a home video from Kazuko, who just graduated in March. She had made a video of about 8 minutes duration and sent it to me last year, an event recorded earlier here. She kept saying in letters that she had made another tape, but marriage, moving and now, pregnancy, were understandably higher priorities than sending it off to me. It finally came last week and contained more than 30 minutes of clown like mugging, lousy English, and banal high jinks by seven or eight of the most beautiful women in the world. Watching that opened the sluices too and now I'm worried that I'm decomposing so rapidly concerning my nostalgia for Japan that I won't be able to pass the supermarket aisle which contains soy sauce without coming apart totally on the spot and requiring the services of paramedics, or at least the summoning of a box boy with mop and little yellow plastic pyramid to be placed on the floor as a warning to others of the recent deluge.

Thursday, October 29, 1998

My mind wandered excessively at work today, and part of the time it migrated to thoughts of teaching in college again. I've begun to think it will never happen, and that's another layer of sadness and depression I tote around these days. It's the job I have enjoyed doing more than any other, but it seems to be fading quickly as a possibility in the future. It is an irony that I could be teaching a full load this semester, and making more money than I am with any of the Signature Staffing gigs I populate.

In late June, Avila college called me with an opportunity to teach a section of Intro to

Philosophy at 4:30 P.M. beginning this fall. If I had taken it, it would have made it impossible to accept a non-academic job somewhere else at normal hours, and so I turned them down. Avila is a highly respected organization in Kansas City, and it might have been worth my while to shove one of my size 12s in the door, but I foolishly retained my improbable hopes of full-time employment in the world of business. Then, in early August, Paul Long from Maple Woods Community College called with the offer of 2 more Intro courses, one afternoon and one night. In retrospect, those three classes would have brought me close to a wage which would keep the most pressing bills paid, plus I would be in a classroom instead of the ship of fools called Renzenberger. Finally, last month DeVry Technical Institute interviewed me and offered 3 sections of Critical Thinking. Combine that with the 3 earlier opportunities I passed on, and I'd be employed full-time and doing what I like. But the jobs were offered piecemeal and none of them, alone, could have made me stop job-hunting. My life is turning into a litany of regrets.

Saturday, October 31, 1998

One similarity between Renzenberger and A.D. Banker is the arrogance of the non-shift working elites toward the shift workers. Not that there were shifts at ADB, other than in favor, but the elites were a clearly defined group and the defining points were their attitudes toward others who worked there. One I noticed on Friday was the habit they have of talking **about** someone in his or her presence. That happened regularly yesterday as the office elites oversaw another test of the latest computer software update. As Lesley, another trainee, was working her computer in the course of handling live phone calls, a pair of office people hovered a couple of feet away, asking in a loud voice what "she" was doing as she performed various tasks and why she was doing them in that manner. Apparently, Lesley herself is not a sufficient authority on

what she does at her desk, and someone else -- younger, whiter, and better educated -- must be present to explain her actions to another young, white, and better-educated 'superior.'

In my last three days of work I have noticed that several of these elites (no better term for them) who hang around the workplace have yet to introduce themselves to me -- and probably none of the new trainees -- and a couple of them seem to do no productive work at all. It is exceptionally hypocritical, since the line supervisors harangue us endlessly about work efficiency. The lesson they want us to learn is given a prominent contradiction as we see young, (presumably) overpaid slackers standing around manually testing the depth and strength of their pockets for eight hours and seemingly contributing nothing to provide a good or a service for our customers. One appears to be a trainer, since her name was on them door of the training room when we were given our three token introductory days. Yet all she does any more is loiter. In our half-a-week of initiation in that shoebox of a room she only made two appearances in an official capacity, both of them to oversee practical exercises. No one has been in day-long training since we were shoved, ill-prepared, out on to the floor, yet I would doubt that she's missed a payday. And they are likely to be heftier ones than those experienced by those who are genuinely productive and incessantly brow-beaten by the shift managers -- the dispatchers. Of course, the disingenuous element in this narrative is the fact that I have been applying for trainer positions in the past year, in an abortive attempt to leave the *faux*-productive ranks and enter those of the leeches.

My long-awaited photo session with Inga's sister Jessica, and her two year-old, Jalen, is scheduled for today and it has been raining all day. I wonder if I'll ever meet her, let alone take the pictures that she and Inga claim to want. The days are losing sunlight earlier each afternoon

and I fear that by the time I have a day off congruent with hers the high temperatures will be in the 20s and she and her son will be unidentifiable in their ski masks.

Another incomprehensible feature of Renzenberger is the regulation against more than one person taking a break at the same time. I suppose two people off together for as much as 10 minutes -- the maximum break allowed no matter how long it has been since your previous one -- could involve themselves in seditions liable to bring down the company in a matter of days. More than likely, however, they would merely become more than superficially acquainted, which might also be thought of as dangerous to the company's stability. On Friday -- which was also the mandated Halloween celebration -- I could only squeeze in one break. The non-shift elites seem to slip out at least hourly, though it could be claimed that their employment is nothing more than one long break.

The Halloween at work was something that was slipped by me in some manner. There wasn't a notice on the bulletin board and it didn't get announced at any morning shape-up I attended. Yet a couple of guys showed up in a pathetic attempt at a costume. I took my first break at 11:30 and it proved to be my last. I had brought a smoked sausage lunch to gobble down with my apple juice, and I returned to my work station in exactly ten minutes. About an hour later the day shift supervisor, Mary, came around saying that lunch was ready and we should slip out to the break room in some semblance of order (leaving the phones uncharacteristically untended) to consume what the bosses had supplied. I seemed to be the only one who didn't know not to bring a lunch today. Out of the loop again.

I'll probably bring LaMar's doughnuts on Monday, my last work day. While I barely know anyone beyond small talk, it hardly seems I'm due a gold watch at my departure, so I

thought it was up to me to mark it in some way. I have chosen cellulite as that way, though I'm unlikely to be permitted to inspect the affected areas a few weeks hence. And there are several affected areas which show a great deal of promise, even with the addition of a half-dozen glazed. In a break with tradition, I'll omit those names here.

One of the most frustrating ongoing episodes of my recent life has been my inability to enlist people to read my writing without monetary compensation. Bill and Gloria are the most literate people I know, and do their best to praise my writing in front of others, but when it comes down to actually exposing themselves to current samples of that writing it seems like they'd rather stay anchored to their illusions. Kin and former kin are also ones you expect to be burdened by such things, just as aunts and uncles must endure the recitals and football games of their nieces and nephews, but that's where everyone but Mata has fallen down. She certainly deserves some sort of prize for stoicism in her reading of this journal in particular, since it hardly casts a kindly light on her and her pursuits. But she has persevered through every page and I appreciate it. My ex-wife Robin, who lives 2 hours away and professes to want to read every word I write, had my book about my experiences in Japan for over a year and got bogged at the point where I was passing through customs for the first time. Well, maybe a little later than that, but less than one-eighth of the way through those 142,000 words. She returned it to me with the pages barely ruffled and without comment, other than the unspoken one that 60 double-spaced pages were about as many as she could handle in 14 months of lethargy.

But Kim has come to the rescue. She is my stepdaughter, a little less than two years old when Robin and I were married in 1966. She was a precocious child, full of curiosity, but she went with Robin when we were divorced five years later. I would see her sporadically when I

would visit Jake or bring him back from a visit with me, but after she graduated from high school in Oklahoma she fled it to San Diego and drugs. There she remained incommunicado for over a decade, finally returning to Oklahoma in the late 1980s. I first saw her at Jake's wedding last year and in the few brief days I could spend with her and her squeeze, Scott, made me realize how much I've missed in these past few decades. She was literally out of my regular life for 25 years, but I believe there's a lot of residual caring and interest on both our parts to make an effort to reestablish contact again. I've seen her a couple more times since then and she asked me at our last get-together to see some stuff I've written. This was on the same weekend Robin returned my Japan journal effectively unopened, and I wondered whether Kim was offering me a "mercy-read." Still, I sent her off to Oklahoma City with this journal (through August), the first act of the play Frank Higgins had shat upon this spring, and a short story based upon a real event about twenty years ago: an incredible blind date.

Three weeks after leaving with this literary bounty, she called to say that she had read it all and loved it all. Skeptical, I quizzed her on the basic elements of the various narratives and she had them down cold. She actually **had** read everything! Not only that, she laughed all the way through and wanted to see some more. I had also given her several books I had taught in college classes during her years of perpetual dusk in California: *Candide*, by Voltaire, John Stuart Mill's *On Liberty*, and a thin volume of five Socratic dialogue by Plato. She liked my stuff better than any of the other writers, and couldn't abide even ten pages of that windbag hack Plato. While I would like to appreciate her powers of judgment and discernment, they seem to run counter to my own. Perhaps that shouldn't be too much of a warning signal, come to think of it.

This day's entry is considerably longer than recent ones primarily because I am using the computer at work. It is an exceptionally slow day out on the rails, and since there is no Hearts game included in the software, I am reduced to using Wordpad to jot these thoughts down and print them. Unfortunately, my laptop uses WordPerfect. I told an equally bored member of the 'assist' staff, lovely young Marcia (pronounced Mar-SEE-ah) that she could use the software for more than entering drive times, conductors's names, and train numbers, and she set about writing a prosy 'poem' which she later shared with me. It was about regrets, and a fear of the future repeating the past, and it seemed particularly chilling for a woman not yet 18, with a seven month-old daughter, to have such thoughts about life. I guess early parenthood is a wake-up call for some, and Marcia appears to be one of them. I like her, and she is one of the few people here I am likely to remember a few months after leaving.

Sunday, November 1, 1998

It continues to rain. Jessica left a harried message on my machine yesterday at 11:30 in the morning confirming that not even Jacques Cousteau would take pictures on a day like this, and she was not him. She also sounded like the homicide of her son was imminent. I'll check the obituaries today before trying to set another date.

Whether it is a reflection of my attentions or merely innate good will, it is clear that the black female employees on my shift are much friendlier and more accepting of me than the white females. Maybe I'm projecting my desires onto reality, but the women of color treat me with greater kindness, humor, and egalitarianism than anyone else does. I'm sure not complaining. There seems to be a parallel between this and the treatment I received by the Japanese women I knew during my time there. It might all break down to a belief many white women seem to have

had instilled in them over the last few decades: that all men are dangerous and potential rapists. None is harmless no matter his age, occupation, or demeanor. Women in non-white, non-American cultures seem to have been spared that propaganda and it shows up in their greater decency toward men who seem to act decently toward them. Since I don't know of any statistics which show that non-whites and/or non-Americans experience rapes or physical assaults to a greater degree per capita, their attitudes haven't seemed to compromise their safety. I would wager the reverse is true; for all their customary defensiveness and hostility, white American women probably are victims of sexual crime to a greater extent than any other group. Do their attitudes egg on unstable males? This is not to make the absurd claim that it's the victim's fault when rape occurs. Merely that a rapist may choose his victim based on some arcane manner of reckoning, including an element of anger at women who either individually or as a general group, treat him with hostility. Maybe it's the rain doing it to my mind. Blame it on *El Nino*.

Wednesday, November 4, 1998

On the first really wintery day of the season, I am wondering about my lack of interviews when compared with the number of resumes and cover letters I send out. I reiterate, these are jobs for which I can make a case for myself. In recent letters, I have attempted to be much more personable and unique than in earlier attempts. One disturbing phenomenon is the fact that I seem to get more attention, in a ratio of jobs applied for versus jobs for which my candidacy is acknowledged, from companies outside Kansas City than for local ones. One explanation for this would be profoundly saddening, if true. Like most American cities, this one is residentially segregated by race. My address is one which most people would recognize as within the African-American community. This part of the city is not all black, just as Leawood and Shawnee are not

all white, but the general rule holds. We are told the human resources offices are so swamped with applications for employment and responses to vacancy advertisements that they must resort to all sorts of methods and short cuts for weeding out the unqualified, such as computer scanning of resumes and cover letters for key words which they have already decided a successful candidate would have in his or her dossier. It surely doesn't stop there. Since I am aware that my age is likely to be a negative aspect once it is discovered how many digits there are to it, I have taken to eliminating from my letter such phrases as "dagnab it!" and reminiscences of drinking sarsaparilla on the front porch with Warren G. Harding. Luckily, my degrees were granted in 1985 and 1989, and my resume acknowledges nothing in my life before 1978. While age likely would be a compromising factor, I do little in my resume/cover letter duo to indicate it. But because my return address is in the heart of darkness, it would sadden but not surprise me if that fact sent my chances into the queue for the office shredder.

Please don't misunderstand me. I'm not begging to be evaluated as a white man. I'm asking that no one be disqualified from consideration based on his or her return address. It is curious how different the perceptions of the races are concerning what might be thought of as mundane things. Most white people reading this theory about racial assumptions made by human resources officials would find it preposterous. Most black people would find it resonant with their daily experience, and therefore credible. Mata read the entry in this journal from last Saturday, October 31st. When she reached the comment about Jessica and Jalen being unrecognizable in the ski masks, she was aghast. To me, it was meant to allude to the coldness of the temperature of the winter day, since we seem to be putting off our photographic meeting so frequently that it is likely to be in the dead of winter before we get together. Mata immediately

thought it was an uncharitable racial comment with overtones concerning people of color getting ready to rob a Seven-Eleven or the sleepy suburban branch of a bank. How could we see an innocent reference so differently, and vehemently so? Of course, I'm vouching for its innocence, and that voucher may well already be contaminated. The difference is in the accumulation of our everyday experience. She has 48 years of being seen as an ungenerous stereotype by the majority of people in her native country, and certain images are not at all innocent, especially when employed by a white man. She and I may have established a firm basis of racial trust over the past decade and a half, but the warheads are perpetually armed and occasionally our fingers stray too near the button summoning our mutual doom. Like the nuclear onslaught we all feared beginning with the Cold War, this one is as likely to be precipitated by an accident or miscalculation as by aggression and a desire to annihilate the other.

Saturday, November 7, 1998

The rain has begun again after only about a two day hiatus. It gives the appearance of remaining longer than an uninvited relative with three suitcases. The NCS training commenced on Thursday with the comfort of familiar faces all around. Barbara, from the Iowa City office, is heading it up, and she does a superb job of training and explaining. It's great to have her combination of calm and incisiveness back in my professional life. Pat is her right-hand man, and he seconds her unruffled and confident air expertly. We Table Leaders have also been given a new job title: Scoring Supervisor. It is likely to look better on our resumes, since 'Table Leader' could plausibly apply to someone who is in charge of passing the mashed potatoes.

All the other Scoring Supervisors (just writing that title brings a surge of authority up from my Id) are people I have worked with before in other projects so there was no period of

breaking in odd personalities and meshing gears of mismatched sizes. But the best part of this project, destined to last no longer than the middle of next month, is that it contains some intellectual challenges and stimulation. After TradeNet and Renzenberger, I feared that was lost forever. In fact, I just e-mailed Cynthia yesterday in an attempt to coordinate an after-work beer at Free State Brewery in Lawrence, and part of my message was that there were things about A.D. Banker I missed, though not many. At the top of the list (once she had left the place) was engaging in work which engaged my grey matter. All the research and writing about business ethics has probably resulted in 300+ pages that the company will never publish, but it kept my mental blood circulating. That's something likely to be missing from future jobs, especially as I slide farther down the slippery slope of perceived occupational uselessness.

Monday, November 9, 1998

While I surely noticed the death, earlier this year, of Sir Isaiah Berlin, I didn't mention it here. You probably thought you dodged that bullet, but put on your flak jacket. Here it comes. He was a philosopher of great lucidity, primarily dealing with issues of our social, political, and intellectual lives, rather than abstractly musing on mind and language as if they were divorced from contact with a living human being. In spite of the breadth and profundity of his thought, Berlin is best known for a fairly non-philosophical distinction he made. By way of purposely over-generalizing thinking humans, he told a simple parable of The Fox and the Hedgehog. The bottom line of the story was that the fox knows many things, but the hedgehog knows only one thing, and knows it well.

Philosophers must good at making those kind of binary claims. The same general one as was made in The Fox and the Hedgehog was made decades before by Alfred North Whitehead.

While working on *Principia Mathematica* with Bertrand Russell, he said that there were two kinds of people in the world: the simple-minded and the muddleheaded. Whitehead went on to say to his collaborator that he (Russell) was simple-minded, whereas Whitehead was merely muddleheaded. A little less generous and Aesop-esque than Berlin, but the same distinction.

So what am I? Of course, I am a muddleheaded fox. Today, NCS passed out questionnaires to all the scorers on this project concerning our expertise in various academic fields and subjects. Since I am a Scoring Supervisor (can't you just hear the cavernous echo of importance accompany that title?), I collected the questionnaires of my 10 table members and glanced at them all. They were hedgehog answers, with each person having a background in either literature, or science, or social studies, or art. No one trespassed over the line with a cross-pollinated background. No one except me. Theater? Done that. Physical science? Ditto. Environmental science? Oh yeah. English? Check. Music? One of my many majors. There wasn't even a subject area for my big one, philosophy. I eventually started inventing categories, labeling and checking them. But that exercise also indicated why I'm such a failure in today's employment scene.

I live in a simple-minded, hedgehog world. That's what employers want. They identify a singular skill required by a part of their business and then find a person who possesses it to hire. That also justifies their paying a benighted wage for it, since only one fundamental skill is being paid for. Of course, the people at my table have been reduced to taking, or are overjoyed to accept, \$10 an hour for a month, and they're all hedgehogs, but every story has its individual narrative. My foxlike background is impossible to conceal without feeding an entire human resources department hallucinogens. I keep hearing about companies who want people who

think “outside the box.” But if they hire people who know only one thing or one way of thinking, it’ll never happen. My guess is that HR people are so deeply embedded “in the box” of uniformity and simple-mindedness that a resume conveying qualities of the fox would be looked upon with as much sympathy and enthusiasm as one from a Manson Family member. The CEO who wants to hire innovative thinkers needs to find some way to circumvent the human resources department, and in most places that’s the most deeply entrenched bureaucracy of the company. Perhaps I could make a little spare change peddling posters and bumper stickers to HR drones with the slogan “Hedgehogs Rule!”

Tuesday, November 10, 1998

Upon looking around the 60+ scorers on this project, I noted that about half of them were on previous NCS projects with me. The sobering fact of that number is the age breakdown. While I haven’t been rifling through everyone’s valuables in search of birth certificates, my trained eye believes that about 25 of those 30 leftovers are over 40 years of age; only 5 are under 40. The age distribution of previous projects has been similar to this one; there were about equal amounts of scorers on either side of the 40 line. All employees I spoke to in the past were looking for meaningful, permanent employment. Yet after the four months between the last project and this one, most of the younger scorers became unavailable and most of the older ones remained available. The most plausible singular explanation for this phenomenon is that the younger people obtained jobs and older ones were unable to.

Let’s dig beneath those numbers for reasons. Those older scorers generally had a wealth of experience, excellent educational credentials, and a demonstrated ability to accept new challenges and surmount them. The only thing the younger scorers had was less experience and

less evidence of ability, yet they got jobs while the older scorers languished until this month.

Anyone who claims there is not rampant, blatant, virulent age discrimination in the job market today probably also believes that oral sex doesn't count as sex.

Friday, November 13, 1998

Yesterday, the first full day of actual scoring, the project underwent meltdown. When we started looking at the way in which the scorers assigned grades, we discovered there was little agreement between scorers. Each essay is scored twice, and the percentage of agreement aimed for is 70%, with no scorers awarding grades separated by more than one increment on a four-point scale (the dread Non-Adjacent Split). Initial results at my table showed agreement was closer to 35-40% with copious non-adjacent scores. Of course this is a problem for NCS, which obviously has a contract with the state of Virginia stipulating accuracy as well as timeliness in its completion. Training took a half-day longer than anticipated and Virginia expects the entire project to be finished by Tuesday. But the poor performance by scorers is certainly going to require additional training, which will make the planned completion date even more remote. So either way, NCS is screwed. Don't do any more training and the agreement numbers are certain to be abysmal; add some training hours and the target date will be missed badly.

For scoring supervisors, the greater the disparity between scorers, the more work we have to do. Whenever scorers disagree more than 30% of the time, we have to read the essays on which they disagree and decide what the essay's score should be. Since each essay is graded on three separate factors -- composing, written expression, and mechanics -- the opportunity for disagreement is tripled over essays which are scored holistically with only one grade. There are ten people under me. Each packet of ten essays can be read and scored in 30 minutes, though

some scorers are faster than that. The average packet, however, contains significant disagreement on an average of six essays, which means I have to read those six essays and adjudicate the disagreement. Unfortunately, in the 18-20 minutes it takes me to do that, approximately six of my table members will have completed a packet for me to review for percentage of agreement. Each of those six packets is likely to have six essays of disagreement. Do you begin to see the statistical hole being dug? I have a perpetual and growing pile of essays to read, and now that the scorers are being encouraged to work overtime (we're all coming in for 8 hours on Saturday), the pile will only increase. I got to work at 6:45 this morning and barely made a noticeable dent before the scorers arrived with their mistaken and mismatched view of how to grade the writing.

Sunday, November 15, 1998

Saturday was a memorable day at work. Most of the times an essay is scored non-adjacently, the scores are limited to only one of the three domains and the split is 1-3 or 2-4. I finally got a 1-4 split and asked if any of the other table leaders has encountered one. Half of them already had. No big thing. Until by 11:00 in the morning, when I came across an essay which was rated a '1' in all three categories by one scorer and '4' in all three categories by another! It may be hard to fathom what that means, except that one person felt it was one of the worst essays ever written, in all domains, and the other person felt it was one of the finest. Both scorers are mature people with degrees and former careers and yet they see the world from such disparate perspectives. And that's really the problem. In the scoring world we hope for, educated, intelligent people are hired to score essays using criteria formulated by the customer. They may have personal opinions about what constitutes a well-formed essay, but they leave

their opinions at the door each morning and accept what the state of Virginia says, through the rubric they created, what constitutes a well-formed essay. Many scorers are able to accomplish that, but not all. The two who gave me the 1-1-1 and 4-4-4 grades seem incapable of shedding their past for the purposes of this project, though one may be involuntary and one voluntary.

Usman is a person from Nigeria for whom English is a second language. His concepts of written expression mirror what seem to be his own abilities. He rewards short, mundane sentences without variety and cannot recognize eloquent complexity. Carole has what could best be described a social worker mentality. She wants to help people by giving them what they have not earned and are unlikely to ever warrant. It seems as if there is a strong moral component to her attempts at scoring. She apparently sees herself as having a mission to improve people's lives by any means necessary, though she sure has made mine a lot harder. Perhaps I have been found morally lacking. She downgrades essays which have a component of violence and gives absurdly high grades to simplistic ones which reflect her own binary way of viewing the world. The criteria by which we were hired to evaluate these essays are irrelevant.

On another front, Mata stashed away several checks this week and actually has some new and presumably more live prospects than previously. In addition, she won some sort of recruiting contest last month. The prize for this is not much-needed cash, but a weekend, all-expenses paid trip to Atlanta next month to meet all the other winners. My way is being paid too, so this journal is destined to have several redundant pages in the near future reflecting that experience.

Early this afternoon, Jessica and I finally met for some pictures. Her son, Jalen, is a real piece of work. Only two years old and smaller than Madisen, he speaks in complete sentences and has a well-developed sense of humor. I'm not sure how the pictures will turn out, since Jalen

was in a frolicking mood and uninterested in sitting with his mother and smiling. He was high-spirited, not mean-spirited, and I really enjoyed being around him. Still, after several months and scores of e-mail messages, it was nice to put a face on the names.

Monday, November 23, 1998

In the Sunday paper a week ago I spied an ad for a tech writer in a salary range of \$12-14 an hour. It was submitted by an agency with which I was unfamiliar, PBC, so I faxed off a letter and resume on Thursday night. By Friday morning they were calling desperately to set up an interview with me for the next week. I talked to a man named Brandon who told me nearly nothing about the job and company but did confirm the pay scale. I was to stop in at his agency at 8:00 A.M. this morning prior to the 9:00 o'clock appointment with the prospective employer. He also admonished me not to be late, which seemed pretty presumptuous of him, but was probably just another reflection of him assuming, from my address, that I am black.

Needless to say, I beat Brandon to work, as well as everyone else in the office. After filling out a redundancy of paperwork for him, he let me read the job description provided by the company. The fact that it was named 'Fleet' brought a sickening form of enema flashback to my nether regions, and my sphincter went on full combat readiness. Luckily, this Fleet made fleets of trucks for various companies. They needed a writer to draw up the purchase orders and write them in sonnet form. Iambic pentameter might not seem appropriate for the industrial world, but this is, after all, the Age of Enlightenment. It sounded dull but do-able. Brandon gave me written instructions to the factory and interview site as if I were a special education student on his first solo field trip. I ignored his advice and got to the Fleet's place by a more direct route.

The interviewer, Mike, was as enjoyable and easy-going an interviewer as I have yet

encountered. He should try his hand in Northern Ireland, since I felt immediately at ease and willing to talk. The good news is that the company has a great benefit plan. The bad news is that I'm unlikely ever to use it. While my writing ability is more than equal to the job requirements, they also want someone with mechanical aptitude, and I couldn't bluff my way into a job as an apprentice light bulb replacer. I was the first person to be interviewed for the position, and anybody who could chew gum and hammer nails at the same time is likely to shuffle me back to the unemployment line. I fear that it would likely be another TradeNet situation all over again. Even under the best of conditions I was likely to be unhappy and would continue to look for a more suitable position. The beat goes on.

Tuesday, November 24, 1998

Today we concluded the Virginia project and began training for the next one, a North Carolina 10th grade one. While we are on schedule, it is obvious that there still are quite a few Virginia packets left to score. A couple of the scoring supervisors are being retained to clean up these remainders while the rest of us try to switch gears and learn a new rubric. It will include six score points, rather than four, and will be holistic rather than fragmented. Yesterday's e-mail contained an unexpected message from the head of Sprint's ethics program. I would not term an encouraging letter. I actually wouldn't term it even a cordial letter. He informed me that I evidently knew nothing about what they did in that program. Then he gave me the mixed message of suggesting I call him to illuminate myself, and then not providing his telephone number. It's hard to put a positive spin on this development. One possibility for what seems to me his hostile response to my letter of a week or so ago is the likelihood that he believes I'm black, and is trying to discourage me as thoroughly as possible. That's not as paranoid as it

sounds, especially when you couple my “inner-city” address with the fact that the person who has been trying to get my name and qualifications in front of him is Jessica, who is black. All he knows about me other than my resume and letter points in that direction.

I will call him on Friday, but I doubt he’ll be at work the day after Thanksgiving. But if I can reach his voice mail I’ll be able to leave a message in my best Caucasian voice and see whether that assuages his reluctance, if that’s what it was.

Thursday, November 26, 1998: Thanksgiving Day

This has been a strange and unsettling day. I knew I’d be cooking a complete meal and Michael would be bringing over a woman neither of us had ever met before for a mid-afternoon chow down. But this morning, before getting out of bed, I experienced a weird wave of near-nausea coupled with a disorienting spell of mental blankness which had a curious edge of pleasantness to it. It only lasted a couple of minutes, but I cannot recall ever having felt that way before. In the past, I have undergone episodes of strange and equally disorienting nausea, but they had a strong element of *deja vu* to them. During the spell, I felt as if I had experienced the same thing many years earlier or was being taken back to a much younger time in my life. Those episodes were unpleasant and full of frightening foreboding, but they only occurred once a week or so for a period of a month one summer in 1994 and then they were gone. This one had nearly none of the *deja vu* element to it, but it was more incapacitating. In 1994, a couple of them happened when I was driving back from teaching in Baldwin City, Kansas and I had no trouble keeping the car on the road at 65 MPH.

After drinking coffee and reading the paper I started the first elements of the dinner: stuffing and potatoes. And when the same feeling came over me in the kitchen, I had to stumble

into the living room and sit on the couch; my knees couldn't hold me upright. This was definitely disturbing. I became almost light-headed and once (there were six of these events that day) I seemed to lose the ability to know where I was. At the time, I was looking for a microwave container in which I would reheat some asparagus, and yet I just looked around the kitchen blankly, unable to remember what I was looking for, and when I finally figured that one out, couldn't quite place where they were kept. And when I finally tumbled to **that**, I opened the cabinet where they are stored and just stared as if I had never seen any of those things before in my life.

While these episodes only lasted about two to three minutes, they left me physically exhausted, and one time I just lay down in the bed and covered myself up. There was no pain associated with the experience, and in some ways it was rather pleasant in a vacant sort of way. It's what I imagine dementia is like, though in a much more intense, and complete, though distant form. It was like the opening salvo in what might be some sort of final escape.

The highlight of the dinner was the turkey. As usual, I used one of the spiffy Reynolds oven bags and it worked its customary magic. However, when I removed the turkey from the bag for carving, I discovered that I had inserted it upside-down. Therefore, my favorite cut, the crispy first slice of the breast, was submerged in a sea of rendered fat and melted butter which had been smeared on the outside of the bird. Moist, it was. My first Alzheimer's Thanksgiving.  
Tuesday, December 1, 1998

For the current North Carolina project I have been relegated to the position of lowly common scorer, with the expected wage reduction to \$10 an hour. This was not a demotion on the merits of my abilities, but a policy based on the overlap of the projects. The Virginia project

employed several former table leaders as scorers, and six of them will now change roles and pay stubs to become scoring supervisors for the next few weeks. It is an interesting contrast of duties. My only responsibility is maintaining productivity and reliability numbers for myself, and those are pretty easy to do. I also have the option of becoming a discipline problem for the leaders, and I've decided to exercise that option. The essays this time concern assignments in a year-long World Literature class, which should provide a nice break from all the fictional imaginings of the last tests.

Today at work I was trying to stay awake while reading that Elie Wiesel (author of the Holocaust autobiography, *Night*) was a "good, religious Christian," and that French author of the short story "The Necklace" was Guy de Maupassant. I'll bet he had a brother who liked water lilies. Those were actual extracts from essays by North Carolina tenth graders. At mid-morning, Becky from H.R. came striding purposefully over to me with a bulging clipboard in her hand. It is always enjoyable to be around Becky, for reasons which need not detain us here. Of course, it could have been my final paycheck and a request for my nametag/electronic door key. But it wasn't. NCS was shooting a commercial for release on local cable channels, and I had been selected to portray myself, i.e., a happy, though superannuated, camper. I was given a line to memorize, like "Two weeks ago I was a drooling derelict living under a bridge in Topeka, but now I'm making \$10 an hour. Next? I'm going to Disney World!" In fact, I wasn't given enough time to say that much, so I was reduced to a single sentence like, "I'm a retired professor, and I can select the projects which fit **my** schedule."

It looks like they are having a hard time finding warm bodies with degrees and enough intellectual flexibility to satisfy most project requirements. Several scorers didn't qualify for the

North Carolina project and were let go; others could only qualify for the Comma Police, a.k.a. Analytic scoring, which handles spelling, grammar, and punctuation. And this Monday, a whole new group of recruits suddenly appeared and began to take training for the current project. Apparently, we're not going to finish quickly enough and reinforcements have been sent for. I hope they're prepared to read essays on "the ancient Greek short story, 'The Dog House,' by Henry Gibson." I'm telling you, I couldn't make up stuff this good. As you are well aware.

The commercial I appear in will be used as a recruiting tool on cable channels in eastern Kansas. It won't run on our local Kansas City screens, however, so my grandchildren will not see my 5.3 seconds of fame.

Thursday, December 3, 1998

If the swallows from San Juan Capistrano ever become disoriented and need some consistency in their lives, I might suggest they move to North Carolina. Just as happened in last spring's project, pressure from Raleigh has begun to press our scores higher. Our project leader from Iowa City this time is Wendie, tall and inscrutable. Apparently, the call has drawled up from the semi-deep south that a "bell curve" of response grades is expected. Fine. That's to be expected, within statistical reason. However, using that truism as a wedge on the numbers, the gunzels of the state's educational fen have made the leap to claiming that the so-called bell curve should be gracefully draped upon the six scores points represented by the rubric. Of course, the two are separate. The responses are likely to be distributed in that bell shape, but the score points we have been supplied to administer are strictly arbitrary. The criteria are quite rigorous and I think they select for they attributes they ought to, but the students do not provide answers which allow us to end up with a bell curve incorporating the six score points. The results we are getting

have a mean score of about 2.7, while a mean they want would be about 3.5. Again, when the hypothesis (i.e., the six-point rubric) doesn't accurately predict the data, what do we do? Of course, we alter the data to fit the hypothesis, rather than the other way around. Every time I revise a score upward at the urging of my scoring supervisor, I feel like a slut.

Interestingly enough, next weekend will supply a respite from such follies along the line of trading a hangnail for gunshot wounds. Mata has dragooned me into a Primerica weekend in Atlanta, though you might have thought my next voluntary appearance at such a function would be in Atlantis. How desperate must I be to flee the North Carolinian tenth grader?

Saturday, December 5, 1998 - Atlanta

My mind has been shifted to eternal questions this morning. Not those of the meaning of life and doubts about eternity. Those are the preoccupations of white idleness, which, in most contexts, would describe me. But in every morning of her life, an eternal question for every black woman in this country is: what shall I do with my hair? It is not an empty or rhetorical question; it reflects the most fundamental quest for self-image each woman of African heritage has. Any white person who knows a black woman but doesn't know the depth of that quandary knows her but superficially.

I am writing this morning, my system beginning to go into caffeine withdrawal, because Mata is currently in the bathroom, attempting to address that question of the ages. Unlike some eternal questions, a new attempt at an answer must be made daily. The closest she ever came to an ongoing answer was the time she had human hair braids from an unknown donor weaved into her own. She is my own Sisyphus, and I admire her doomed tenacity.

I felt a little less dread attending this weekend than I usually do when confronting a

Primerica function. First and most important of all, Mata's accomplishments in the organization are being recognized tangibly, and that's an encouraging event which I hope becomes a trend. And second, very little Lowden cash -- and there is very little Lowden cash anywhere -- is supporting this venture. Primerica is flying us here and paying for our hotel room on Saturday night, though Mata wanted us to come a day earlier and pay for the extra night ourselves. Of course, that meant I had to take off a day of work which resulted in the forfeiture of \$80 in wages plus any overtime I might have volunteered to work. She also wanted to carry off the planning herself, I infer. I am known as a meticulous and detail-oriented planner of vacations and other affairs, and we've done well on them. But this is her weekend and she has a right to set the agenda her way.

Primerica didn't have the town to themselves when booking hotel rooms; the SEC is holding its football championship game on the same evening as the gala we'll be attending. In addition, rooms were assigned according to one's rank in the company, and Mata is still a grunt. We are stuck with a Comfort Inn while the elites get a Westin or Ritz-Carlton. Mata did check, and found that the Hyatt offered us the special squeeze-them-by-the-cojones-until-they-squeal rate of \$139 for the extra night. At Comfort Inn, it was \$89, so we'll bunk there both nights.

The only reason for an arrival early by one day was a reception last night given by Shane, the head millionaire of the KC coven of Primerica. His (literally) rags to riches in less than 10 years story inspires all who sign on as recruits. In the late 1980s, he was a young, long-haired derelict, sleeping for a while on the floor of an office at night. But, by the force of his will, personality, and gift of BS, all of which I have witnessed first hand, he has become an incredible success.

Mata has been in Primerica since late 1992 or early 1993. Shane was the Alpha Dog then, as he is now, but he's changed. There was a sense of fun and conviviality he conveyed back five years ago. It was a great adventure and he had just begun to make piles of serious money from it. Even though his good ole boy demeanor doesn't go very far with me, he was fun to be around, even on the far periphery as we were. He had in his eyes, at every Saturday Opportunity Meeting, as they are called, the look of a ten year-old kid who has just begun opening his presents on Christmas morning.

Now he's all business and has begun to take himself seriously. In his suite last night, he sat in his armchair, receiving guests like a Mafia don, or the Pope. He talks shop and money matters incessantly now, and though I never knew either of them at all, I'm beginning to miss the old Shane.

His reception was modest and the amount of schmoozing Mata did with other winners, as well as kissing up to Shane, was stunning in its restraint. Sure, I had brought a bottle of 1989 J. Lassalle Champagne to celebrate her triumph, and had it iced down in our room, and that may have kept our visiting time to slightly over an hour. Shane had about a dozen high-quality pizzas delivered to his suite every hour, but for that modest payback, an \$89 hotel room hardly seemed worth it.

Especially not **this** \$89 hotel room. We had stayed in a Japanese "business" hotel for our sumo siege in Nagoya, June of 1996, and this room resembled it for *bonsai*-like dimensions. Not only was it quite small by American standards, it was small by Comfort Inn standards. It was positively Lilliputian, but within its modest area resided every fabric pattern known to exist, in rudely clashing colors. Maybe they saved that room for couples of rudely clashing colors. The

rug, bedspread, overstuffed chair, drapes, and upholstered desk chair were all shoehorned in painfully, like a size 7 foot in a size 5 pump. Nothing matched, and because the quarters were so close, the eye found no repose from the aesthetic warfare being waged before it. Except for the walls. They were a blank white: no pictures, no adornments, a visual counterpart of 120 decibels of white noise; no rest for the weary. There were a couple of exposed screws on one wall, and since throngs of University of Tennessee fans were in town for the SEC game in the within-walking-distance Georgia Dome, I can only surmise that the customary velvet Elvis painting had been relocated to one of their rooms.

Of course, the Champagne helped the dousing of the lights, so I expected the room's artistic flaws to be obliterated by the darkness. And they were. But those were not its only flaws. The individual A/C and heating unit we were equipped with needed to be operated all night, since the air outside was still warm and humid, and Mata's hot flashes had been reinvigorated in the last week, requiring a third member in bed with us each night: a beach towel.

The A/C in this room alternated between sounding like a rapidly approaching freight train -- when the compressor was off -- and a rapidly approaching tank column when the compressor was engaged. It vacillated between those two unpredictably all night, like me at the grocery store, trying to decide between paper and plastic.

Sunday, December 6, 1998 - Atlanta

Last night's hyperbolic orgy of self-congratulation was all that, and some, but it was far less offensive than the retreats, etc., staged by the local commissars. This night was run by the front office of a company which is a part of the big merger with Citibank, and it seemed more an impress-the-yokels effort by them than one of the yokel-run evangelical tent meetings. It was

hosted by Joe Plumeri, CEO of Primerica, and his up-front Eastern ways ring a consonant chord deep within my DNA. I could easily like the guy, though I doubt the reverse is true. He harangued (passionately) on keeping your passion alive, and that's what I want, too. But I fear we have divergent passions. Like a love that could have been, I am reduced to a wistful sigh and change of subject.

Lots of the 4000 or so attendees (2000 Primerica wonks plus spouses) were getting upgrades in the token area of Primerica recognition: different colored doubled-breasted blazers, each tint denoting a level of accomplishment within the organization. While there seem to be general guidelines for their bestowal, especially at the lower levels, favor, politics, and sucking up is rumored to play a large part of membership into the upper levels of the elite. Gold (mustard, actually) is the apex, and Shane made his bones last night. Mata's honchos, Nash and Hootie, made it to the Navy Blue level (the middle of five gradations), and their daughter Michelle hit the first rung, Pale Blue. Shane had about three others in his general hierarchy make it to Navy Blue, so his night was made.

This morning, Mata's at a feeding frenzy known as max-out-the-credit-card-on-corporate-crap-the-cheap-bastards-should-be-giving-her. Literature, advertising materials and gimmicks are made available for sale in a ballroom of the Marriott this morning, and we just had a muffin and coffee for breakfast so she could speed over there, wilted plastic in hand.

All this weekend, ticket scalpers have buzzed about street corners like gnats (an appropriate Georgia analogy) representing an amusing breakdown in capitalism. Standing less than five feet apart would be two young men holding nearly identical hand-lettered signs made from one foot square pieces of idle corrugated box lids. One sign would lament, "I need tickets."

The other would proclaim, "Tickets for sale." They are referring to tickets for the same event. One would think that two reasonable people, with complementary needs, could arrive at a price and keep the market humming. Of course, both principals were in the same fundamental business, that of selling tickets for an obscenely high price. So it is unlikely they would be able to arrive at anything but blows. This morning, as we were walking back to the hotel after the obligatory postcard purchase, we encountered two such people by the Planet Hollywood at Peachtree and International. Mata actually suggested to the wielder of the "I need tickets" sign that he introduce himself to his opposite number by the curb. For her troubles in trying to grease these modest wheels of commerce, she received the kind of look commonly thought reserved for aspersions cast at the nocturnal habits of one's mother.

Monday, December 7, 1998 - Kansas City

A few pages ago I acknowledged the death, this year, of Sir Isaiah Berlin. I regret that I have one much closer to home to ponder. Bob Lowden was my second cousin, which sounds like a rather distant relationship, and I suppose in conventional ways of measurement it was. The last time I saw him was at the marriage of his son, Jeff, in 1975. I did some unofficial photography for the event, though Bob had already retained a professional to take care of all the important shots. My purpose was to keep occupied so as to avoid dwelling on recent history. A week before, my father had hanged himself in Ft. Lauderdale, in the church of which he was a pastor, and he had been the one scheduled to officiate at Jeff's wedding. I bring up this unfortunate past because Bob and my dad will be forever linked in my mind and heart, and it is a linkage of great affection for me.

Bob, his younger brother, Dud, and my father kept our family laughing throughout my

youth in New Jersey. Some of my warmest memories are of family get togethers in Ocean City, usually at Uncle Clint's house -- Bob and Dud's father -- and the inevitable blending of laughter and music. I am one of the few Lowdens who is not a professional musician. The family instrument is trombone, and every child of my generation became intimately familiar with spit valves and slide oil. I was one, though my muddleheaded fox outlook -- a characteristic I shared with my father -- demanded that I also take lessons (eventually) in voice, piano, and violin.

Eventually Bob became one of the few Lowdens to become a financial as well as musical success, and if you have a child playing band or orchestra in some middle school in this country, he or she is likely to have played several Bob Lowden arrangements. Just after Mata and I were married, we attended a band concert in which her son, Michael, was playing trumpet. When we took our seats on risers normally occupied by cheering basketball fans, I looked at the program and saw that they were playing one of Bob's arrangements. With great difficulty, I kept tears of pride from sullyng that event, but there's no need to restrain them now, and I haven't. They aren't tears of pride any more; merely another tribute to a beautiful past now totally outside my grasp.

Wednesday, December 9, 1998

Last weekend, while I was in Atlanta tearing through the first 650 pages of Tom Wolfe's novel, *A Man in Full*, a birthday gift from Melanie, NCS offered six hours of overtime to the scoring teams. Add that to the hour of overtime available every weekday and the extra scorers hurriedly brought on board last week, and it sounds like the coordinators have given up hope of even meeting the ending date of this Friday. Our scoring rates have been closely monitored and those who couldn't achieve at least 20 per hour were publicly scolded and sent to the ducking

stool. A glance at the daily statistics reveals that less than half our number have reached minimum productivity levels. I infer this by comparing my cumulative total number of papers scored for the entire project, imposing on it my known rate -- 23 per hour -- and finding that, as of last Thursday (the last figures I saw) I had scored the eighth largest amount of essays in a house of about 40 scorers. With these abysmal figures, I began to wonder whether we would be here at Christmas. We won't. Apparently, the leaders have not been entirely candid with us concerning the quantity of work remaining. At 3:30 yesterday, they told us that we were beginning our final **hour** of work! That's right; we filled out our exit paperwork, exchanged e-mail addresses with those we wanted to, and suddenly were shown the door, minus our security badges. This was a shock to everyone there except the bosses, who did wear an unbearably smug air for that final hour. It was as if they had scammed us, and they had. Unfortunately, most of us need to set up something following this project in order to make the holidays less suicidal than they are likely to be. One way that can happen is if we know as far in advance as possible what the end date of the project will be. Then, those of us from agencies can give **them** a likely time we will be available to take other offers. Past NCS project leaders had been as open and candid as possible concerning how much work we had left to do and when we were likely to be finished with it, but not Wendie. Apparently her aloof, distant demeanor was not a facade. Of course, her job was to finish a project within a specific time frame, and with certain reliability figures intact. She apparently figured the best way to do that was to keep us thinking we were perpetual slackers, allowing the project's deadlines to seem ever more remote, due entirely to our obstinate sloth. The truth seems to be that the project was always on target, and the dire predictions of it extending into the middle of the month merely a prevaricating and disrespectful line to keep us

pumping out the numbers. Of course, all of us are caught suddenly without resources, but that's not her problem. She's going back to Iowa City with what she came for. I hope she never comes back.

Yesterday we continued our mandated policy of every-pimply-peckerwoods-with-a-pencil gets a 4, and, in addition, one other strange element of the scoring process sticks in my gullet. I propose to cough it out onto my keyboard for your inspection. The students are instructed to write an essay based on their reading of a work of world literature, which means non-North American, non-British Isles writing. Will Shakespeare is out, Chinua Achebe is in. The prompt asks them to recall a work within that bandwidth in which a character was motivated by a desire for wealth or power. They were to name the work, author, and character, of course, as well as describe the kind of motivation and its source. Then they were to describe how the character was changed by it, as well as how the work of literature itself was affected by it. Pretty decent test, I would think. Fairly narrowly focused, and yet allowing a range of responses, depending on the work it is based upon and the proclivities of the individual student. Occasionally, an author or character was misidentified, but those were not details to which we attended, except with our sporadic laughter.

However, one of the works assigned by several of the schools was Elie Wiesel's wrenching autobiography of his holocaust experiences, *Night*. It's a book with which I was intimately familiar, having taught it in the 1980s in the University of Kansas's Western Civilization Program. Its subject matter and the **unofficial** criteria of the program ended up giving me a lot of heartburn in the last couple of weeks. Since most of us were familiar with several of the works on the list, including biblical stories (the Bible Belt fits snugly around North

Carolina public education), *A Doll's House* by Ibsen, *The Odyssey*, and the plays of Sophocles and Euripides, we were enjoined from deducting points for aberrant interpretations. Thus, we had to take seriously the claim that Nora's marriage was a blissful one, and she was a worthless, neurotic tramp for slamming the door in Torwald's face; and likewise that Medea was "a few french fries short of a Happy Meal," an actual quote from one of yesterday's essays, offered in way of an explanation for the carnage which poor Jason had to endure in ancient Corinth. Don't get me started on *Oedipus*. But still, that's fine. One person can read *Antigone* as a story of a strong male role model being challenged by shrieking religious fanatic, and another as a struggle of mortal laws against eternal ones. Our job was to treat each interpretation as equally plausible and merely judge the quality of the response within the framework given us by the rubric and given the students by the prompt. The glitch came when it was obvious that a student hadn't read the work he or she was purporting to analyze. It happened with saddening regularity.

Gilgamesh's buddy was Mickey Mouse and they traveled down the Yellow Brick Road in search of the Golden Fleece. Our instructions from North Carolina -- the 'unofficial' criteria alluded to above -- were to treat each obvious fabrication as just another attempt to answer the question in a non-standard and innovative manner. In other words, treat a crock of shit like a pot of gold. As long as they were able to answer the points of the prompt by making something up during the test and pawing it off as an interpretation, it was to get full credit. So, if Mickey Mouse was tagging along with Gilgamesh because he was motivated by a desire for wealth or power, and felt that the Yellow Brick Road was the best route to achieve that desire, especially since the Golden Fleas (as one student termed it) is at its terminus and is destined to supply it, that student could get a superlative grade, even though he or she demonstrates no evidence of having read one text in

world literature. In other words, you can ace the statewide test in world lit in North Carolina without ever having cracked a book in the subject. In fact, those poor fools who restricted themselves to the letter of a particular text placed themselves at a competitive disadvantage with the cheaters. Often, the text they had read didn't have a direct connection with the demands of the prompt, and thus they often had reduced grades because of a loss of coherence between the question and the answer. No such problem for the scuzz who couldn't even be bothered to crack a Classics Illustrated; just make it sound reasonable and you're in. And for me, this wasn't even the worst of it.

Whether Cyrano roughed up Roxanne or merely pined after her is historically immaterial. They didn't exist, so any grotesqueries committed in their names merely reflect violence done to an idea. Now, I'm not in favor of violence against ideas; I merely prefer that to violence against persons, when those are the only two options. The number of times *Night* was cited as a basis for an essay probably has more to do with its diminutive size (109 pages in the Bantam paperback I still have) than any Tar Heel horror at the events it depicts. But the book purports to relate events in an important history of our, or any, time. When those are gotten wrong, real lives and deaths are defamed and besmirched. Some might be trivial, like the student who insisted through the essay that "Ellie" Wiesel was a girl. I let that one slide with only a snicker; the student had enough of the events in Auschwitz correct, as well as the relationship between the father and child to show that the sex mixup was merely a confusion or some deep personal gender denial. However, the **majority** of the *Night* papers I read gave no evidence of having read the book, but instead attempted to give the fifteen year old overview of the holocaust, North Carolina style. It was ghastly.

The worst papers came in bunches, usually ten or twelve in a packet of twenty, and they certainly seemed to reflect the way that era in history was taught by the particular teachers of those classes. It is unlikely that the concentration of infamy found within two covers could have been the product of the random chance of parental attitudes absorbed by osmosis. For example, most of the Wiesel papers did not choose the narrator (the author, in other words) as the character in the book whose motivation is to be analyzed and followed. Instead, they would invariably choose Adolf Hitler, who doesn't actually get characterized by Wiesel in the text, or occasionally substitute a collective "character" such as "The Nazis" or "The Germans." One centered it on "the Germs," and it was not meant satirically. Clusters of papers on this subject usually meant Hitler's actions would be explained away in the most appalling sort of revisionist 'history.' The motives ranged all the way from a blame-the-victim kind of anti-Semitism, e.g., the Jews were all rich and the Germans were all poor, Hitler needed the Jews's money to build up a superpower and they wouldn't give it to him, etc, to preposterous psychobabble, such as Hitler was confused, misled, or had "issues" with his mother, his teachers, or some Jewish doctor. The worst claimed that Hitler either didn't mistreat that many Jews, or that he relented near the end of the war and set them all free from the camps. That latter was a common theme in a couple of classes. The first few times I saw responses of this kind I would take them to my table leader, Janet, and she would give the party line, i.e., take them as serious attempts to answer the prompt, no matter how remote from the text of literature they strayed. The worst offenders, e.g., that Hitler had a change of heart, relented, and opened the doors of the camps before the war's end, I took to Wendie, suggesting that they represented such a divergence from history that state officials should be notified. She asked me to photocopy the worst examples and she would make a file of them for

eventual faxing to Raleigh. I wonder if she was just humoring me. I can confess here that I refused to award any such essay higher than a '2' out of a possible 6 points, which made for a lot of conflict, since most scorers were happy to treat those historically preposterous essays in a straightforward manner. My reputation as a malcontent was not whittled down during this project.

Sunday, December 13, 1998

Being recently without a situation, I find I can pay more attention to our country's deteriorating political debacle. It certainly appears as if we have finally been given the political system we deserve. Decades of increasing electoral indifference has presented us a legislative and executive duo completely out of touch with the country's ideals and best interests. While there's enough blame to go around, the American electorate must shoulder a part of it. While we are the ultimate victims, this will not be a trite exercise in blame-the-victim. Trite it may be, but the entire scenario is hardly worthy of eight minutes on Jerry Springer, that beacon of banality toward which we all yearn, but ultimately fall short.

Here it is: the Judiciary Committee has sent articles of impeachment on to the House, which seems very likely to pass them. These are articles which the nation thinks are unworthy of such a drastic conclusion, and the nation has expressed itself in the ubiquitous polls consistently throughout the spectacle. It is abhorrent of, and is embarrassed by, the President's actions, but does not feel they warrant impeachment. The message continues to be unequivocal on that point. After the House, on party lines, votes to impeach, the Senate will have its opportunity to convict the President and remove him from office. Those results are not merely remote possibilities. Between two-thirds and three-quarters of the country feels that's a dreadfully inappropriate

solution to a nonexistent problem, but our legislators do not find the will of the people a compelling reason to pause.

It reminded me of a section from Locke's *2nd Treatise of Government*. In Chapter XIX, ominously entitled "Dissolution of Government," Locke asks the question, in Section #240, "*Who shall be judge* whether the Prince or Legislative act contrary to their Trust?" Of course, Locke has an answer known to all who have endured the first 18 chapters: "*The People shall be Judge*; for who shall be *judge* whether his Trustee or Deputy acts well, and according to the Trust reposed in him, but he who deutes him. . . ." And in Section #242 of the same chapter, he says, "If a Controversie arise betwixt a Prince and some of the People, in a matter where the Law is silent, or doubtful, and the thing be of great Consequence, I should think the proper *Umpire*, in such a Case, should be the body of the *People*." (Emphasis and irregular capitalization in the original)

The beliefs of the People, in the current climate, seem to be the least important of the institutions which presumes to judge our Deputy Bill. I did not recall Locke saying "The Press shall be judge," nor "The quasi-Independent Prosecutor shall be judge." No further chapter refines his message to "The Opposing Party shall be judge." Nowhere does Locke counsel, "The People shall be Ignored, treated as Inconsequential, or otherwise be thought of as incidental to this Event of Exceptional Consequence."

We have arrived at this place in our once proud democracy by letting the people and processes of our governing slip from our grasp. No one can arrive, elected, without having been bound, purse and soul, to interests inimical to the national interest. Think of the numerous and consistent parade of North Carolina politicians who have defended tobacco companies

throughout the century. Some of those interests are ideological, some commercial, some both. What we are seeing currently is how strong a particular ideology is in our current government, and it should make us shudder. But it does not. Most people really just want the big top to pack up and move on, no matter who is president when it's all over. If Clinton is sent packing, it's sad but as long as the roads are fixed and gas prices remain low, most people will accept that. Even the two-thirds to three-quarters who don't want that result. Ironically, the people in the House who will vote this week on the future of the office of the Presidency (and make no mistake, this vote is not a limited plebiscite on this particular president) include those who were voted out in November, perhaps because they had taken a hard line against the Clinton Follies.

What's the likely result? In the short term, I have no idea. I've always liked Gore more than Clinton, but I still would not like to see the impeachment carried on to removal. In the long term, the removal of our legislative from the will of the people will accelerate, and we are unlikely to care. At least, we are unlikely to care sufficient to rise off our cellulite and demand fundamental change. The role we play now has been reduced to knee-jerk reaction to whatever hot button a particular politician cares to push in search of approval and re-election. The so-called 'Christian' right responds to one stimulus, the environmental left responds to another, the frustrated minorities to yet another. A given politician might resort to all of them in a single campaign, and without apology. With exception of the ideological legislators, the point is not to defend a particular moral position, but merely to gain or retain power by any means necessary. In order to do that, a politician has to have financing sufficient to mount a visible campaign. The amount of money required in these days to do that means taking a lot of money from people who expect you to look after their narrow interests, once elected, no matter how they diverge from the

interests of the country. Again, what the country wants or needs -- as expressed by the populace - - hardly registers as a nudge of the needle. The wishes of John Locke, expressed earlier in this entry, now seem remote and inaccessible. The idea that the people should judge the performance of the legislative and executive in any particular issue of national import sounds distant and unattainable. But attain it we must, or we are sunk as a democracy.

Monday, December 14, 1998

The head of Kansas City's golf program called this morning to request an interview. Her name is Martha, and she sounded, on the phone, like she was 16. Still, it's encouraging to have an opportunity to make my case in front of yet another person who then also has an opportunity to return me to the Bone Pile. However, desperation is not a part of my mindset now; I still have January's *tete-a-tete* at Sprint. None the less, it might not hurt to practice my swing, get a shave, and bring as many polyester trousers out of the closet as still fit me.

Saturday, December 19, 1998

Yesterday will be another December date that will live in infamy, if hyperbole is your cup of sake. I went to the Raytown Supercuts to obtain my "job-interview-grade" haircut and to smooth out my cheeks and chin by the removal of my beard and mustache. Like a rabbit being pursued by unseen assailants, I veer and swerve erratically, hoping that some maneuver will finally free me of them. Of course, there are two sets of pursuers. The first are the condemned properties in Human Resources who interview the briefly hopeful. What can I do to avoid appearing unacceptable to them? I've given up trying to appear to be what they want; I am reduced to hoping I can avoid looking what they abhor. The second group holds paper with our signatures on it. They are relentless, and they call every day from 800 numbers, asking when

they can expect payment. They can expect payment today, if that suits them, but they are unlikely to have their expectations fulfilled.

Happily, my favorite fondler of follicles, Chanel, was on duty. No, not **that** Chanel. She is an African-American princess both ingratiating and able, and far above mere commercial mortals. She remembered me from an earlier attempt to use a haircut as an employment tool, and asked whether it had been successful. That was the Mid-America Payment Exchange interview, as I recall it, and you know the results, though Chanel didn't. She commiserated, and when I told her that I wanted to leave there clean shaven, tried to talk me out of it. Since my beard and mustache are almost completely white while the rest of my hair is predominantly dark colored, I felt that I had to remove those traces of my advanced years which were easy to remove. Pulling gray hairs out of my head one-by-one is not too efficient, but a swipe with a razor at my cheek, other than possibly leaving me as a Scarface look-alike, rids me of those traces instantly. Chanel lobbied for a goatee, and even cut my beard leaving just that amount of hair, but it was spectacle so fey I began lisping instantly and begged (though preciously) for her to cut it off. She then paused at my mustache, hoping to retain it, but its snowy shag was a placard which proclaimed "Too old for a real job," and I told her to be ruthless.

Of course, the point of all this is not vanity and the desire to snag some young sweetie like Chanel. It has dawned on me that one's physical appearance at interviews is not necessarily evaluated as a part of the process to determine fitness for the position in question. Rather, it is a part of the context within which that decision eventually is made. One's appearance can either be reassuring or jarring in some way. In the world of business, a full beard is jarring, in most cases; an all-white full beard doesn't convey energy and enthusiasm, it conveys Santa Claus and

mid-afternoon naps in front of a fireplace -- or a computer terminal. All I am trying to do is shut down alarm bells before they are set off. My ideal situation would be one in which I am not noticed, physically, by my interviewer, and my qualifications are judged as objectively as is possible. With the exception of modeling jobs and other appearance-related positions, what you look like should not be an element in the decision whether or not to hire someone. But of course, it is. It is conceivable that I would already be employed and you would have been spared thousands of words already had I only shaved last spring. It's impossible to know, but I have decided to eliminate my potentially jarring appearance as a contributing factor in this, and future, interviews.

Monday, December 21, 1998

I am about 45 minutes from leaving for the golf interview, and for the last couple of days I have been thinking of what I have to be thankful for. Those are musings seldom to find expression on these pages, and that may be an unfair omission. If you have been able to read between the lines -- often the least offensive way to approach anything I have written except a check -- you may know what they are anyway. But let the fountain of redundancy continue to o'erflow!

It's clear that Mata loves me and is committed to staying married to me, for worse or for even worse than that. We have been pulling together recently more than we have been pulling in opposite directions, and an easy sense of peace has settled over us again. I can't overemphasize how important that feeling is for me in my attempts to solve my vocational dilemma.

My eighteen months in Japan left me with one overall revelation which had never occurred to me before: I missed being the father of a daughter. Jake is a fine son, but I probably

wasn't the father he wanted. My influence over him was sporadic until he was 9 or 10, and by that time it seemed as if all I could try to do was caulk the hull and add some putty to the worst-appearing cracks. For better or worse, I'm a ladies's man, and I felt like teaching at a women's university awakened some instincts within me which were more fundamental and satisfying as any I have ever known. Of course, I'm not there now, I'm here. But I have Mel. In the past year, and particularly in the last half of the year, she and I have suddenly warmed to each other in a way I would never have hoped to experience. She not only calls me "Dad," she treats me like it, and it fills a place in my heart which I not only did not really know existed, I also didn't know how big it was and how loved I could feel when it was filled. This year has held many surprises for me, few of them pleasant. This was the most wonderful.

What else could compare with the love of two women? I'm pretty healthy for an overweight 58 year-old man who doesn't exercise. My last hospital stay was in 1970 for a motorcycle accident. Of course, my teeth are falling out of my head almost as fast as my hair, but unless I choke on one, that's not likely to be life-threatening.

None of my grandchildren lives more than a 20 minute drive from my house. Twenty years ago I would have laughed in disbelief had someone claimed this item would be on any list I ever made, except one I was compiling as evidence of my dementia. But they have become of increasing significance to my life as its years accrue, and to have them all nearby is both fun, and a comfort.

My impoverished state has left me free to avoid the shopping crowds which inevitably take their toll on our collective spirits this time of year. I am grateful for that every time I venture onto the fringes of commercial insanity for such things as cumin or another head of

garlic. When I see desperate-appearing people pushing cartloads of diversions, either furry or raucous (both the toys and the people buying them), I find myself pleased to regard them as a species unrelated to me. For this year, as my Christmas gift to him, I will teach Mikey to play golf and try to get him a used set of clubs to start off with. That's assuming I get the city job, a grand and unsubstantiated assumption.

Well, time passes, and the interview has come and gone. I should know better than to try to assess my success in it, but I will pass on a few observations. A golf course looks real bleak covered with snow. I arrived ten minutes early for the one o'clock meeting and spent the time in the pro shop, watching a few dozen Canada Geese circle in as much confusion as that anal-retentive species will permit itself. Apparently, their favorite pond had recently disappeared from sight under a glaze of ice followed by this morning's inch of snow. The squadron appeared caught in an eternal holding pattern, its confused instinct sending messages which were contradicted by the message relayed by their eyes. Of course, those conflicting messages were, "Land on the pond," and "What fucking pond?"

My interviewer, Martha, eventually arrived and I had to abandon my attempts to talk the geese down and make an attempt to obtain gainful employment. She had a cohort from Parks and Recreation participate in the process, and the three of us retired to a conference room for the ordeal. Actually, it wasn't an ordeal at all. Both my interviewers were women and I ended up talking so much about Mata that I thought they were going to offer the job to her. It all seemed straightforward and aboveboard, and I gave it my best shot. I have found that words do come as quickly as they ever have, but not the right ones. When I was teaching, my verbal communication genes were getting a full-time workout everyday, and they were **buff**. Now there

are a few puckers where muscle used to bulge and unseemly veins stand out on my forehead too quickly when I strain to locate the right word. Now I seem to search my directory more than I used to, and the processor doesn't always get the turbo boost it needs.

Well, Martha is **not** 16, but she is younger than I am, and not likely to be 30 yet. She just returned from maternity leave and wants to get this nasty business over with by Christmas. The position was first advertised in September, and she promised to make her decision this week. So I'll either get a much-appreciated Christmas present from the city, or a lump of coal in my stocking.

The late Peter Cook, who could make me laugh reading my own obituary, worked with Dudley Moore as a comedy duo, and one of their sketches involved a one-legged man ("a unidexter") auditioning for the part of Tarzan. While it was glorious, zany fun, I felt a lot like that character at the interview. It seemed to me from the orientation of the questions they asked that they were looking for someone with a business background. They opened the door for me to provide that kind of information for them, but I had none to offer. In spite of my professed hedgehog character, I surely appeared to be a unidexter to her. Instead I talked about what I saw as the promise of golf as a moral activity, and the analytic side of philosophy being an asset in the position. Perhaps I got the interview by virtue of my enthusiasm in the cover letter and my expressiveness in answering the five questions they sent later. But that only gets me so far at crunch time, and I would guess that someone with a rich background in management and business, as well as a knowledge of golf, has the inside track. What with all the bank consolidations recently, there must be hordes of out of work bankers willing to settle for \$32K in a country club environment. Martha alluded to the promise to inform us hopefully by the end of

the week.

Thursday, December 24, 1998

Fast away the old year passes. Our erstwhile contractor, Tony, remains incommunicado concerning the fence installation, though the recently frozen ground makes that an impossibility for the next few months. I certainly was counting on greeting this season in the company of a dog, but only The Gray Cat remains in the house, by turns surly and frightened. About eight years ago, while we were living in Lawrence, Mata was spending an overnight with a friend in Kansas City, Julie. At the time, I was a very good buddy with a lesbian couple, Sue and Linda, and when I revealed to them that Mata and Julie slept in the same bed for the night, they immediately wanted to be put on the list for future visits. Mata will **claim**, to this day, that none materialized.

During the night, Mata and Julie heard a painful-sounding mewling, if that's an actual word, under the bed. Julie matter-of-factly announced that her female cat was pregnant, and a glance under the bed confirmed that she was in the process of squeezing out an array of kittens of every color and pattern. They stayed up for the entire ordeal, and the long-term result of such doting dedication was that Mata felt a sufficient bond to the process and its participants to accept a couple of kittens to commemorate the event. Kittens are cute, no doubt about it, and these didn't disappoint in that regard. But Mata and I seem to have a fundamental disagreement on the topic of naming animals you intend to associate with on a continual basis. My favorite pet of all time was a cat, so I'm not a cat-hater. A cat-**kicker**? Yes. But not a hater. That cat was named *Taxi*, and was an outside cat, returning to spend the evening hours inside with the rest of us, his peers. I named him *Taxi* because I felt it would be excitingly retro to open the front door to the

street and yell, "Taxi! Taxi!" Well, I could have called him *Rape*.

Mata and I couldn't compromise on names for the two little fur-balls we were stuck with, and as soon as their kitten period expired, they also became considerably less attractive and deserving a proper noun of their own, as Virginia Woolf might term it. So we called them "The Black-and-White Cat," and "The Gray Cat." What the hell, call us sentimental softies; we don't care. Eventually, B&W met his four-wheeled match one night on the street in front of our house and only his neurotic brother is left. I was thinking of calling him *Ganyu*, after a sumo wrestler we ate breakfast with in July of 1996, but not even Ganyu's formidable stomach drags the ground so shamefully and is of so little use. I was hoping that he'd run away from home when I got a dog, but The Gray Cat doesn't run anywhere; he slouches and lumbers at best. But now he's all I've got. I prefer the stuffed toy duck collection I've accumulated, though I'd prefer a Peking Duck collection.

I don't know what I'll do about Tony. I got my back up about his stalling and failures to meet schedules this summer and he doesn't even attempt to communicate with me at all. He will occasionally call Mata on her private number if he calls anywhere, but mostly he just ignores our messages on his machine. The fencing material he bought is strewn all over our garage floor which prevents us from protecting our vehicles from winter's sadism. It might be worth noting that these are cars which we bought when Bush was still president. Without financial resources, I can't threaten him with a lawyer, and there don't appear to be criminal charges which anyone would want to do the paperwork on. I don't own a firearm, nor do I have a cohort or gang to do my dirty work for me. Even my kitchen knives need sharpening. When I owned a motorcycle I tried to join "Hell's Geezers" but they wouldn't have me. Money is power in this case, as in all

others. A modest amount of money is all I need to exert a modest amount of power where it is needed to set accounts to rights, but without a job, the system doesn't budge.

Saturday, December 26, 1998

Our Christmas yesterday consisted of visiting Melanie's brood. Mata was able to squeeze some money out of our exhausted bank account for presents for our black grandchildren, but none for our white ones. The races continue to have a long way to go. I was ashamed to even show my face at Jake's house, since I had nothing to share with Heather or Hayley. Mata was able to pile outfit upon redundant outfit on Madisen and Malcolm plus a token effort for Mikey, but Jake's kids get stiffed again.

However, when I arrived at Mel's door on the morning of the 25th, no one had seen me since shaving, and all the adults in attendance were shocked and astounded by my appearance, which mirrored my previous few days. But Madisen just ran up and cried, "Paw-Paw!" In some wonderful way, she could see more clearly than any so-called grown-ups that the essential Paw-Paw was still present, and no subtraction of hair could change that. You can't imagine how much that cheered me; Madisen again proved to be the savior of my spirit.

Monday, December 28, 1998

David Brower, one of the great leaders of the Sierra Club, often used an analogy in which nature was a condemned prisoner. The point of his usage was always that the best an environmental effort can expect is to gain a stay of execution. Improvement of the condition was a foolish illusion. I'm in the mood to use the same image for this marriage. A drastic change from the "love of two women" phrase of just a few days ago.

After yesterday afternoon and last night, I fear the governor has put his phone off the

hook and a gurney is being wheeled up the hallway. It's my fault, of course, I say without guile or pretense. I committed the unpardonable sin of my wife's family, and probably of any set of in-laws. Oh my God, I hear you gasp, what unspeakable depravity or cruelty has that poor woman had to endure this time? The lowest of all, I admit, contritely. I stand guilty of sarcasm.

Men who have been married longer than I will chuckle in understanding. Frolicking naked with neighborhood bimbos under the twinkling Yuletide tree can be admonished sternly, and then forgiven. Hurling crockery, even long-harbored wedding presents, will encounter an upturned eyebrow and an estimate of how long one's residence in the dog house will be. Even comedian Chris Rock's favored form of physical abuse -- "shaking the shit out of her" -- once the vibrations tone down, can be explained away and reconciled in time. But sarcasm? Why don't I just sleep with her sisters and carve a trio of the numeral '6' in my forehead? Those appear to be next in the logical progression once sarcasm is initiated. Sarcasm is the preemptive thermonuclear strike of marriage and other relationships, at least in Mata's family. Massive retaliation is called for, lest the offender believe that the offense is not a capital one.

So that's where I am now. The massive retaliation Mata favors is the dread Marcel Marceau Icicle Onslaught. Cold and silent. I can attest to its effectiveness as an insomnia inducer in multiple instances over the past 15 years. Knowing how little sleep I was likely to get, I even made an attempt at reconciliation last night under the covers, but it was coldly and silently rejected by a body of near-cadaverous rigidity. Apparently, Mata is more interested in nurturing and protecting her anger and resentment than finding a way to dissipate it.

A generation or so ago, one of the most seedy places to pick up a few extra dollars was in a place where you could sell your blood plasma. As often a week as the veins could stand it, men

far removed from the dole of commerce could muster at some plasma collection point on the fringes of Skid Row and donate their fluids to science. While plasma is still solicited, and while the profoundly, terminally out-of-luck still congregate there, there is a more '90s option for those of us who still harbor the odd false notion that a job might still be found for us. In the Kansas City area, the company's name is Quintiles, and they do pharmaceutical research. Nearly every day they post an ad in the paper, either generically stating who they are willing to hire ("8 to 80, blind, crippled, or crazy," as my old buddy Greg used to enumerate his criteria for a sexual partner), or often a more focused announcement, such as the more recent osteoporosis study they are conducting. In most instances, they require a certain amount of time spent continuously on site, including overnight stays. After last night's frosty fitfulness, the idea of being paid to spend a few days or weeks sleeping alone sounds awfully appealing. I called them this morning while the mute Mata was preparing to leave, and heard some words I hadn't heard in a very long time: "You're too young." I thanked the young woman on the other end of the line, but it also turned out that I was too old for another project they were recruiting for. However, a third study sounded promising. I'd get five night's absence from the front lines and be paid a little over \$600 for it. I asked them whether I could come on out now and begin before noon, but much discussion lay ahead.

Of course, the overnight stays required while testing strange concoctions doesn't only concern the need to keep the protocol scrupulous. They need to observe all the side effects produced by the various dosages, straining through the puddles of vomit we yield for their scientific, if not prurient, interest. We also need to be nearby to describe the ear-popping, Van Halen-sized headaches which result an hour after ingesting something designed to produce

ovulation in mares. Of course, this journal could stand some sort pharmacologically-induced section, *a la* Ken Kesey or Aldous Huxley. It certainly couldn't decrease its quality.

Alas, we finally discovered I was disqualified from participating in this mild-sounding project by my use of the steroid cream for my eczema. Otherwise, I'd be packing my bags to have my arms slathered in bacteria, then in an unguent meant to combat the bacteria, and finally plastic wrap to keep it all centrally located while the forces of good and evil did their work. Of course, it might also be the forces of evil and placebo, depending on the luck of the draw. The fact that I was seriously prepared to give my body and its symptoms up for such a study is yet another downward tracer to note in connection with my fortunes, or at least my estimation of them.

In other news, we discovered this weekend that both our computers are Y2K compliant. Mata downloaded a disk full of test software from an Internet site and we ran it on Saturday. The big question now is, will this journal still be active at that time? Without checking the date of the last entry of this, what do you think now? Will I be meaningfully employed in 370 days? A year and five days ago I would not have thought I'd still be waging the same old fight 370 days hence. It would take a huge amount of courage or foolishness to bet against a continuation of my futility. Unfortunately, Ben Stein has already named his web site [futility.com](http://futility.com), or I'd consider saving that address for my Home Page.

Tuesday, December 29, 1998

A couple of times in the past, I have alluded to a binary choice to be made in my vocational dilemma: seek a cure, or live with my condition forever. Since a cure -- the offer of a full-time, meaningful occupation with a generous benefit package -- is decreasing in likelihood,

Mata has often suggested that I find a way to accommodate my failure and live with it. To her, that means accepting whatever demeaning job an agency offers me and be damned grateful for it. Supplement that with some inexpensive therapy by a shrink sympathetic to the newly impoverished. Then, work till I drop. While I have feebly resisted such voluntary euthanizing, *Fortuna* has placed a tool for the implementation of this solution in front of me. It is the life's work of the philosopher Epictetus.

The Tom Wolfe novel I read earlier this month contained a lot of Epictetus in it, and the thought of that sage played a pivotal role in the direction of a couple of the novel's characters. In fact, it would have been impossible to read the novel without getting a clear sense of where his thought could fit into our world at the end of this interesting century. I had been introduced to Epictetus as an undergraduate, and read a little of his work on my own in graduate school. At that point in my life I still had hopes and ambitions, and his counsel seemed a little defeatist. Now, in full-fledged defeat, the wisdom of Epictetus has never seemed more apt to me.

The man is known as a Stoic, and that term seems to exude (if Stoicism ever really 'exudes' anything) tolerance of the intolerable, not fighting the good fight, and resignation to the inevitable. Just what's called for here by Mata's 'accommodation of my condition' hypothesis. Since my earlier years as a philosopher-wannabe left me with little more than a useless M.A. and many (and I do mean **many**) floor-to-ceiling shelves full of books by the great ones, I hauled down one called *The Handbook of Epictetus*, and read it through a couple of times. Since I taught Marcus Aurelius and Seneca in KU's Western Civ Program, I've put them at the ready as well. They're both Stoics, and all three were Romans.

What I learned first is that Epictetus is not all resignation and flaccidity. His call for

resignation and flaccidity is based upon his view of the human condition and a nearly religious opinion about the structure of reality. As it seems to me, his philosophy is based upon three fundamental questions a person needs ask. What is my fundamental nature? Is a given thing within my control or not? What do I desire? The second of these is of immediate interest to me. Epictetus teaches us to distinguish between what we can control through our will, judgments, and actions, and what is beyond our power. In that latter category are many things we might fancy we have some authority over: our popularity, wealth, reputations, health, as well as how those closest to us behave, like our children or spouses. No way, says Epictetus; all those are out of our reach, and we should not let them affect us. They should particularly not affect our evaluation of question #1: what is our fundamental nature? When we take as our fundamental nature elements which are outside our control, we open ourselves up to a lifetime of frustration. If we believe it is in our fundamental nature to become wealthy, or popular, or even to help people become better themselves, we delude ourselves and ultimately fail.

So what's this got to do with me? If I am to be a Stoic, or even a stoic, I must accept the fact that whether or not someone else awards me a job is ultimately out of my control. My task should not be currying favor with others, trying to make myself appear younger, more attractive, more of whatever they want. None of the things I have done in the past has improved my chances with others, and my disappointment and depression concerning the process, Epictetus would counsel, reflects a basic mistake in my own self-understanding. Who I am is not reflected in the rejection of others; neither is it in any sporadic approval rating I may briefly garner. I doubt he would say that I should give up desiring work, but that's another issue entirely, and needs to be kept separate.

If Epictetus is right, what should I be doing rather than typing pointless cover letters and wasting postage on resume mailings? I should be working on what I can control. And what is that? My judgments and the actions which proceed from them. That's it. Nothing more in this world is within the grasp of any of us. Of course, making those judgments first requires that I distinguish between what I can control and what I cannot. It is pointless to make judgments about what I cannot control. It is very windy this morning and stray branches have come off the old elm in the back yard. We always seem to be making judgments about the weather, and we are always misguided when we do. The wind is neither good nor bad; it is outside our control, so it just **is**. Deal with it and move on. This house we are living in is cold and drafty. On mornings like this, when a winter wind bites out of the north remorselessly (even the use of that adverb alludes to judgmental elements in a natural phenomenon which indicates our linguistic predisposition to assume everything is a matter of our will; if the breeze can feel remorse then we can reason, cajole, or intimidate it into working to further our immediate goals.) cold air seeps through every opening. Mata and I have been known to condemn this house and rue its very existence. Of course, we are wrong to do so. We know the characteristics of this place; we should either move or tolerate it by wearing an extra layer of clothes. Anything else is a waste of our time and energy.

These ideas of Epictetus made sense to me last night as Mata and I continued our wordless standoff. She seemed to want to punish me, and initially she was. But her attitude toward me is something I am powerless to mold; she will act the way she acts. My reaction to her -- my judgment, as Epictetus calls such things -- **is** something I can control. So Mata can punish me by her actions only if I decide I am being punished by them. I suddenly felt very good

about the whole situation. In a sense, she seemed to be punishing herself with her scowl and abruptness, but I felt released from all that. Life was going on; her life in her direction, mine in mine. I turned on the electric blanket, polished off a couple of Seneca's letters, and turned in early. I slept the sleep of the innocent, at least until Mata plopped into bed and decided to call off her vendetta in the crudest, most carnal, and also most hackneyed means known to our species. It is also the most effective.

So what is my essential nature? The fox in me bristles indignantly at the mere suggestion that I could ever be reduced to a single activity. However, Epictetus is pretty inflexible on this count; he derides dilettantes mercilessly in his writings, and even suggests that philosophers avoid the company of non-philosophers for fear of contamination of the will and mind. Unfortunately, philosophy was the study which attracted me precisely because it allowed me to unify all my many interests and make an attempt to understand them from a more comprehensive perspective. It permitted a fox to masquerade as a hedgehog, but now Epictetus is demanding that I quit playing dress-up: either be a philosopher or be something else. But don't try to be everything. This is going to be tough.

Of course, I don't actually know yet if I'm a philosopher. I certainly haven't tried to be one by applying for jobs on golf courses and in corporate training functions. Here I am caught between two criteria for what constitutes a philosopher: contemporary academia's, and that of Epictetus. By commencing graduate school in 1986 I tacitly accepted their definition: a Ph.D. from a reputable program. Having failed to achieve that, it does look mightily suspicious to suddenly adopt a diminished criterion just so I can confer on myself some honorary title. However, that would be a hasty judgment. First of all, there's nothing remotely connected with

'honor' in being known as a philosopher. Ask someone who has two degrees in the subject on his resume. It is more a curse. When I am introduced as a philosopher at a party, few people rush to engage me in conversation. One would think that intelligent dialogue would be the one activity one of us occupational lepers would be capable of sustaining, and most people would recognize that. While I certainly have that to offer, most people seem to stand apart and regard me as they would a rare species in the zoo, on loan from some exotic location. So, what philosophers have to offer few people want, and what most people want it is assumed philosophers can't provide. That pretty much covers it.

The problem with this analysis is that Epictetus would be roaring his disapproval at me by this time. I don't discover my true nature, he would snarl, by asking what other people think is valuable or worthless. I discover it by looking into what is essential about me -- without which I would cease to be the best human I can be -- and what is unique about me -- without which I am indistinguishable from everyone else. And I **don't** discover this by asking what I want to be, or what I want out of life. The only certain way of discerning my essential nature is to rid myself of all my desires. Epictetus was one smart sumbitch. He knew how easy it was to project our wishes onto reality and read them as a state of affairs in the world, rather than what we want that state of affairs to be. Being in love is a great example of that. How often, when I was infatuated with another person, would I read a random smile, an act of simple human generosity, or an offer to have sex, as an indication that she loved me as much as I loved her? Every fucking time, if rhetorical questions require answers.

So, is being a philosopher in my essential nature, or isn't it? I can't decide now, since my mind is not clear enough about such fundamental things at this point. Stripping away the

interfering layers of desires and wishes will require effort, and I'm not sure I am that dedicated to the task.

Wednesday, December 30, 1998

Well, in one sense I will get to be a philosopher in the near future. Paul Long called again last night and offered me two courses next semester at Maple Woods Community College. While I'm doubtful about an 8:00 A.M. course, I've accepted one on Thursday night: Logic for Losers. I'll get the text next week and then have two more weeks to crank out a syllabus.

I've also set myself up for a test Tuesday morning for one of the seasonal tree stump positions with the IRS. It makes sense, even though it pays less than \$10 an hour. This is going to be our grimmest tax counting yet. Even though we made **considerably** less than \$20,000 last year, we looted our IRAs for nearly another \$10,000, more than half of which went to bail out Melanie and her inert spouse. It was only temporarily effective. They had their new Mazda repossessed last month and now we ferry her to work every day. Penalty and taxes on those indiscretions alone will make us blanch, and of course they are counted as income, placing us among the lower fringes of the apparent 'middle class.' The last time we discussed such matters, my friend Bill adamantly maintained he's also "middle class." I didn't know whether he was complaining or trying to affect an aw-shucks veneer of commonality. I wasn't taken in, either way it swung. Gloria called me last night from their condo in Marina del Rey, California. They're often bagging rays in Rey when they're not in their Manhattan digs, loitering around Lincoln Center and MOMA. In Kansas City, they live in Mission Hills, across the street from the late Ewing Kaufman's mansion. Such are the skewed perceptions of economic class in this country which claims to have abolished them. Of course, someone living in a refrigerator crate

under a bridge would resent me calling myself down-and-out when I have a house with doors and wine which doesn't have a twist-off cap and someone else's lip prints on the bottle's mouth.

Thursday, December 31, 1998

Last night I dreamed my life was being satirized in a "Doonesbury" kind of comic strip. All right, all together now: one chorus of "You're So Vain." The strip was written by Warren Lane, computer wanker at A.D. Banker (it's got a ring to it) while I was there, and now just all-around utility wanker for another organization. I haven't heard from Warren since the summer cookout we attended at his house, so I have no idea why he and his illustrative powers would surface at this time from my unfathomable subconscious.

In the real world, however, I **have** made the cut in one distant area. Earlier this week we received a Christmas card from Jessica and Jalen, and one of the pictures I took was tastefully placed as its centerpiece. It was one in black and white, and the border was in color. Both Jessica and I professed in an e-mail to prefer B&W, and I like her choice.

Earlier in the evening yesterday, as Mata returned from shopping for what few pitiful provisions we could afford, she walked in the door, arms laden, and indicated something on the porch with a toss of her head. I looked out to see a puppy, looking as pathetic as puppies are capable of on a night where the predicted low will be 8. I had been watching the news, which puts me in full cynical mode, so it was truly amazing to see how I was transformed in an instant. Though not dressed for the wintry blasts, I crawled out onto the porch on my hands and knees and extended a hand of friendship to the creature. It carefully sniffed it, and then reluctantly permitted me to pick it up and hold it in my arms. It was shivering violently, and dug its face and snout under my chin apparently for warmth. As we went inside, I could see that he was a young

pup, perhaps not four months old, with markings that looked like a Shepherd but body more akin to a Beagle. And he did not have the aroma of Obsession on him.

I held him until his tremors subsided, and then the two of us (the dog and I) sat on the floor. We attempted to feed him from the bag of dog food Mata had bought when this summer's visitor began to seem like a permanent fixture, but he didn't appear hungry at all. He just wanted to be close to me and I obliged him. In just a few minutes, Mata suddenly placed the portable phone in front of me for some unknown reason. All she said was "Keep talking." I had no idea what she meant until she took the phone back and mentioned to Melanie -- whom she had just called -- that I had been a torrent of baby talk for this foul-smelling four-legger since it arrived, and wondered out loud what **she** has to do to get that kind of treatment. Every wedding should be required, by federal regulation, to take place under a bower inscribed with the 'fun' house slogan: "Abandon all hope, ye who enter here."

Since the pup was unlikely to be housebroken, his remaining inside for the night was out of the question, so we fixed up a bed for him of an empty wine box and a no longer needed blanket and set them on the porch, along with a bowl of water. This morning all were still there: the pup alive, the water frozen. Mata got up a little before me and brought him inside to some warmth, and for her trouble he rewarded her with a puddle on our newly shampooed carpet.

Tonight we are reduced to another Primerica New Year's Eve at the same location as last year's, with each attendee expected to contribute a dish. Even with our recently restocked larder, we won't be capable of anything more appetizing than oatmeal or doughballs.

Saturday, January 2, 1999

The pup knows a good deal when he sees it and is still a part of our extended family.

Unlike the summer pooch, I doubt he'll wander away to greener pastures and kinder souls. In this neighborhood, we are the Rockefeller Foundation of human mercy, but I'm not certain how much longer this puppy will be on the receiving end of ours. Like all young dogs, he is considerably High Maintenance, requiring constant monitoring for spontaneous emptying of certain bodily reservoirs. Mata spread plastic over the floors the size of an America's Cup mainsail, originally purchased to stretch over the inside of our north-facing windows for protection from the season's meteorological rigors. Instead it will protect our carpeting from the improvisational skills of a puppy's bladder.

In preparation for such a day as this, I had stashed away an old Barbara Woodhouse book on training a dog and began leafing through it yesterday. For us, housebreaking is the first and only chore of importance, but the formidable Ms. Woodhouse was not encouraging about the odds of it being successful during the dead of winter. Great. In addition, we put a pie tin out on the porch full of dry dog food but it has been devoured by blue jays and a flock of starlings. The pup seemed uninterested in protecting his food supply just as he was uninterested in eating it when we poured some for him in the house. He gave it a desultory sniff and then walked away to inspect the cat. The cat has not been in the mood to permit such intimacies, and communicates to him only by hisses. Our concern for his failure to eat was relieved, if that accurately describes it, by observing him yesterday in the back yard. He spent a lot of time in one spot and when we looked more carefully at what he was doing in that spot, it turned out he was feasting on the frozen, dried-up carcass of one of the late local stray cats. Of course, he eventually dragged the dregs of his feast around front for our inspection, and continues to refuse civilized nourishment.

Monday, January 4, 1999

As abruptly as he showed up on our porch, the dog has disappeared. On Saturday morning, Mata left for her customary Primerica morning in spite of the steady snowfall which had begun the previous afternoon. The puppy had come in for a warm-up during our coffee half-hour, but whenever one of us would go outside, so would he. We had even gone to the extreme length of naming the little critter. Since he came to us on the (near) eve of a new year, the Year of the Rabbit, I looked up the Japanese word for 'rabbit' and named him that. It is 'nousagi,' and he started calling him "sagi" for short. Short is right. That was Friday night, and by Saturday morning he was among the missing. Maybe he didn't like the name we had chosen for him.

Mata said he had hung around the car while she warmed it up, and even followed her down the block as she drove away. After being unable to keep up with a race-tuned 1992 Toyota Corolla, he may have given up and then found himself unable to regain his orientation. In addition, the continuing snowfall may have covered over his scent, making it impossible for him to retrace his steps. Saturday was to have been the day I gave him a bath, and I had gone to the store on Friday, buying a puppy shampoo. And Mata, not knowing the dog had not returned, went to the store on the way back from the meeting and bought chew toys, flea collars, and a couple of bags of Gravy Train. We may have to incorporate it into a meat loaf since that nearly exhausted our near-term budget.

I hope he was made a better offer by someone down the street, but that seems unlikely. Since last night's low was -5, it sounds like curtains for that sweet little hound. In addition, he hadn't learned that automobiles were not his friends.

Tuesday, January 5, 1999

If this is the kinder, gentler IRS, I can only imagine the Genghis Khan version. My test

for tax examiner was today, and consumed 2 ½ hours of my morning. Unbelievably, the test was only 50 minutes in two parts, strictly timed, which left 100 minutes for the standard government wastes of time. There was duplication in the paperwork we had to fill out, but the forms were fairly brief. Why twice as much of our time had to be spent sitting looking at the walls or writing down our Social Security number one more time on yet another piece of paper is beyond me. Perhaps it was a shrewd psychological test of one's suitability for government employment. If your scruples or sense of the value of your own time makes you impatient wasting twice as much time as you dedicate to a job-related task, the people behind the two-way mirrors are trained to spot you and target your application for the shredder. There were also 4 or 5 IRS employees in the room, ostensibly to "help" us when we had a question, but before long it was clear they were primarily discipline enforcers. Welcome to the IRS. One middle-aged woman named Tanya punctuated the silence so frequently, barking out warnings to us for nonexistent offenses she thought we might be contemplating, such as opening the test booklet before the next millenium, that I began to wonder whether she was afflicted with a mild form of Tourette's Syndrome; hired by the non-discriminatory federal civil service. There were about 60 of us for the 8:30 test, and it ran the gamut from displaced suits to pierced body parts, and some appeared to have great difficulty defining common words and grasping a #2 pencil with only one hand. Apparently, we will be summoned for work in order of our test scores.

Late yesterday afternoon, I had the shades in the living room opened and did some mild exercises in my sweats while looking out into the street. Junior high kids were coming home, and I saw a young lady who lives diagonally across the street walk briskly up the sidewalk. She was not alone. She was accompanied by . . . . the puppy! It jumped and danced around her feet

and followed her onto her porch. I couldn't see whether she let it in, but it was certainly the same dog and it ran around the street a little while later. When I relayed this information to Mata, she asked that I put the wine box and blankets out on the porch again in case he wants a place to stay. Sure enough, when I came back from the IRS today, he crawled out of the box and wagged his tail furiously at my approach. He and Mark Twain.

Wednesday, January 6, 1999

We've finally committed to the dog, *Nousagi*. We'll license him, and have contacted another contractor who will put in the fence. He really is an ingratiating creature, elaborately grateful for the smallest kindness we bestow and acting as if we were brothers separated by decades each time we're reunited. Actually, **my** brothers would likely act more like The Gray Cat would upon finding an empty water dish, skulking and glowering.

Thursday, January 14, 1999

Yesterday was the long-awaited appointment with Chayk, and I was nervous all day. That's different for me, but I didn't interpret as a good sign. After prodding him with an e-mail and phone call to his secretary, I was able to obtain a copy of Sprint's code of ethics for study prior to yesterday. It was a nicely-produced 30+ pages of very comprehensive ideals and directives. It certainly looked like a place that took the subject seriously and that was encouraging. I took a page of notes and questions to present to him and arrived 15 minutes early.

I was met by Pam, who introduced herself as the manager of the ethics program Chayk oversaw. She also said she'd be sitting in on the meeting we'd be having, which sounded fine with me. The man himself was far from formidable, which I mean as a compliment. He was affable, informal, and seemed to have an intellectual depth which is so often absent -- or kept

submerged -- by most business managers. I liked him right off. In addition, he had my resume and letter on the table in front of us, so I felt confident that my desire for work would be addressed at some time during the half-hour. That was one of my hidden fears earlier that day. It seemed entirely possible that we'd launch into a discussion of the code I had read, I'd pose my questions and suggestions, and at the end of the half-hour allotted, I'd be dispatched into the street without a mention of my impoverished state. Of course, the mathematical details of our finances are never even alluded to. When I mention that I am doing a lot a writing these days I try to make it sound as if the Tyrone Guthrie Theater in Minneapolis has just as me to do a rewrite of my most recent play for their upcoming season. It may be shame on my part, or it may be a belief that interviewers don't want to know how bad off things are out there for fear that they themselves may join us at the slightest whim of a higher-up.

One thing he said early on was that he'd never seen a resume like mine. My heart sank; it was clear that writing it in Swahili was a colossal blunder. He clarified that statement, however. Most people seem to show a linear path in their employment and educational record along entirely predictable lines. Apparently mine lurched about like a drunk getting off the Tilt-a-Whirl. To his credit, he tried to put a positive spin on it and I agreed to be his accomplice. It was evident that I had a wide range of interests and abilities and was unafraid of appearing a little unconventional. The light dawned cruelly. It **wasn't** the fucking beard! It was my whole fucking life! My beard merely confirms to the astute what my resume already states: I don't have a singular goal toward which I have been striving since pre-school. I have committed the unpardonable sin of diversity. Chayk hammered home that thought with the standard question: "What do you want to be doing in 5 years." I paused just briefly to feign thought. I knew what I

wanted to say, and I just blurted it out before my sensible side took over: “Everything!” That’s an exact quote, including the exclamation point. But it wasn’t entirely a product of my addled spontaneity. When he and Pam had been explaining what the two of them did in the course of their duties for Sprint, they ran through a litany of variety including writing, training, supervising, discussing, devising. It sounded great. So my answer was designed to show that I would enjoy fitting into a workplace which has a spectrum of demands, as well as genuinely express a desire I had.

But it was also clear that the Ethics Program at Sprint is a Wizard of Oz type operation. Behind all the flashy publications, and 800-number helpline, and seminars on demand, are two people. Period. Reta, the secretary seems to keep the scheduling up and running, but there doesn’t seem to be much muscle behind the bold proclamations. This doesn’t mean the program is toothless; merely that they seem to trust Sprint employees to do the right thing. It also means that they don’t have a job for me, or anyone. He did say that they expected to need some writing and training help in the next few months and seemed to allude to the thought that they might be able to offer me something in the way of a consulting position on an as-needed basis. Chayk said he imagined that I’d be uninterested in a standard position with a large company, to which I answered, “It depends on the position and the company.” I didn’t want to eliminate that as a possibility, even though he already had. It really was a pleasant half-hour, but I began to realize a part of why Chayk had seemed to relaxed and at peace with himself during the entire time. He’s got a great position with a prime office and no heavy lifting required. With something like that, I’d be friendly to everyone I met as well.

Saturday, January 16, 1999

Though I had sworn off attending “career” fairs for nearly a year, Sunday’s paper announced one by a single employer: Waddell and Reed. They are a significant financial services force in this city, but most of the jobs they were trying to fill were customer service and hard-core computer folks. However, stuck onto the ad as an apparent afterthought was a writing position. Of course, I bit. The hours were listed as 9-1 Saturday (today) and the requested attire was the abomination entitled “business casual.” It was amazing, once again, to see what some applicants interpreted that to mean. Everything from the lumberjack look to black tie showed up, with my turtleneck and tweed jacket landing approximately midway. And in another break with tradition, I resisted my usual urge to arrive at 7:00 A.M., just in time to greet the departing janitorial shift, and straggled in a little before 11.

Well over 100 people were probably processed this morning, and only one other so far was an aspiring writer, the woman at the reception desk confided. An application form was required, and it merely asked me to copy what was on my resume, with the exception of my time in the slammer, which I tend to omit whenever possible. We were sent to an auditorium to fill out the paperwork as well as to see how low the temperature had to drop before our vital signs flickered out. An hour and ten minutes after finding a seat and contemplating setting fire to the ones on either side of me for warmth, I was summoned by Diana for the first interview. She was also the supervisor of the position for which I was applying, but in spite of the paucity of applicants for it, she seemed in a hurry to send me back out the door again. She asked very little about my relevant experience, nor was she curious about the circuitous route which landed me, clean-shaven, in front of her that morning. I brought a folder with two writing samples and a floppy with the A.D. Banker business ethics text on it, and while she seemed pleased that I had

material for her, she showed no interest in what it was or the context within which it was written. Maybe she wanted me to read it to her. She also declined to accept the disk, even though it contained the only writing I have been paid to do within a financial services framework. She either didn't want to have to work to interview me, or had already let my graying temples make the hiring decision for her. At the end of our less than ten minute discussion, she said that they intended to make a thorough and exhaustive search for the right candidate, which sounded like code words for "And you ain't it, pal."

Thursday, January 21, 1999

The dog was hit by a car today and died instantly. He had just begun to show some signs of becoming housebroken, and never lost his enthusiasm for us and everything we did. The last memory I have of him was his curiosity at the sound made by the screen saver on my laptop. It is an aquarium scene from the After Dark software and makes some sporadic bubbling noises.

Rather than putting him on the chain he detests, and from which he was known for barking incessantly -- not an angry bark, but a bored bark of insult and humiliation -- I just let him out in the back yard briefly while I was putting together my lunch. It had begun to drizzle and I didn't want him getting wet on the chain as well as barking incessantly. Exactly four minutes later, I looked out the window to see Jerome, the son of the neighbor across the street, shoveling his body to the curb. A blue Plymouth idled nearby, and then slowly pulled away. I could do nothing but call the dead animal disposal number in the phone book, just like I did for the black and white cat four years before.

Guilt and emptiness. Tonight is my first meeting of the Logic class at Maple Woods, and I was feeling a little unnerved already. It's a subject I hadn't taught in nearly four years and the

book is one with which I was unfamiliar. But the dog's death and my guilt in it weigh incredibly heavy on me this morning. I called Mata at her office to prepare her for the sight of his body lying at the curb when she came home, but preparation is greatly overrated, I feel. There's still the aftermath of lost feelings and emotions now homeless again. I suppose I can say that we gave him three final weeks of happiness and that he died being a dog and doing what dogs love to do, which is to run and explore. But those sentiments quickly melted into the manufactured state they sprang from, and are replaced by the more durable and genuine ones of guilt and emptiness.

Saturday, January 23, 1999

While it is likely to have its roots in my ongoing failure to find employment, the death of the dog has cut my legs out from under me. Thursday night was also the first night of my teaching at Maple Woods, and I rued the three hours, having only just patted the tears dry on my cheeks before getting in the car to drive to class. Would I be able to hold my emotions in check as I tried to make a favorable impression on the first night? Dissolving into a fit of weeping might lead some to believe that grading would be lenient, even by Montessori School standards and keep them in a class they might otherwise drop out of after reading the first chapter of the text. As long as I can keep some minimum number of students enrolled, it's in my best interest to discourage any above that number. I get paid the same amount of money no matter how many people stick with it, so the fewer papers to grade, exams to score, or names to learn, the more easily I earn the money.

The short version is that I retained my composure for the entire time, and eventually felt so emboldened that I actually shared the day's tragedy with the class. They must have been cat people, though one lovely woman expressed her condolences on break. I would have been happy

just to keep from having to flee the classroom in sad convulsions, and I succeeded in that goal, but I actually felt as if I gave a very coherent overview of philosophy and kept most people interested. Unfortunately, that also means it will probably keep most people enrolled. Only two of the 20 who showed up had ever taken a philosophy course before, so I felt that a cursory glance at the four generally agreed-upon branches of the discipline would be useful, especially if aimed toward letting them know where logic fit in that little universe. I felt satisfied by my work.

Of course, even at a little before 10:00, when I returned home, the night was still young. What amazed me more than anything she has done in recent years was Mata's reaction to Sagi's death. Before we were married, Jake and I lived in a house fairly close to what was then called Royals's Stadium, and at that homestead we also had an Irish Setter, Holly, and a cat, Smoky. Holly was victim to generations of in-breeding and her intelligence would never be mistaken for that of Rin-Tin-Tin, or even a gladiolus. The first time Mata and her school-aged children visited our house it was for a cookout prior to an outing to watch the Kansas City Royals. I was already beginning to carry a torch for her, though it would be years before she even got a hint of my condition.

When she entered the house that evening, she was wearing open-toed sandals and we went straight to the side porch where the charcoal was smoking away. Holly was there as well, and when she saw Mata, came over to her, tail wagging furiously. She may have been dumb, but she certainly was kind-hearted, and I'm not talking about Mata. The first thing Holly did was begin licking the exposed tops of Mata's feet, and for her show of affection was given such a vicious kick to the chops by Mata that it was almost as if Mata had decided to begin practicing

for the last two elements of some unannounced Pass, Punt, and Kick competition. Did that mean I'd have an opportunity to field one of her passes later that evening when the children were in bed? Who would want to? The woman was obviously an unfeeling beast, and the sooner I extinguished that ember in my heart the better off I'd be. Holly skulked away, whimpering, and hid by the wood pile for most of the meal.

Mata has been consistent for most of her life concerning dogs, considering them the filthiest creatures on the planet, refusing to allow on to lick her, and refusing me affection until I had washed the affected areas, had I been foolishly intimate with a dog. That continued through this summer, when we had our delightful visitor for a month. Once I took a Tostito from a bag without having first washed my hands after petting the dog and she promised that she would not have another one from that bag, and acted pretty accusatory about it, too. While she's accepted my irrational love of dogs as part of the baggage I brought with me in plain view, and has agreed to our eventually obtaining one, she made it clear that it would be **my** dog, and don't expect much in the way of support from her.

But just as Sagi's death blind-sided me, the depth and genuineness of her love for that little hound blind-sided both of us -- most prominently her. We held each other as soon as she got back after my call to her on Thursday and cried tears unlike ones we have shed together since our last night together before my departure for Japan in 1995. Then, on Friday morning I couldn't bring myself to get up when the alarm beckoned. I'm usually up an hour ahead of Mata, and my first activity of the past three weeks would be to go down cellar and bring Sagi up. His happiness at seeing me was nearly uncontrollable, and he would dash about the house, looking for Mata within the first few minutes. I suddenly didn't have the heart to go downstairs knowing

he wouldn't be there to greet me with such a show of love as I have not experienced in a very long time. Mata got up briefly, but didn't go downstairs and came back to bed, asking if I was going to be all right. I started sobbing that I knew Sagi wasn't down there and I couldn't bring myself to face that fact this morning. Suddenly we were both holding each other and uttering the most hideous moans and sobs I have heard us perform in duet. It lasted a long while, and I felt so utterly inconsolable that it almost felt like my own death, but not that pleasant.

My thought was that Mata was joining me out of solidarity, and I appreciated the effort very much. But then she started sharing her feelings about him with me and it became clear that she was as deeply and personally distraught as I was. She even told me that she had been moving toward letting him lick her face (her face!) in the near future. Hearing that was akin to hearing the Pope announce that we would be going to Mecca next year and observe the entire season of Ramadan there in strict Islamic fashion.

Sunday, January 24, 1999

All day yesterday and most of the night (until after midnight), Mata attended a Primerica hoopla event and I found myself coming down with a severe cold. I had 17+ hours by myself, and I became amazed again how much space and time Sagi occupied in his brief time in our lives. In spite of the fact that my biological system was slowing down, I was aware that I had time and attention which would have been filled, just a few days before, with Sagi's exuberance and love. Somehow, he filled a void I didn't know was there until it suddenly became empty again. I didn't weep as I had Thursday and Friday, but I could only wander from room to room, finding evidence of his presence in each one: food bowls, a chew toy, spots on the rug from housebreaking accidents. For three weeks I would spend a part of each night sitting on the floor

in front of the couch, letting him snuggle up next to me, seemingly trying to maximize the quantity of bodily contact he could experience. He would stretch out his full length, often tucking his legs under mine and passing some of the most malodorous wind I have ever had to inhale. I look at the floor in front of the couch now and I can't imagine why it doesn't contain me and Sagi, both purring with the pleasure of each other's proximity.

It seems to me that many if not most ordinary people would find my feelings of the last couple of days far over the top. Mata said it just right on Friday when she said that Sagi was our child, and we mourn his passing as we would a human child we had made a part of our family. Of course, in the important emotional ways I am beginning to find more frequently in my existence, he gave us more than any child could. When I visit Mel to see Madisen, Malcolm, and Mikey, they all react with joy at seeing me again, but in 30 seconds they're off doing whatever they were doing before I arrived. To Sagi, we were his agenda and his only agenda. Within these four walls, nothing was more important than being with us, no matter how mundane the activity. Each morning as I washed the dishes he would lie down at my feet on the cold tiles of the kitchen floor. There was a much softer throw rug atop the carpeting in the dining room which would still afford a view of my labors and an opportunity to head me off were I to attempt an escape through the back door to the yard outside. But closeness overruled comfort every time, I suppose because it was a more poignant form of comfort. I feel that poignancy now and miss his closeness and devotion more than I can express.

Friday, January 29, 1999

Yesterday I got an unexpected call from Shook Hardy. Nowadays, any call other than one from a creditor is unexpected. The woman on the line said she wanted to set up an interview for

an Analyst position. This was really strange; just last week I had received a standard rejection notice for a training position with the firm, and I had quit applying for the Analyst jobs they advertised as of last summer. I also recalled the feeling from the interview last February, not an encouraging one. You may remember that my interviewers claimed they had no current openings for the job, and then the company advertised for the very position two days later.

Ever alert for innovative ways to sabotage my candidacy before it gets off the ground, I asked the caller whether she had known that I had already interviewed for an Analyst position last year with Holly and Pam. She had not, and her voice contained an element of surprise to it. Apparently, Shook Hardy has become bloated enough that the various divisions do not share their disillusionment concerning prospective employees. Perhaps I have inadvertently cured that. The interview is scheduled for Monday morning the 8th of February, which should give them plenty enough time to assemble and centralize my dossier.

This past week I have also been focusing on jobs with the Federal government, my previous teat of 20+ years' s sucking. As a result of being formerly employed by them for a substantial period of my life, I am eligible for what is called "reinstatement." If I were to regain my last Federal grade, I'd be making over \$55,000 a year. The local Federal Building downtown has an automated job bank where I have been looking for positions all over the world and printing out the specifications of the likeliest. A couple were actually in Kansas City. What should not have amazed me, but did somehow, is how little standardization there seems to be in what kinds of materials are required to apply for a Federal position in the various departments. Some will accept a resume, some require an application form, others will not give you credit for education unless you supply transcripts at the time of application. Each position with each

department seems to require a different combination of documents, and all of them far in excess of what even the most nosy and intrusive private company would have the *cojones* to demand.

Thursday, February 4, 1999

It seems as if every contact I have with the world of HMOs is a Brave New World one. After my post-Sagi cold subsided a week ago, one sinus remained stubbornly clogged with some exceptionally foul-smelling mucus. All other cold symptoms vanished, so I felt it was probably infected and needed more attention than Dristan could give it. But on Friday morning, I awoke less congested than usual and wrongly supposed it was in the process of self-correction. That led me to decide not to call the doctor for advice and drugs, only the latter being of any substantive value. It not only lingered but intensified over the weekend, so on Monday morning I called in for a consultation. As always, I was shunted off to the voicemail compartment of his haughty assistant, Carmen. I pleaded my case with her disembodied arrogance, and waited. When the doc finally called, it was 8:00 P.M. and I wasn't around to take his call. His message on the machine said he'd call again later.

How much later was never specified, but I gave him all Tuesday and night without any second try by him. When I called his office on Wednesday morning, Carmen's voicemail box wasn't accepting any new messages. On the slim hope that he had made a tentative diagnosis based on my original description on Monday, I called the pharmacy where I have him customarily call in any prescriptions. Upon asking to check to see whether he had called in any new order for me, I was put on hold for seven (count 'em, 7) minutes, listening to Osco ads repeated in a loop reputedly useful for victims of insomnia. I finally hung up without that simple request having been filled. Again I tried the doctor's office, pushing the requisite buttons to talk

with a live operator. She promised she would give my brief message to the sawbones.

Last night, just as I had given up hope of having my request answered, the doctor called me at quarter to ten. After a summation of my symptoms, he surmised that it was an infected sinus and said he'd call in a prescription the next morning. It is now the next afternoon, and he has not done so. In addition, I can get nothing more than Carmen's automated delete bin in which to register my dismay. Where has competence and care gone in today's health institutions? I certainly haven't been on the receiving end of it, though our premiums went up about 15% this month. It almost seems like having no insurance and being a charity case is the best option we have available. The level of our care certainly won't diminish, and the costs will. Sounds like a no-lose situation.

Monday, February 8, 1999

Shook Hardy II: The Sequel. This morning found me still stuffed from last night's dinner with Bill and Gloria at K.C.'s new place to be seen, Lidia's. It certainly is a handsome place, with excellent food, though the highly praised service was slow and inattentive. We were still eating at 10:30 (for a 7:30 reservation), not wholly because of the number of calories we had earmarked for our consumption. None the less, the interview seemed to go a little better than last year's. For one thing, the participants had swelled in number to 5, including me. Holly again started it off with little new to reveal except that they now have an office in Buenos Aires which I am destined to see only in my dreams. Holly turned me over to three others, and they freely admitted that there were four Analyst vacancies they needed to fill in the Tobacco division. That was a change as well. Of course, my background in ethics again was an element of concern for them, and they asked me whether it would prove to be an impediment to the faithful discharge of

my duties. While I tried not to sound whorish about it, I think I managed to convey a sense that I was willing to compromise any and all things I stand for as long as medical insurance can be obtained for it. They'll let me know in two to three weeks. Holly did inform me that \$35,000 was at the extreme upper end for an entry-level Analyst, and of course I told her I could be flexible in that regard, too. I hope I didn't overdo the spineless jellyfish act, though I'm beginning to believe that's a facade that can never be overused, especially in an employment context.

Saturday, February 13, 1999

Yesterday's mail again reduced my musings to irrelevancies as a form letter from Holly informed me that I was not getting a job this time either. I was told to expect to hear in a couple of weeks, but this one hit the postal service just about three days after my interview. For the interviewers, apparently rejecting me was a slam dunk; other candidates might require a little more time and energy. It certainly seems like the same old story: no one interviewing me was within 15 years of my age, and probably not 20, the guy who would be my supervisor was easily 25-30 years younger, though I had greater educational stats than he did when he first signed on.

The Lidia's dinner with B&G also revealed that Bill has set me up to interview with a guy named Dave from Dunn Construction Company. Apparently he hasn't seen my cellulite and accumulation of spare tires; a Firestone store might be more appropriate. It's hard to know what kind of work I could do in construction, but the appointment is Monday, so I'll try to remember to shave and put in my teeth that morning.

For some reason, the opening lines of *Walden*, by H.D. Thoreau, were ringing in my head around the time of yesterday's mail drop. He wrote that he went to that cabin in the woods

owned by Emerson because he wanted to live deliberately. Even the contemporary world of America in the middle of the 19th Century wouldn't permit deliberate living on Thoreau's terms, and it seems more emphatically so today. Building a 10X15 cabin for \$28 is no longer possible, nor raising the food you need and felling trees for fuel, but there hardly seems a modern-day analog to that either. Perhaps Thoreau would be astonished, not so much at the 'wonders' of this modern age, but how many exits from it have been sealed up by society in the intervening century and a half. In Thoreau's time, the West beckoned if a year by Walden Pond didn't seem enough, and any direction, other than east, would place a person out of the reach of society and its expectations. I think a good tandem reading for today's schools would be *Walden* followed by *1984*. Which society are we closest to, and in which direction are we moving?

Well, I am incapable of finding a way of living in society on society's terms -- one in which I am able to fulfill all requirements society has placed upon me -- and most of the means of honorable evasion have been barred as well. What remains? The life of "quiet desperation" until life ceases.

Tuesday, February 16, 1999

Well, Bill's friend Dave spent an hour and a half with me in a J.E. Dunn conference room yesterday. He certainly seems nice enough and Bill has apparently decided that he is just the person I need to help me optimize my job searching energies. Clearly his company is not about to take me on as a charity case or any other kind of case. It was a nice interlude, but he came to the conclusion that he can't imagine why I have been unable to find work. I'm not sure I needed yet another expression of incredulity. It is worth noting that Dave is a college buddy of Bill's **son**, and the realities of being perceived as old and useless have yet to descend upon him. We'll

work on my resume and cover letter, mainly, and Bill will foot the bill to have someone break me of the habit of incessantly picking my nose and eating it, which might be directly related to my interview failures.

Today I received an employment rejection so extraordinary that I cannot think of an analogy preposterous enough to use in comparison. Since the IRS hadn't called me in as a temp tax examiner yet, I decided to give them a buzz to see when training was to begin. The person I talked to said that all tax examiners had been called and training was underway. She asked my score and the grade for which I was applying and I told her. All she would say was that all positions had been filled at that grade and there was nothing more to it. While these were not plum positions, I had been counting on them to fill the first 6 months of this year, and to be rejected by the IRS is unlike any other rejection I can remember. It's like one of those nightmares when you fall from a great height and just as you are about to hit ground the earth begins to open up and you discover that there are far more lower levels to this dream than you first thought. The inference in that dream is: if it can get worse, it will. Perhaps my natural curiosity should welcome a chance to see heretofore unseen mysteries and unfathomable depths that most mortal will never even imagine, but if there's a choice involved, I choose ignorance in this case. But I fear there is no choice involved, and I'll experience many more levels of increasing degradation before this saga ends.

Wednesday, February 17, 1999

When I sent a sample of this journal off to the K.C. *Star* recently, Careers columnist Diane Stafford sent back a very nice e-mail, suggesting that I need to limit myself to about 2 pages, double-spaced, in order to be consider for a guest column at \$50. Today, I took the entry

from exactly a year ago, cleaned it up -- in particular, I expunged the name of Jerry Heaster, the inflexible Capitalist apologist who writes their regular business and economics column -- and cut a lot of the crap out to hit the page limit. I sent it off via e-mail as an attachment to another letter, and Stafford was quite prompt to reply. It was a rejection, of course, but a revealing one. First of all, the tone of the column is too "bleak and dark" for the Business section which, apparently, must reflect some lockstep groupthink with Heaster's unrealistic Pollyanna view. She did suggest I seek professional help for what she diagnosed as my deep depression, and even included a toll-free shrink number for my convenience. As a subscriber, I feel flattered; as a person who likes to have a variety of perspectives reflected by all parts of the newspaper, as long as they are plausible and accurate, I am chagrined. Not that my viewpoint is expressed with irresistible eloquence, but the thought that our country's so-called prosperity is a mixed blessing for many citizens will not, apparently receive a hearing via the Heaster-dominated financial section. Imagine a Sports section which would not allow columnists to criticize local athletic franchises, or a political section which hand a hands-off policy toward local politicians. Piss-poor journalism, I'd say. But the shameless boosterism of the Business section, like the right to bear arms, shall not be infringed.

Thursday, February 18, 1999

In yesterday's *Kansas City Star*, Republican Paul Weyrich is reported as lamenting about the lack of public moral outrage over President Clinton's well-publicized problems. In the same article, Congressman Henry Hyde labels himself as a participant in a "culture war" which he now seems to admit has been won by the forces of 'barbarism.' Poor baby. Many conservatives seem to echo his incredulity over public acquiescence in the President's acquittal, and are hard-pressed

to explain the phenomenon, except in apocalyptic terms. Let me propose another explanation.

Reagan and post-Reagan conservatives have been engaged in a culture war, and they have been the clear victors. However, their victory has produced unintended consequences, and those consequences have included a moral desensitizing of citizens, and a near-elimination of their ability to think critically. These qualities are logically connected.

A cornerstone of conservative ideology is adopting “business” principles in as many areas of public life as possible. Let the market rule. Thus, businesses have insinuated themselves into public schools, with certain brands taking entire school districts hostage for money. Higher education is already being operated on the same sorts of “business” principles prevalent in corporate America: hire cheap, ‘temp’ workers as instructors, offer them no security or benefits, and cashier them when enrollments sag. In this I am a far from disinterested observer, but observer I am none the less.

Of course, companies that operate in our tax-supported public schools are not motivated by civic altruism, but by a desire to consolidate brand loyalty and snag customers as quickly and securely as possible. Thus, Pepsi or Coke may have an exclusive contract with a given district, guaranteeing that only their brand is placed in front of the students. It has even been reported that some students have been suspended from school for wearing clothing that contained an advertisement for a rival product.

What are the students being taught in this kind of atmosphere? I suggest that a major intended lesson of this recent business barrage in our schools is uncritical acceptance of the claims of advertising, and unthinking loyalty to entities which do not qualify for it. We should be loyal to friends, our family, our country, our ideals. We should not be loyal to Pepsi.

The personal qualities that comprise a good citizen are very different from those that make up a good consumer, at least from the point of view of the business world. A good citizen needs to analyze independently, ask for facts instead of ideology, demand candid answers to tough questions. A good consumer needs to accept advertising claims unquestioningly, even the most preposterous, and that quality is short-circuited by a critical mind. He or she needs to believe, with a belief which rivals religious belief, that Ford is different from Chevy, Lay's are better than Guy's, and products are as worthy of our loyalty as friends, or the ideals of respect and equality. Loyalty is a moral quality, and it is cheapened into unrecognizable squalor when applied to a consumer product.

Why aren't Americans outraged at President Clinton? In two decades we've been taught other lessons, and a casualty of that tutelage has been our ability to be critically outraged. Instead, Republicans have made certain we were taught the lessons of business, which are: be a team player, don't be negative, don't criticize the boss no matter how wrong he is. When they then demand that we pillory the President, they find that they can't have it both ways.

Tuesday, March 2, 1999

Mata's father died yesterday afternoon. He had been in the Intensive Care Unit of Baptist Hospital for a little over a week and most of his systems finally just shut down. Things have become chaotic in the house and his death coincided almost to the hour with my being offered a job. It's not much of a job, but it starts next Monday at \$12.00 an hour. The company, Sitel, placed a gargantuan ad in Sunday's employment section of the paper and said they'd only accept applications given in person during business hours. Since it was only a customer service position, I fully expected a mob scene, especially since I was choosing to show up there at a

slacker's hour, i.e., 1:00 P.M. But there were only about 5 others when I began filling out the forms they gave me, and I was interviewed at about 2:15.

Apparently, there was never a chance I'd be turned down for the job unless I drooled excessively and snorted incoherently. Training lasts a week and starts on Monday, and the job itself ends on April 23. That means the I have to choose between it and the next series of NCS projects at \$1.00 an hour less and an hour more driving a day. Plus we get a \$100 bonus just for completing the project. Sounds like a slam dunk, but something the interviewer stressed was disquieting. We'll be taking incoming calls from consumers and she said that some were liable to be "irate." That might explain the C-note given to all those who are desperate enough to take six weeks of telephone abuse. Since Sitel just does this on contract, I have no idea who the ultimate customer is but I hope the word 'anthrax' doesn't appear in their company's name or slogan. I'm not certain that I'm ready for anyone irate, though the fact that our home addresses will not be supplied to the caller is of some comfort. Unemployment and the consequent feelings of worthlessness and isolation do little to insulate the nerves. Mine have been jangly all year, except for the one night a week I'm in class. For some reason, those great feelings of validation and participation in a worthwhile venture come back quickly, but barely last the car drive home at the end of the evening.

Wednesday, March 10, 1999

Training for the new job was put off a day, but on Tuesday about 40 of us sat down in the conference room of a Holiday Inn to see what we had let ourselves in for. Most looked desperate enough to hack their dearest relatives into tiny pieces for \$12 an hour. The training session was an utter shambles, and I remain mystified why I cannot get hired in that sort of position with so

much incompetence being rewarded. The client is Citibank's credit card division, and a couple of their people arrived in mid-morning to confuse things even further. Lauren, the Sitel woman who was in charge of the training effort, was young and personable, but claimed to have none of her own training materials with her that day, and so we sat around looking at each other, taking numerous extended breaks, and finding out little of the tasks we were about to undertake. When the Citibank people got there, no one seemed to know who was expected to do what, and so we had to endure two women standing in front of us, playing dueling facilitators. It was a debacle.

One thing that **was** expressed clearly, however, was that these were not customer service positions we were filling, but were telemarketing! Nothing in either the newspaper advertisement or the interview I had mentioned that aspect of the duties, but there was no mistaking it now. The customers who would be calling were doing so to cancel their credit card insurance, called CreditShield, and it was our job to talk them out of it. Now I can understand why the customers are expected to be irate. Hell, I'd be irate too if I called to cancel something and instead encountered some bozo trying to convince me that **I** was the bozo for wanting it eliminated as a monthly charge. But that was our job, and it was quickly leaving a bad taste in my mouth.

The hapless training only reinforced my growing desire to flee screaming. There was no board upon which to write, the PA system was a mystery to all who attempted to use it, and the training manuals they had assembled for us had copious errors and no page numbers. In order to keep everyone on the same page, literally, Lauren had to describe what was on the page and the rest of us leafed through the manual hoping to find one that appeared to be that way. Apparently having run out of things for us to do, they suddenly decided to make us take the final exam in the

back of the book, in spite of the fact that much of the material being tested had never even been introduced to us. The failure was primarily of preparation, organization, and professionalism. In my eight years as a trainer for the National Weather Service, had I put on something as slipshod as that I'd never be allowed in front of a class again. And this is the much-vilified federal government we're talking about. In the past year and a half, I've been subjected to training by four different organizations, and only NCS had a real commitment to it and a sense of its importance.

When I returned home Tuesday night, I determined to see whether I could rescind my decision to decline to work for NCS in the upcoming project. I called the agency, and they didn't know, so I faxed NCS directly and e-mailed Linda, my old supervisor. This morning while I was learning how to keep the unwilling on the line for a sales pitch, Peggy from NCS left a message on my machine welcoming me back as a Scoring Supervisor. Hoping for that news, I sped home during the lunch hour and listened to the message for myself. By the end of training today, I took my binder, pen, and assorted collectibles to Lauren and told her I was through. She seemed surprised but I wasn't going to give a good salesperson like her a chance to run a pitch by me. I shook her hand and strode to my car. Training for the NCS project will probably start next week, so my voluntary unemployment will likely be short-lived.

Friday, March 12, 1999

This afternoon, the editor of the Business Section of the Kansas City *Star* called to say he was going to run a column I wrote. It will appear in Tuesday's paper, which is the day of the largest concentration of business news in the paper. I had begun submitting guest columns last month, all of them documenting my employment woes. Most of the material has been drawn

from these pages, so I won't repeat it. Diane Stafford apparently shuttled it over to him, since she sent me an e-mail today to the effect that I shouldn't send her any more of my whining and complaining and gave me two other e-mail addresses at the *Star* to afflict with my writing.

Apparently this guy liked it, and I go in on Monday to have a picture taken to lead the column.

Tuesday, March, 16, 1999

The column came out today and my worst fears have been realized. On Friday, I asked Mata to make an announcement at her Saturday and Monday Primerica meetings concerning the column. The main thing I wanted her to tell her colleagues was not to call me with their irresistible offers of a new financial life unfolding before my eyes. She said she didn't make that announcement, and as a result, I have received two calls from Primerica agents and it's not even 10:00 A.M. They are the only two calls I have yet received concerning the column, though I expect to field a few mumbling incoherencies from Generation-Xers later in the day, since the column rags on people in their 20s.

This morning was also when my complete physical for the cholesterol study was to take place, and I appeared dutifully at my 7:00 A.M. appointment. Blood and urine were wrung from various orifices, and then my medical history was taken in some detail. All went well until I recounted my 1970 motorcycle accident, and the hip and ankle pins my body still sports from the orthopedic complications required to repair me. The nurse stood up as if her stool experienced a sudden surge in electricity and told me she was sure the pins would disqualify me from the study. After consulting with other officials, she came back with a unanimous thumbs-down for me. The problem was the MRI required as a part of the protocol. Since the first letter in MRI stands for 'magnetic,' it was thought that the internal hardware I toted around might either compromise the

MRI readings, or, as the head nurse expressed it, those are powerful magnets and they might just suck the metal right out of my body. And people say that a medical education will destroy one's imagination.

Friday, March 19, 1999

Earlier this month, when the events surrounding my father-in-law's death blotted out everything else for a few weeks, I spied an ad for something called 'Monticello University' in the Sunday ads of the *Kansas City Star*. It was not in the employment section, though it was definitely a want ad. It had been misplaced in the section which announces educational opportunities for would-be students, and in my desperation these days, I read **everything** even distantly adjacent to the want ads.

It was a correspondence school, looking for adjunct professors to plump up their staff. As I recall, experience wasn't a prerequisite. The ad gave me a 'diploma mill' kind of feeling, and my distaste was intensified by the use of a Jeffersonian image in its name. But the ad also listed a web site, and I decided to see what was on it. What I discovered was a very well put together web site, if nothing else. It also included a curriculum and course catalogue, and I was astounded to see so many philosophy offerings. There were three courses on Rousseau alone! If the need for the exclamation point isn't as evident to you as it is to me, I can tell you that the philosophy program at the University of Kansas in the years I was there -- 1986-94 -- did not offer one course on that important figure in the Enlightenment. So to find this embarrassment of philosophical riches at the Close-Cover-Before-Striking University of Liberal Arts and Mimeograph Maintenance was a real jolt to the system. I decided to respond to the ad by fax, finding that its 'world' headquarters were in Overland Park. Sometime during the funeral

maelstrom, a representative of the school called to tell me more about it. He sounded like a young sales wonk, but I gave him as much line as he could take and he tried to explain the Monticello vision for distance education in the future. First, it would center on the Internet, which sounds sensible, but hardly liberating; the small percentage of houses online is probably the same ones affluent enough to be able to afford traditional educational avenues. I didn't hear any new doors opening.

In addition, there wasn't much money in it for me unless I recruited students myself. For that I received \$500, providing the student hung in there to graduation. For grading a final course paper I'd get \$25. When the literature he promised to send me arrived, in it was a contract ready for me to sign and return to him. Pretty hasty it seemed to me. Plus, they only were permitted to grant degrees in South Dakota and Hawaii. With everything else going on at the time, I decided to drop it and not respond to their offer.

Yesterday, the same guy called me again, as a good salesman will, saying they were still interested in retaining my services. I shared some of my concerns and misgivings with him, primarily the seeming cookie-cutter approach to course requirements: all undergraduate courses require a 10-page paper as the only work presented by the student as evidence of mastery of the subject matter. I can think of nearly no philosophy course where that would be an adequate demonstration. He insisted that I come down to their offices and take a tour, meet the president, and continue the dialogue, and I told him the only day I had available was tomorrow (today in this journal), and he asked if 9:00 A.M. was all right. It was.

In the end, there seem to be two possibilities here. Either it is a diploma mill, or I could be getting in on the ground floor of a growing enterprise with an appreciable future. I have

begun to incline to the former interpretation. A few of my concerns were addressed directly by the dean, and we dealt with the diploma mill image and problem directly. They seemed to be forthcoming on all issues, and the contract allows either party to terminate it at will, so I can always bail out if the integrity of the institution proves negotiable. Of course, they can do the same if mine turns out likewise. When it comes down to it, if they were being truthful, it would appear to be a venture worth joining. The question is: do I trust them? If I guess wrong, I could be either a participant in fraud, or once again missing a mediocre opportunity. The downside is **much** greater than the upside, and the entire operation has a slightly unsavory taste to it.

Part of what finally made me let their contract unsigned was the physical appearance of their facilities and the high-pressure sales atmosphere presented by all. There seemed to be no one there with any kind of academic, quest-for-knowledge kind of attitude. Eventually, I began to feel like a mark. Their “world headquarters” was a crowded, cluttered set of offices too small for a two-person insurance agency. The “Dean of Instruction,” probably a retired Air Force Master Sergeant, could easily have doubled as a knee-breaker for the Mob, and they quickly took me across the street to another building, occupied by another company, when they couldn’t find someplace to have an interview. Their story is that they will soon be moving into that larger suite in the near future, though there was no sign that packing boxes were at the ready to dispatch the current occupants to a better place. Tiny details, none of them decisive, seem to add up to reasonable doubt, in my mind.

All this week I’ve been tormenting myself by visiting local animal shelters and pounds. Now that the fence is up and the weather is moderating, it just looks lonely out there. I know it’s lonely in here, as he points to his heart. There are four such places in the metro area, and I went

to three of them, one twice. Every place had at least 3 dogs I could fall in love with immediately, and them with me. One, a chocolate Lab named Fudge, was allowed out on a leash with me for a few minutes, and we frolicked like yearlings. But the adoption fee is \$70 and I can't afford to replace the last of the onions I used in a casserole, and they're only \$.39 a pound. I'm just a tire-kicker at these places. The municipal pound for the city has a clearly marked "Death Row," and I found a sweet female Lab/Golden mix named Ginger on her last few days and it broke my heart to leave her there. She had obviously been there long enough to be seen by plenty of people, but none responded to her. I sure did, but their price for her was only \$30, since she was already spayed, but it's not in the budget. I know I was a fool to even show up there since I can't do anything about the march of history, even for one poor needful dog, and had I never shown up there, I would never have had an innocent, trusting face like Ginger's to put with the statistics about how many animals are needlessly put to sleep each week or month. Not just in this country, but in a little room behind the pound on Raytown Road. I was sniffed and licked and wagged at by one such statistic, and I hate myself for it. It almost seems as if I am looking for new and different ways to induce self-loathing, and my creativity is a wonderment.

Saturday, March 20, 1999

Melanie came by last night to make another payment on the 5 Gs she borrowed this summer, and Mata, bless her, gave me money for a dog house and the cheapest dog I can find hereabouts. That would be Ginger, if she's still alive, but I am not going to count on anything. Early this morning I found a house on sale and brought it home for the backyard. Then I made the heart-stopping trip to Animal Control to see whether Ginger remained among the living. I knew where her cage was located and made straight for it. She was there! My earlier visit on

Thursday had found her eager and affectionate, even through the bars, but today was a different story. She lagged back on her stainless steel bunk, staring at me with sullen distrust. I asked one of the officers there if I could take her on a leash and he arranged it easily. As soon as the bars parted, she changed dramatically. We went outside to a fenced-in exercise yard of claustrophobic proportions, and Ginger strained at the leash, seeming to believe that by her will alone she could leave that place forever.

During the entire time at the pound, I was an unnoticed functionary to her, a means to a desirable end. I handled my anonymity well, I thought. The car ride home was handled pretty well by both of us, and once she made a preliminary inspection of the yard and house, it was as if she had been born here. And she also began to notice who sprung her, and the warm little bitch (if she'll pardon me) I felt heartsick about earlier reappeared more lovingly than ever. I knew she was the right dog within 30 minutes, as she showed her malicious disdain for a neighborhood cat.

Sunday, March 28, 1999

In the intervening week, Ginger's disdain for a local cat has been revealed as a full-fledged psychosis. She has proven that the expense of the fence was unnecessary; we might as well have just let her out the front door to roam and pillage in the neighborhood. Within minutes of her second day in the yard, she discovered that it took her less than 15 seconds to dig and burrow under the new fence in order to chase a stray. This talent is put to nearly constant use since the next door neighbor has more sentiment than good sense, and puts food on her back porch for all the stray cats hereabouts. Well, 'hereabouts' means next door these days, by which I mean on the opposite side of our house as she is. Rebecca (the neighbor) lives to our south, Rico's abandoned house is next to us to the north, and several generations of feral cats have

taken up residence in his empty garage, breeding and being protected from elements and predators to breed some more. Our yard is the Harbor Freeway between food on one side, and shelter on the other. Chasing and barking at cats can be a full-time occupation to one so inclined, and to call Ginger ‘inclined’ is akin to calling Saddam Hussein ‘apathetic’ to the plight of the Kurds. Like Saddam, Ginger has taken on the role of avenging angel against these clearly inferior and undeserving creatures. I put up some physical barriers at the most likely fence gaps, and that stopped her for a day. Now she just chooses a spot, apparently at random, and digs until she achieves her goal. We finally attached her to the yard chain which screws into the ground, and the 25-pound dog pulled it up and attempted to drag it through the fence. Unsuccessfully. So we attached the chain to a steel post embedded in the ground for decades. That also worked for one day. She then found a way to detach her collar from the chain’s clasp. Luckily, the result is always the same; she heads to the neighbor’s back porch where the cats are dining and sneering at her. Once inside that yard, her admirable rational abilities leave her and she seems incapable of finding her way back. She also seems to have a respiratory problem. Aside from these things, she’s truly adorable and a great addition to the family. At least from my point of view. I think Mata has yet to forgive me for letting Sagi out to his death in January, as I have yet to forgive myself. She now feels Ginger is not an adequate replacement, and wants an additional dog of **her** choosing. She, however, is unwilling to fork over thirty Big Ones (in our current condition, thirty pennies could qualify for that title) for an unknown quantity. She’s got me looking in the classifieds for “free to a good home” ads. We actually went to a family with a chocolate lab one year old. She was to make the decision, but my presence was crucial for two reasons. First, the racism of some people is likely to extend to how they treat their pets. A black woman might

appear to be less worthy than a white person, in some eyes. And second, she is exceptionally restrained around dogs, treating them the way Netanyahu treated Arafat at the 1998 peace accord in Washington: even the slightest physical proximity is distasteful. On the other hand, I just get down on my hands and knees and frolic with whatever dog comes my way, talking to it and touching it in as many ways as it will let me. I'm the P.R. flack, she's the negotiator.

The chocolate lab we saw was a great hound, bounding and jumping like a gazelle, and I fell for him instantly. We had brought Ginger on her leash, and the two did really well together. Mata felt the lab was too big, and she was right. But I would have thrown something out -- like all her Primerica files, literature, and references -- to make room for him. We drove back with only Ginger in the back seat.

This week the *Star* also informed me that they were publishing another of my columns, again one taken from these pages. It appeared today in the Careers Section, apparently in virtue of the fact that I have no career.

And the NCS project began this week. It's much the same as last year, and most of the returning veterans are older workers, as expected. One addition to the paperwork we were required to sign upon being accepted for employment was some sort of secrecy or confidentiality pledge. While I will adhere to it on these pages, there is nothing in my previous reports of the North Carolina projects that I would change as a result of what is happening this year.

Saturday, April 3, 1999

One of the first things I did on the first day of work was check on the vacancies across country with NCS. One such opening was for three (count 'em!) Associate Scoring Directors, headquartered in Iowa City. That is the job that Linda has, and it's one I'm interested in

pursuing. Since it was only on a list, with no qualifications shown, and the listing said that one should check with Human Resources to obtain more information, I decided to ask the HR people, Becky and Peggy, to provide me with a position description. After a couple of days of no response, I asked Linda whether she could call Iowa City, have them fax her a position description. I also asked her to inform them that I intended to apply for one of the vacancies, in case they were tempted to close the competition prematurely.

She never got back to me and HR remained mute, and so I went in to see Becky on break and ask her what luck she was having. It turns out she didn't actually have a copy of the position in her files, and just let me slip through the cracks. Linda claims to have mentioned me in one of her calls to her supervisor in Iowa City, but I got no feedback from her until a few days later. The job listings change every Friday, and by the next Friday the openings for that job had been reduced to one. My concern heightened, I went to see Becky again. She had my original Post-It note with the request on it stuck to her desk top next to a computer keyboard, but I was no closer to knowing what I needed to do to apply, and to whom I should send my application, than I was a week before when I first saw the opening. She promised to get back to me later that afternoon, though she sent one of her underlings, presumably because bad news was being conveyed. Iowa City had faxed them a position description, though it's not clear on what day it actually arrived in the Lawrence office. Today's call, however, revealed that all openings had been filled. As a result, another opportunity to compete for a job I'm qualified to perform has disintegrated through the ineptitude and neglect of yet another human resources department.

Mata has succeeded where I have failed, which is certainly not the first time. She's been accepted into a clinical drug trial for her high blood pressure. She's paid \$50 for each weekly

physical checkup. This Tuesday, however, she begins an eight day stay at their residential facility which includes overnights. I'm unclear on the possibility of conjugal visits, but it does appear that Ginger will be able to abandon the rug by the bed for a week.

Tuesday, April 6, 1999

In Sunday's want ads was one for a sports photographer. It didn't seem to require an extensive background nor was a portfolio requested. I called the number, left a message, and got a reply a few hours later. Apparently, some guy has a small business shooting high school track meets and selling the pictures to schools and parents. He's looking to add 2-4 photographers to his staff on a strictly part-time basis to travel to meets and tournaments around the Midwest. The job interview is going to be unique. He'll meet all interested candidates at a track meet today at Oak Park High School, give us some film, and make his decision based on the results. It sounded like a refreshingly direct and relevant way to make a hiring decision, and I took time off from work to be there at the appointed hour, 3:30.

Well, he may have appointed it, but he didn't seem to feel as if he had to actually meet it. I was on time, as were a couple other photographers, but he didn't show up until 4:00 o'clock. And when he finally graced us with his presence, that seemed to be his attitude; we should be grateful that he deigned to walk among us at all. His main task seemed to be to talk to us incessantly, repeating himself with maddening frequency, while we stood around in mock awe. It finally occurred to me that he really wanted acolytes, not employees or colleagues. Eventually, I tired of it and made a circuit of the various events, setting up shots and gradually taking the pictures I felt might work. Meanwhile, the rest of the candidates remained clustered around Mike, hanging on to his every redundancy. By the time I had shot up my 36, some people hadn't

removed their lens caps. I handed him the roll and walked off, not expecting to get the call, no matter the quality of my work.

I suppose again I let my minuscule capacity for the humbug of others eliminate me from a potential job, albeit a marginal one.

Monday, April 19, 1999

By the end of last week I hadn't received any money for my two Kansas City *Star* guest columns, so I dropped the Business Editor, Chris Lester, an e-mail inquiring about it. His response was swift and apparently incredulous. What gave me the idea I'd be compensated for those columns? The space the *Star* devotes to them he described as some sort of civic duty they were proud to offer malcontents like me. Of course, I got the idea from Diane Stafford, a *Star* columnist and staffer herself, in a January e-mail in response to my initial assortment of prospective columns. I sent Chris off a copy of her e-mail, and boldly suggested that it was reasonable for me to consider her information both authoritative and official, since she sent it from the *Star*, using their e-mail system, and as a part of her duties as a correspondent. He is apparently choosing the route of silence and neglect in response, so I'll zap the Publisher with a slightly more vociferous e-mail. It will be more vociferous because it will be composed and sent around 5:30 A.M., which is the only time I can get my NetZero Internet server to be operational. At that hour, however, my social graces are not.

Wednesday, April 28, 1999

The *Star's* publisher, Art Brisbane, cannily keeps his e-mail address out of the reach of the *hoi polloi*, and I had to settle for Mark Zieman, Vice-president of something or another, and the highest ranking officer listed at the web site. He responded saying he'd look into it, and a

couple of days later agreed that I had a case. Though it was contrary to policy, a policy unknown to Diane, the *Star* would pony up a C-note at some unspecified future time. Small victories are considerably better than small defeats.

The Sunday ads of the 18th showed that Charter Schools of Kansas City were holding a job fair for teachers the following Saturday. In the ad it was mentioned that uncertified teachers could be allowed to fill as many as 20% of the openings, so I decided to take my uncertified self down to Linwood Boulevard at the specified time. NCS had us scheduled for five hours of overtime from 8-1 that day, but it still left me enough time to change and motor downtown.

It was hard to know what I'd try to entice them with. Philosophy was all I had, but did anyone want to have philosophy taught to students prior to college years? When I arrived, I saw about seven schools represented, and it looked pretty bleak. Many were elementary schools for whom philosophy was inconceivable; others were inner city institutions emphasizing some concept of "the basics" and discipline. One was a technology center. My suit appeared to have been sullied in vain. However, one high school being founded was planned to be on the site of the former Southwest High School, and the woman representing it was incredibly enthusiastic when she heard about my background, especially philosophy, of all things, and what I wanted to bring to a secondary school environment. We talked for quite a while, and I began to think that she was a pathologically enthusiastic person, prone to gales of optimism when confronted by such events as a malignant biopsy or the sound of incoming mortar rounds. I'll probably get a reading after I fax her my dossier.

On Saturday, the mail was late, and both Mata and I were home when it came. She retrieved it, and brought one piece of it into the kitchen with a nearly ashen expression on her

typically mocha face. It was a letter addressed to me, and she wanted to know what I thought it could be. I looked at the return address, and it was from the city's office of Communicable Disease Prevention, and Mata seemed to imply that she was due an explanation. Well, if a marriage isn't built on trust, what is it? Subterfuge has always been a close second as far as I could see, but this time I was as puzzled as she. No hooker caught in a desultory dragnet would be able to cough up my name as a John, and not because I always gave an alias, either. I had no idea what the letter could contain, but it was clear that Mata was unlikely to allow me to open it in privacy and then have enough time to cobble up a fiction to explain away the evidence of my myriad depravities. With a show of confidence just slightly greater than warranted, I tore open the envelope. Inside was a brief, two-paragraph letter stating that their office had a vacancy for an administrative officer, and wanted to know whether I'd like to interview for it. Amazing. When I received a rejection letter for the golf course administrator, the HR person signing it said that my name would be kept active for similar positions for something like 90 days. Those days have passed, but that is the only possible link I can come up with to explain their interest in me. Of course, I have no background to qualify me for the position, but I doubt the city people responsible for filling the position are aware of that. It may be a brief interview.

Tuesday, May 4, 1999

This weekend I continued to think of reasons why the city would want to interview me for that position. One plausible scenario is that someone else from inside the bureaucracy has been pre-selected for the job, but in order for that person to be awarded it the necessary machinery must crank the specified number of times. Someone in H.R. must have uttered those words of Claude Rains in *Casablanca*: "Round up the usual suspects." Thus a panel of seven derelicts like

myself was dredged up from the computer listing of failed candidates for other jobs -- itself a ringing endorsement -- and interview letters were sent out. The job wasn't advertised, lest someone more qualified than the anointed one embarrass the proceedings by asking to be considered. It's not an off-the-wall possibility.

My appearance at the interview was more than unnecessarily early this time -- 40 minutes ahead of 8:30 A.M., but I had received a follow-up message requesting my presence 20 minutes early for paperwork and a breathalyser, so I doubled it, knowing how easily my mind is numbed by the demands of governmental redundancy. The interview had a couple of surprises to it, but one of them was not an on-the-spot offer of the position. The interviewer was a gray-haired white male Ph.D. in epidemiology, rather than the twenty-something Ally McBeal wannabee I usually encounter. The job is to administer a part of the AIDS prevention program the city has established using grant money from various sources. The various aspects of the position description are ones I whiff on completely. No experience in grants, either writing or disbursing; no experience in contract supervision; no background in public health; and, since most of the new cases of the disease are black gay males, no darkened skin or flaccid wrist to qualify me there. So why was I here? I more or less asked the man how I had been dragooned into giving up nearly \$40 in pay that morning in order to participate in the exercise, and he didn't add anything new to my understanding. My name and resume had been plucked from the H.R. list of the damned and out of 85 eligibles there, I had been chosen. Nothing he said disqualified my earlier explanation, which doesn't validate it either. He'll call in a couple of weeks he says.

Thursday, May 6, 1999

The NCS job ended on Tuesday, though another one will get underway around June 1st.

In between, I need to accomplish something other than checking [www.sumoweb.com](http://www.sumoweb.com) daily for the latest tournament results from Japan. Everything is stagnant in my life. Mata's business prospects are no better than they ever were, and she confirmed that our combined income last year was less than the amount we withdrew from our IRAs to stay afloat. And in spite of only being employed about 8 months of a year, at nothing more than \$11.50 an hour, my total income for the year whipped hers, and I only brought in a figure **less than** \$15,000. She seems to keep repeating the old mistakes she has always made, and I'm getting older with each passing rejection letter. If there's some reason for hope in this picture, it eludes me completely. I had hoped the addition of Ginger would change a little of that, but it hasn't worked as well as I thought. She's sweet and affectionate, but so maniacally cat-averse that she can't be allowed out in the yard untethered. And even tied up securely, when she gets to the fence, she'll dig furiously in a futile attempt to escape and dismember whatever cat seems to have caught her attention. As a result, the crater-pocked perimeter of the yard looks as if several of the NATO bombers headed for Kosovo were misdirected and scored hits on our property instead. Ginger has turned out to be much higher-maintenance than first suspected.

Monday, May 10, 1999

I have long since given up on job fairs and other similar gatherings as a likely source of either a job itself or leads on other opportunities. None the less, I selectively attend them when the subject matter seems encouraging. That was the case with the Charter Schools get-together last month, and when a particular set of Charter Schools located in the Westport section of Kansas City advertised an employment-centered open house today, I decided to brush off my tasseled loafers and give it a try. To my amazement, it proved to be the most rewarding job fair I

have ever attended.

The enthusiastic reaction of the Southwest High Charter School to my suggestion that philosophy might be a worthwhile addition to a high school curriculum led me to take a chance on a similar one from Westport. The only way this works, however, is if I can have a one-on-one, face-to-face, mano-a-mano, tete-a-tete, blow-by-blow with an administrator as fond of hackneyed redundancy as I am. I can very forceful about the subject of pre-college philosophy, but it doesn't have the same impact on paper as it might were I to direct my sporadically foul breath and foul words on the topic toward a live person.

Alas, the Westport open house was rigidly structured to consist almost entirely of group events and no personal ones. We all met in the school auditorium to watch a puff piece of a video on the parent company, Edison. Its CEO is Benno Schmidt, a man I have admired since his days as a Columbia University Law Professor. That gives them a few points with me but, like all gratuities, they can disappear from the table quickly. Also offered today were a mass Q & A and a walk-about to tour the facilities. About 75 other teachers attended, and more kept coming through the turnstiles all the time. While I dropped off a resume and signed an attendance list, it was clear that there would be no opportunity for me to make my case personally to anyone. I regretfully walked out during the tedious question session.

So why do I call it the most rewarding job fair I have ever attended? Out in the parking lot on the way to my car, I spotted a \$10 bill floating on a puddle left over from the recent rain. Looking all around and finding no one within sight, I quickly pocketed it and drove home.

Wednesday, May 12, 1999

About a year ago, I submitted the first act of a full-length play to Frank Higgins for

evaluation. His reaction in a couple of phone conversations was so unremittingly negative that I couldn't write another line of dialogue under any pretense. When he returned the script with his comments last June, I put it away in a box and never looked at it. I had his verdict; I didn't need to read the entire brief detailing my obvious guilt. For some reason, I found that envelope and opened it today. It wasn't an accident; I looked for it, finding a lot of other misplaced detritus in the process. Somehow, I felt it was time to confront what was there and move on, if that was possible.

Rather than just read Higgins's comments, I decided to read the entire play as well as the criticisms when and where they were inserted. Of course, I could be counted on to love the sight and sound of my own words -- which of us does not? So I began, and by the fifth of the 30+ pages, I had the disheartening feeling that Higgins was entirely right. Everyone in it was a windbag, not unlike their creator. Too many long speeches, not enough plot advancement, and everyone disagreeing but no one interrupting. A certain amount of it Higgins doesn't get. My angular sense of humor often blind-sides the reader and he is a little too dense to be anything but perpetually blind-sided. But nearly every element of his critique seems well-placed. I'm almost embarrassed to have sent it to him. Now I'm stuck. What do I do with it? It needs a lot of revision, and I'm not sure the story, as such, is worth the effort. Actually, if it's going to go anywhere, it **needs** a story, which means it may need other characters. Of course, that seems to point to another play. It's been a disheartening day.

Sunday, May 16, 1999

My hypothesis of a couple of weeks ago concerning the Health Department job for which I was invited to interview, i.e., that someone else already has the fast track inside and the other

interviewees are mere token stand-ins while the department goes through the formalities, seems a lot more plausible today after two causally connected phenomena. First of all, I received a letter on Saturday announcing with regret that someone else had been awarded the position. No surprise there. One day later, however, the Health Department has an ad in the Sunday Careers Section of the K.C. *Star* soliciting applications for someone in public health at a slightly lower pay grade than the administrator position I was being ‘considered’ for. When one accounts for the paucity of health department openings advertised at any level, these two events could hardly be called coincidental.

Last week’s flyer from Big Lots advertised a starter set of junior golf clubs and bag for \$39.99. From its near absence from these pages, it would be hard to imagine how much I love golf. I merely hate the pathetic shape my game is in. But my grandson Mikey likes every sport known the humans, and I am betting he’d like to learn how to play if given the opportunity. In addition, Mata and I have ignored him ever since returning from Japan and having the delightful Madisen to shower with our affection. Mikey seems to have slipped through the cracks with us, and I want to rectify that. He’s really a nice kid, though Melanie seems to treat him as her own personal burden from the Almighty for her lascivious teenage life, a *bete noir* in every sense of the phrase.

So I took my last paycheck from NCS for a month, bought a set of clubs, and took them clubs to him after school on Friday. Yesterday, a day later, we went out for our first lesson. I had some luck many years ago teaching a teenage girl in Oklahoma the rudiments of the swing. We even went to the 1965 LPGA Muskogee Open to watch the struggling tour look for a rising star upon which to hitch its fortunes. This time I had a camcorder to help with the lesson and it

turned out to be a nice first session. He's no natural, at least at this point in the proceedings, but the most encouraging element I took from the day's videotape was how good my swing still looks. Actually, I hit the ball consistently well all day, though I only brought the very forgiving 7-iron. None the less, I hope Mikey can keep from becoming discouraged when he isn't Tiger Woods in two weeks.

Friday, May 21, 1999

Yesterday morning I had an interview concerning being a photographer in Germany this autumn. The ad appeared a couple of weeks ago and I replied, uncertain that I could convince anyone that they should trust their Hasselblad in my hands for 2 ½ months in a foreign country. The gig is supposed to be limited to standard school portraits as well as the occasional family gathering. It seemed astounding that the homeland of the Leica needed some broken-down, underpaid snapshooters to take official portraits of its young. A follow-up phone call from the woman running the show stateside informed me that the subjects would all be Americans from the schools on various military bases there as well as in Belgium, Holland, and Italy. That made a little more sense, but the pay did not: \$60 a day. That's less than \$8.00 an hour for an eight-hour day, plus the privations of being away from home and family; or perhaps that's meant as an inducement. However, most expenses, such as a room in a grubby *pension* and whatever food the proprietors could force us to eat, would be borne by the company, and a rental car would be available for our personal use on the weekends. All weekend meals and daily lunches would be our responsibility. It was hard to see what I could send back to Mata other than my occasional best wishes. However, I agreed to an interview, mainly on the force of my past performances in interviews.

Brenda, the woman on the phone, conducted it from the basement of a house in Raytown, which is apparently where the processing and printing is done. While it looked clean, it also had a penny-ante feel to it, which is certainly consistent with the pay being offered. Brenda asked me about my experience with automated studio cameras and lighting packs, and I whiffed all around. I did have some background in non-automated cameras and darkrooms gear, but I have no idea whether that scored any points in the interview or not. Apparently, the only thing I had that they required was a valid passport. I did bring a portfolio and list of references, and Brenda feigned enthusiasm over my enlargement of Inga and her kids. I also brought the only grouping of shots I had kept together -- the portfolio I submitted for admission to the Art Center School in Los Angeles 30 years ago. Unfortunately, all the good stuff from Wake Island, K.C. Jazz performers, and Chiefs games are in a missing album I haven't seen since we went to Japan and left my larcenous crack-head brother-in-law, Russell living here. Brenda didn't know exactly how many vacancies there would be since she had no final head count on the remaining photographers returning from previous years to stash the extra thousands away in the Swiss bank accounts they had opened last year.

Every part of my life has become an exercise in greater futility. This journal attempts to detail the occupational futility I am experiencing, but that's neither the beginning of it, nor the end. I mentioned my golf swing, always a thing of aesthetic pleasure. However, its practical effectiveness at hitting a ball well is limited to the short irons. For a putting stroke I would be better off using my bare feet, and my woods set off a slice of such parabolic magnificence that new geometries are being invented merely to describe it. Mata and I had another shouting argument tonight, and each new one, I have noticed, is accompanied by less verbal restraint on

the part of each of us than the previous. Tonight's was set off by me, though Mata rose to the occasion and surely had the last angry word. My feeling of marginalization in the marriage had another innocuous chapter today, and I overreacted to it. Then Mata overreacted to me. She did go so far as pack a bag this time, which is another kind of escalation. In an act of comic frustration and insanity I let the dog off her chain to run free in the neighborhood as a gesture of some sort, but what? Sheer madness, and not necessarily the anger sort. Of course, rather than talk with me about the fundamental issues in our marriage, the ones to be addressed after the vitriol is expended, Mata called Melanie. So the two of them went off for an hour to talk, under the pretext of a car exchange, and I sat on the glider sipping Tropicana Twister. More futility.

What are old people supposed to be good for? I feel I possess an off-center but still useful brand of wisdom and critical insight, but nobody is buying. I'm not only commenting on the job market; the kind of intellectual acumen I've ended up with is shunned by all my family members, near and far. Sometimes it is a form of religious feel-goodism which rejects it, sometimes it's a desire for nothing but cheerleading and positive words, and sometimes it's just a fervent desire to remain ignorant. In some people it appears to be all three. We live in a fundamentally uncritical age, and I feel it's a source of some of our worst traits. And maybe my critical nature is the source of my worst, as well.

Here's what tonight's result will be: nothing. We will find a way to regain peace and calm and say those words which temporarily smooth the stormy surface. But nothing substantive will have been dealt with, which means the ground will remain fertile for the next harvest of anger, a metaphor much in need of replacing. And since each new outbreak seems to raise the ante, who knows whether the next one will send one or both of us over the line to the territory of

the unforgivable. While I've never struck Mata, or even done anything physical to her in the heat of anger, she has told me that physical violence against her person is her point of no return. Hit her and I might as well kill her. Well, I have never come close to either, but I have no sense of what **she** could do to me which would close the curtain and bring up the house lights. Do I need that line she dare not cross? Perhaps without it, I am forced to accept each escalation as the new norm, rather than measure it against a known and accepted measure of civility. It's terrible to discover, after years of teaching ethics, that I actually have no personal standards for measuring the behavior of others against me. And what is worse, it seems to imply that I have none for measuring my actions against others. That should be one standard, not two. I apparently have zero.

Monday, May 24, 1999

If it's Monday, it must be time to recount the myriad job opportunities screaming out my name in yesterday's *Star*. They not only screamed out my name, they followed it with the sentence, "And you won't even get an interview, you pathetic loser!" Well, they were wrong for once. One job described itself as a golf tech rep. Is that Newspeak for a caddie? None the less, my fax kept MCI happy this morning, and after I returned from other duties, I saw a message on my answering machine. The call was long distance, but my money needs were extremely local, and I plunked down the quarters and made the connection.

The letter I had sent was heavily shaded with wise-ass, which seemed befitting such a frivolous-sounding job. It seemed to have amused the young woman on the other line and we had a very encouraging conversation. It seems as if the MacGregor Corporation is bringing out a new line of golf clubs and they want a couple of reps to introduce them at local golf courses,

provide the appropriate line of bull shit, and try to encourage the hackers to trade in their Pings and titanium-shafted Big, Medium, and Small Berthas for this divot in the sand (traps) of time. Unfortunately, a *gratis* set of these new wonders is not included in the gig, but you can be sure I asked. It almost sounded like my hiring was a done deal, but I know not to add it to my resume just yet. The good thing about it is that I could probably wedge (sand or pitching) this into my NCS schedule, since they only want us out there on the links for weekends. At \$100 per day for only about 4 hours worked each, it sounds great. Unfortunately, it only lasts about a month. I might try to make a deal to get paid, in part, with a set of clubs. I can hear an unequivocal veto from Mata over that, even though she's currently in Wichita Falls, Texas. The south winds are particularly strong.

Monday, May 31, 1999

It's Memorial Day, and you can tell who the poor folks in this neighborhood are: we're the ones still around and not at the lake, or visiting some relatives in plusher surroundings. That seems to include nearly everyone in sight. A clear key to one's financial and social class is where one is found on long weekends and the holidays observed by everyone else. The poor stay home and try to make the best of it, lighting their 99 cent bags of Best Choice charcoal briquets over which will sear cuts of meat fed to the dogs of Leawood. Everyone else has options they exercise. Stephanie and Ruth across the street seem to have found a way to escape for a couple of hours, but they're back just in time for 3:00 O'clock's prime time heat. And Sean, two doors down, is absent, though her family seems to be around. I drove out to deliver some videos we rented and then strolled around Big Lots for about \$4.00 in time and goods. I was hoping that a long absence from the 'hood might lead neighbors to think we were on the Chris-Craft

Commander, trolling for Sea-Doos on Lake of the Ozarks.

As much as I believe race is the greatest divider in these nominally United States, economic class is beginning to overtake it. I'd like to think it has come about because of a lessening of racial tensions, but they are as obvious and intense as ever. On a day like today, no black person in this neighborhood would think that I am likely to be able to vacation in luxury simply because I am white. The material circumstances of my life are not fundamentally controlled by my race, but by a goulash of conditions like my age, education, and market perceptions of what I have to offer. In those elements, I am little different from my neighbors, and we are neighbors because of that. None of them may have an M.A., but few of them, if they had the opportunity, would have been stupid enough to have pursued one in philosophy. There are several older people around here, and most of them seem to sit on the front porch, too. Except for the accident of skin color, we are all alike over here. Sure, I won't deny being white can probably grant me transient benefits of little value. I might be able to get a slightly better table and service at an upscale restaurant, if I could afford to eat there. I'd likely have better luck hailing a cab in midtown, if I could afford their preposterous rates, and a rental agent would give me a leg up in the waiting list for a townhouse in Shawnee, but the monthly rent would be double my mortgage payment in this near-tenement. These boons are meaningless to me. The point where racism comes in is that their **absence** is far from meaningless. While I might find the ability to attract a cab insignificant, someone who wants one and is denied it because of race would correctly find that very significant. But I live in a neighborhood of bus riders, not taxi customers, and we all live here primarily not because of what color we are but because of our economic condition. At a low enough rung on the fiscal ladder, race matters little. But if the

Publisher's Clearing House people showed up on Ruth's lawn, she'd board up the place and move to whatever 'burb would have her and her green. And there are enough that would take her to show that some forms of racism can be made to yield to economic conditions. But at that point, racism would become a prominent impediment to Ruth's life. Why? Because she'd be in a position to exercise the newly-won freedoms that came with sudden wealth, but would be stymied by her skin. The new car she could suddenly afford to buy would cost her more than it would Bubba from Branson, since it would be an assumption of the salesperson that a person of her color would be a less sophisticated bargainer than a white person, and she would be gouged accordingly.

Thursday, June 3, 1999

Today was the first day of training for the troops of the new project. This time we're doing duty for the state of Washington, and first up is 10th grade writing. Other new wrinkles include new project directors. Gone is Linda, and I miss her well-oiled machine already. This summer's drawers of the short straw in Iowa City are named Nina (pointedly pronounced '9-uh') and Chad. At first glance, Nina resembles Susan Sarandon gone **badly** downhill, but there is an endearing directness about her Alpha Dog (or Alpha Bitch, to be more precise) attitude, and she does a first-rate job in training. She has also gone a long way toward winning us all over through her abbreviated work days (we were out the door by 2:00 this afternoon, though unlikely to be paid for those missing minutes). Unfortunately, she has little interest in the details of a project, like making sure everyone has a time sheet (and consequently, a paycheck), and neither she nor Chad seems especially interested in bonding with the Scoring Supervisors. When she introduced us (belatedly) at the morning shape-up in front of the 125+ scorers, she couldn't be bothered to

remember one of our damned names. That would have been a nice touch, but probably out of character with what might turn out to be a rather self-absorbed woman.

As good as Nina is at training, Chad is terrible. He's quite young, perhaps not yet 30, and couldn't get excited about a surprise midnight visit to his motel room by Yasmeen Bleeth.

Although Brad Pitt might be more to his liking. No matter to me; I'm sure **I'm** not. He trains in a monotone that sounds like that bored voice William Hurt often affects. With Chad, it's not an affectation, it's the most animated he becomes. As a result, his drone is causing eyelids to droop over the entire county. Linda let the Scoring Supervisors read some of the training papers out loud during these sessions, and it was a deft stroke on her part. Not only does a ham like me have an opportunity to break loose for a minute or two, it also subtly reinforces an element of our roles as sub-authorities to her. It's a nice touch, and I appreciated it. Nina had us do only one thing today: pass out packets of training papers, which reinforces the message about us **she** wants known by the scorers: we are her lackeys. I like and respect forceful, authoritative women. At NCS, Linda and Barbara quickly come to mind. But Nina seems on a transparent power trip. In the wrong hands, power and authority can be made to bear little or no logical connection to each other, and this seems to be a case of that. She has power, and wields it. I wonder if she'll ever have any authority over us to match the power.

Friday, June 4, 1999

The excitement continued today with little change in anything. Most of the training is now complete, and Monday afternoon we'll start scoring. While I believe my observation of Nina was accurate on Thursday's entry, I may have added a hasty judgment or two. She is definitely not a detail person. An HR assistant was there and had to be pressed into service to

give an impromptu indoctrination on the unnecessarily cumbersome time sheet. Nina either had no clue or couldn't be bothered. Of course, she's salaried. One of the Scoring Supervisors, Matt, tried to help explain an interpretation of one of the practice essays, and she addressed him as "Mitch." But that may be cured by time, and in other ways, it seems as if she'll let us take care of the details she isn't interested in. That suits me, though a couple of the Scoring Supervisors are as detail-averse as she is. Unfortunately, a couple are equally prone to become detail-fixated, and the amount she'll leave to them will inundate them fatally.

Chad's drone continued during today's training to such an extent that it has become the proverbial zit at the end of a person's nose. Once you notice it, you don't notice anything else about him. Unfortunately, it may prevent me from ever attending another William Hurt movie.

Monday, June 7, 1999

If this journal were to be named after a logical fallacy, which one would it be? This is a favorite party game of philosophers; if your \_\_\_\_\_ (fill in the blank: spouse, career, upbringing, etc.) were a logical fallacy (or philosophical theory, figure from philosophy's past, etc.), which one would it be. Now, aren't you relieved that you were never invited to a philosophers's party? Of course, this is all a fabrication. Philosophers at a party behave just like anyone one else; they grab ass, drink too much, and sound pompous. They especially sound pompous. Or should I say 'we'?

Having just taught a course with logical fallacies as a major part, I can answer the first question with certainty. This journal could be accurately renamed "Hasty Generalization." That realization came to me at work today as we divvied up the scorers into teams and began work. Nina remained in character by controlling every aspect of the assignment of scorers. Thus,

people with whom I have already established a relationship -- like Ivy -- and who are also prone to certain kinds of occasional anomalies -- with Ivy, it's boredom, which results in her giving lower and more punitive scores -- go somewhere else and another supervisor has to reinvent the wheel with them. But control is more important than effective scoring.

But at least Nina is a great trainer, right? That was my hasty generalization of last week. How did I arrive at that conclusion? She sounded good and easy-to-understand, and very self-assured about her opinions. Nothing wrong with that, but activities like training are falsely judged if they are judged only by the trainer's performance. The most genuine gauge is not the trainer's performance, but those of the trainees. And as the first packets began to get turned in, the results were ghastly. No clear trends were in evidence; some people scored high, others low. It's almost as if the training had no effect whatsoever on scorer performance. They brought their own proclivities in the door, were not effectively disabused of them, and now employ them to the detriment of Washington's 10th graders.

With teams of 8-10, we scoring supervisors need to read every essay scored by our team members. That means for every packet of essays we finally review, 8-10 will have replaced it on the desk. Multiply that by an eight-hour day, and each scoring supervisor has a pile which would put the Tower of Pisa to shame. Nina sent the scorers home at 2:00 today, and told them to return tomorrow at noon. Her putative reason was a lack of packets to score, though she may have been influenced by the alarming growth of backreading (as the reviewing is called) each of us has to accomplish. Keeping this kind of slacker schedule, we're due to finish by Labor Day.

Last night I got a call from Gary, the MacGregor district rep overseeing the Missouri/Kansas territory. No one had ever given me a yea or nay concerning the demo gig I had

applied for. Apparently, somebody with Golf Digest Marketing was supposed to handle that, and I had already made the cut. It begins this coming weekend, though I get an orientation session on Thursday after work. Today I got a informational packet and contract in the mail, so I guess it's for real.

And Doug Frost got back to me yesterday, too. Last month, Mata told me that we needed about \$1500 to keep from going **several** months behind with a couple of crucial creditors. It sounded like time to go to the IRAs one more time, but I knew I probably had another few cases of decent stuff in my cellar that could fetch a few thou. The problem was that most of them were dessert wines from the year 1988. It's Mikey's birth year, and I was saving the bottles for some time in the very distant future (perhaps 2018) when both he and the wine would be mature enough to do each other justice. Now they're going to make some money for Doug on the online auction block, and I'll barely break even. But Citibank and the mortgage company will be temporarily mollified. It breaks my heart, in a strange but sad way.

So what was the problem with Nina's training? Since her performance was excellent, there must have been other factors. The training sessions were not as long as they could have been, but I've already mentioned that. Perhaps extending them might have been worthwhile, but there weren't enough materials to spend very much time at it.

Friday, June 11, 1999

And speaking of not enough materials, the project has literally shut down due to a lack of materials to score. While the skills of the workers are slowly being honed, thus increasing their reliability, NCS has proven incapable of shipping us a sufficient quantity of essays to keep everyone employed for one entire eight-hour day. It is a truly scandalous situation, due primarily

(it would seem) to not enough employees in the Iowa City distribution center and other company priorities higher than some pipsqueak scoring project. Both of those conditions are the result of upper management decisions or policies, which means that no one who is ultimately responsible for the debacle will pay a significant career price. You can be certain that if it had been some poor night supervisor in a warehouse, or a dispatcher misrouting some trucks to Tucumcari, his job would be advertised on the morrow. When the same glitch is the result of a conscious, or clueless, policy by a vice-president, no one's bonus or key to the executive wet bar will have to be relinquished thereby. There's a cruel and ironic inverse relationship here which appears to be true of most large organizations. The lower a person is on the corporate pole, the less likely a large glitch in a given operation is the result of an order or action they initiated. The problem is that the lower a person is on that pole, the more exposed he or she is, so that the blame for a serious fuck-up by a higher-up stands a great chance of being deflected down to an exposed supervisor. The irony is that the less the chance that your misstep caused the foul up, the greater the likelihood you'll be blamed for it.

We worked ourselves out of work on Wednesday, and all the scorers had Thursday off without pay. By late morning today, it was clear that we would run out of work by early afternoon, and continual phone calls to Iowa City revealed that materials were not going to arrive for quite a while. As a result, not only was everyone out of the building before 3:00, we have Monday and Tuesday off without pay. I would guess that I'm not the only one going to chat with the Full Employment Council on Monday. The whole project has been very disheartening for the scorers. They desperately need work or they wouldn't have volunteered. They were assured, once they qualified, that they would have 3-4 weeks of steady employment and a predictable

paycheck. There seems to have been a steady, if not precipitous decrease in everyone's motivation this afternoon, and there are legitimate fears that some people will bail out if they can find something more reliable. It's ironic that HR fears always seem to focus on whether they can round up reliable scorers, or at least some with vital signs. The problem with this project is that the scorers have discovered that the company is not a reliable source of employment and are likely to look elsewhere. I know I will.

Another pair of ironies emerged this week. Linda, the much-respected director of several previous projects e-mailed me saying that NCS was looking for additional scoring directors to hire, since they were expanding to a new permanent site in Tucson. That initially sounded great, and not only because Inga lives in the same Area Code. This journal has documented my abortive attempts in the past year to be evaluated for that position. After this project's pathetic support by the company, I'm reevaluating my desires. I'm also reevaluating my opinion of Nina.

Her initial aloofness might have been a need to keep some distance until she could figure out exactly what kind of bozo scoring supervisors she was stuck with. And part of it may have been the same thing with me. As bozos go, she's beginning to wear pretty well with me. While she's retained her admirable directness and no-nonsense demeanor, she also seems to trust us a little more not to fuck things up so hopelessly that Jean Reno (of "The Professional") will have to be summoned to wipe us all out and let her begin again with fresh troops. She still needs to be the One Voice of Authority for the scorers, and that often is a problem. When she decides to make announcements and read essays to help "calibrate" the scorers, her own puny voice doesn't project much past her nose, and unamplified, one strains to catch the odd word. But she will not relinquish that vestige of power to another voice, no matter how much more effective it might be.

So, as a project director, she's far, **far** from the worst I've experienced (Wendi is still there as a standard for all time in that category), but she's not the best. Barbara alone inhabits that Pantheon of perfection, with Linda waiting in the ante-room. If nothing else, Nina is handling this problem beyond her control with outward grace and empathy for the scorers. Since she is powerless to change things, you can't ask for a better response.

Irony #2 concerns my golf tech rep gig for MacGregor. I had my first face-to-face meeting with Gary (the regional sales wonk) last night, and one of the first things he had to get off his chest was that the company had drastically cut their marketing budget and my initial quota of 12-15 days @ \$100 was down to 4. Hardly worth pulling on my golf glove for that. However, my four will be at fairly hot-shot country clubs, so I'll stay on board just to chip to their greens. And if this NCS project ever gets any paperwork in, I'll be available for several weekends of overtime I hadn't anticipated. All in all, another week of modest disappointments and no encouragements. In most weeks, that's worth popping the cork on some Champagne.

Wednesday, June 16, 1999

After our two days of enforced idleness, we returned to NCS to more bad news. Well, it wasn't bad to me, but we found out, from a chorus of protests, that half the scorers didn't get paychecks this weekend for their past two weeks of work. These were not the temp agency folks, who apparently were well cared for by their handlers and are paid weekly, but NCS employees who were shafted. First the company can't provide dependable employment, and then it can't be bothered to pay us for the few crumbs it manages to toss us. I say 'us' rather magnanimously, since I was a part of the half who were paid as scheduled. Nina found it convenient to remain in Iowa City this week, and as a result Chad became the official NCS flak-catcher. As yet another

tribute to the force of gravity, Chad had an underling named Susan nearby, onto whom he deflected most of the angriest questions, proving once again that everything flows downhill. There were few satisfactory answers for anyone, and Chad could not even guarantee a day of work tomorrow. The immediate result of this near-hour of target practice was slow and slovenly scoring all morning. Several scorers didn't even show up today after being given four days off, and it is likely that more will bail out later this week. In addition, the three projects which follow this one are certain to be contaminated by these events. The trust that had been built up by previous projects is quickly evaporating, though a majority of scorers are new. People will likely score with artificial slowness for fear of working themselves out of a job, and based on their past experience, who can blame them?

Saturday, June 19, 1999

Tomorrow is Father's Day, the puny and resentful sibling to its glory-hog sister, Mother's Day. When an informal survey revealed that no one of blood, step, or marriage, had any intention of remembering me on it, I decided to host a cookout in the backyard for all my grandchildren and their thinly tolerant parents. It rained earlier this morning and clouds have provided a thick blanket of humid, stationary air all day. It has stifled everything today, including my enthusiasm for tomorrow's supper for the spawn. I'll cancel it quickly if there's rain, or even a sunrise.

Last weekend was Madisen's 3rd birthday, but most of us were nearly penniless and therefore little ado was demonstrated. But my weekly visits to give Mikey his golf lesson always include a few minutes with her and Malcolm, and her rapid development has been wonderful to behold. It almost seems as if she learns entire new pages of vocabulary each week, and treats me

with an innocent reverence of excitement every time she sees me. While I was waiting to get a haircut on Tuesday, I amused a young girl awaiting her mother's transformation in the chair I would soon occupy. She was a whirlwind of energy, inquisitiveness, and loquacity, all served up without any inhibition whatsoever. I asked her age, and she told me she was four. I asked when her birthday was and found out it was in November, like mine. I could scarcely contain my excitement as well, but not exactly because of her company. Mine came from the anticipation of Madisen at Bailey's (the girl's name) age, and the delightful days of growth and joy leading up to it. And I'd be lucky enough to be a part of it.

Not having any more irons in the fire, I'm giving thought again to offering myself as a philosopher for private consultations. Location is still a problem, though I've begun to think I know a way around it. The client and I could meet in the watering hole of his or her choice, providing it was quiet enough to allow conversation at a normal tone of voice. For teetotalers, a coffeeshop or some such non-alcoholic joint would be fine. Actually, I'd prefer a park bench when the weather was pleasant, or a leisurely stroll around Loose Park. Barkeeps and caffeine pushers might begin to suspect were I to keep regular hours at the same place, but we'd always be paying customers, not just freeloading squatters. It was 17 years ago at about this time that I took the great leap of deciding to launch my wine newsletter, *Hair of the Dog* (back issues still available). It was a financially ill-considered venture, but was also the most exciting year-and-a-half of my life, at least until I went to Japan. While I wasn't devoid of prospects in 1982, my job teaching meteorology for the National Weather Service had settled into a dull routine rather than the intellectually invigorating participation in a "community of scholars" for which I had hoped.

Now I'm stultified by a variety of sources rather than just one, but without the GS-12

safety net which stretched beneath me then, above which I could somersault between trapezes. I also appear to be at the opposite end of a bell curve of my own making. In 1982, I was hungry for greater and deeper philosophical knowledge, having not yet finished a B.A. Now, after ascending the curve in eight years of graduate school, I fear I am on the downhill side. Teaching one night course every two semesters is only sufficient to illuminate my decay. I must find a way to incorporate the methods and texts of philosophy into my daily life or it will eventually escape my grasp and I'll be another ex-something. It will be added to the list which sounds more like an indictment: ex-writer, ex-professor, ex-playwright, ex-weatherman, ex-wine consultant, ex-photographer, ex-husband, ex-golfer, ex-sailor, ex-lover. Currently? Currently sitting in a glider on the front porch, burdened by a laptop which only yields what it is given, wondering.

Monday, June 21, 1999

New week, new hope, same old shit. NCS had an entire weekend to provide us with the materials of employment, but we began running out of work again by 2:30. Since the scoring supervisor next to me, Mac, had arranged to be absent all day, I was able to work an hour and a half overtime cleaning up the backlog on his desk. But I'm to be absent tomorrow, just like the rest of the working stiffs.

The Father's Day cookout pleased no one. I worked my ass off, Jake and his family decided to visit his mother over an hour's drive away (on Father's Day?) And showed up after the picnic table had been cleared off and the food brought inside, and Melanie, *et al.*, didn't like much of what food I prepared. They do not have very adventuresome palates, but seldom has the displeasure at free food been so transparently clear. Of course, that condition is easily cured: no more free food.

Last week, I received a call from one of the pharmaceutical testing firms mentioned earlier, and it appears that my cholesterol count is close enough to critical mass for me to be accepted into one of their trials. First physical and screening is on Wednesday morning, and I get paid \$50 for each brief follow-up visit. In addition, I get my fill of either a tasty placebo or some snake oil remedy dreamed up in a lab by someone who wasn't competent enough in medical school to make it with an HMO. Health care, and the risks thereof, are another element of a person's life which is greatly determined by economic status. Do you think Bill Hickok, who lives in a million dollar house in Mission Hills and has a cholesterol and triglyceride count to put mine to shame, would ever volunteer for such a study? Of course not. He doesn't need an extra \$5000 a week, let alone a mere \$50. Yet I subject my body to a concoction which probably laid waste an entire generation of laboratory rats mainly because I'm poor.

Tuesday, June 22, 1999

My involuntary idleness today has not been reduced to utter immobility. Mata recently made the acquaintance of someone intimately enough to be able to pour out her unhappiness over my employment situation. He or she worked for an organization called The Full Employment Council, though wags might substitute 'Fool' for the second word. Its implied lofty goals notwithstanding, it is a publicly-funded place for people who need work other than day labor to go to hook up with an employer. Employers also keep the place stocked with its latest job vacancies, and the idea seem to be to bring the two together. Mata has mentioned the place often enough for me to get the hint, and she made pointed reference to it last night when I told her that there would be no work today.

It's located at 17th and The Paseo, within walking distance of the rejuvenated 18th and

Vine jazz district, now best known for containing a park where I give Mikey his golf lessons. It looked and sounded fairly chaotic when I arrived a little after 10:00, but someone asked me if I had ever been there before, and the wheels started turning. The paperwork I had to fill out was mercifully brief, and less than two minutes after I turned it in, my name was called, along with three others, and we scuffed our way to an office down the hall.

Never one to avoid doing a head count in the service of this journal, I was the only white client within sight, though several of the job counselors were. I was also the only male whose voice hadn't changed within the past 10 years. Most job seekers were under 30, and several were in their teens. In my group of four who were given an orientation together, there was a teenaged male, a woman in her early 20s, and another woman in her 30s. The two latter had to work all future meetings and classes for FEC around child care issues. Three generations of desperate slackers, since but for the reticence of teenaged girls of the 1950s to drop their drawers for me, I could easily have a grandson the age of the young man in baggy clothes slouching over the back of the turned-around chair next to me.

We were given the option for two levels of service: A and B. The first is a complete intervention into your life, including such necessities as wardrobe advice and alarm clock operation. It involved classes and a major time commitment. Option B sounded like my best choice, though less than I wanted. I would have full run of the room in which they had the job listings, phone bank, and computers. But no advice given, just facilities provided. When I was taken to the room and looked over everything, it contained nothing that I hadn't found at the unemployment office in Independence. I spent about 45 minutes there, found little I could use, and signed myself out.

When I got home, I did call the one number I wrote down from my FEC foray: the one to Project Refocus. It is also publicly funded organization specializing in helping displaced workers develop a new career. When I explained on the phone a little about my situation and where I had spent a part of the morning, the woman I was speaking with asked me whether the Full Employment Council people had told me about their "Over 55" Program. Of course, they had not.

Since this journal celebrates its second birthday on Thursday, I wonder what kind of comment I can make on such a milestone. Astounded and appalled that it has gone on this long, and less certain than ever that a meaningful job is in my future. I seem less suicidal than ever, but then suicide, I believe, requires passion. If passion creates a polarity, there's not an MRI machine developed that could detect any in me.

While it's not exactly an analog of passion, the ubiquitousness of smut on the Internet is a source of amazement for me, but not, alas, a rekindling of passion. A while back I used a search engine to look for sites containing information about my favorite opera singer, Barbara Hendricks. In doing so, I discovered some very helpful places, like pages created by recording companies for whom she has done albums, and also the Barbara Hendricks International Fan Club, located in Germany. But a mere innocent mouse-click on another site suggested by my Barbara Hendricks search would bombard me with all sorts of female body parts examined in microscopic detail, and none of them, I am certain, belonging to my diva of choice. At another one, bodily fluids flew as if in a Quentin Tarantino movie, though not in any shade of red. None of them appeared to land in the proximity of Ms. Hendricks, I am relieved to report.

One site promised to reveal celebrities in the buff, either by design or accident, and I

foolishly ventured further into its pages. It wanted money. For what, I wondered. Pictures already published in various Playboy and Penthouse pages? Apparently, the big commercial attraction of the Internet is re-selling what has already been sold once. My brother Phil does that, nosing about garage sales and flea markets for the odd book or record and then putting them up for auction online. Anybody need a c.1948 copy of *Anna Karenina* in the original Russian? E-mail Phil at Worthless Crap.com (not his real address).

Needless to say, I didn't pay the Celebrity Beaver site a cent, so I'll never know whether a sartorial indiscretion by Ms. Hendricks, permitting a furtive nipple to be exposed and quickly documented by the *paparazzi*, awaited my search.

Saturday, June 26, 1999

Well, the sun shines bright not only on my old Kentucky home, but also on the driving range of the Sedalia, Missouri, Country Club. This was the first really scorching weekend of the year, and I was stuck outside watching hackers try to bend the expensive clubs I brought for their amusement. It really wasn't a bad day, at least until I decided to pick up a club and hit a few. But my job was to let others make fools of themselves rather than setting an unnecessary example myself.

The tent I was supplied only arrived on Thursday, so I had very little time to practice raising and lowering the 64 square foot behemoth. Actually, lowering is a lot easier than raising, thanks to our 24/7 pal, gravity, so I solicited a couple of extra hands for the erection festivities. Unfortunately, none of the young girls at pool side volunteered.

Thursday, July 1, 1999

This book is about to crack the 100,000 word barrier, and I have reason to believe that the

end is in sight. Today I had my interview with Tracye Bruno, who will be the principal of the Southwest Charter School, and my head still swims with possibilities. In an earlier message forwarded by Mata, she said that it was most likely that she would only be able to offer me a part-time position, if any position at all. That was still an interesting possibility from my point of view, since I might be able to fill in a residual income gaps with a class or two at other institutions. And in the interim between that message and today's interview, I received a call from someone at William Jewell College concerning a night course available in Social Ethics. Not a full plate, perhaps, but add something from Maple Woods and I might be able to both keep the wolf away and be engaged in philosophy on a full-time basis.

The interview today changed all that. I had been thinking about teaching philosophy at the middle school level for a few days and came armed with some concrete ideas. In addition, as our conversation moved on, she asked me whether I would be available for a full-time position. Is Roseanne available for more cosmetic surgery? Is Bill Clinton available for a blow job? Are rejection slips available for this manuscript? We talked salary. I couldn't slip below 30K; she thinks she can get me at least 35. I talked up my writing, photography, meteorology, and western civ background, as well as my ability to pinch-hit in a variety of classes. The fact that I'd both been an actor and written plays intrigued her, since she didn't have anyone to do drama. Pretty soon it was beginning to sound like a done deal. And for once, that little cynical voice of defeat failed to go off in the back of my head, saying, "It's happened before, imbecile, and each time you got shafted." Well, "*No mas*," say I. She'll call tomorrow after talking to the committee about me, and then, she seemed to think, we'll have a lot to discuss over the weekend.

Sunday, July 4, 1999

My hopes are that this day will mark the beginning of my independence from financial and occupational insecurity. Tracye did leave a message on my machine on late Friday afternoon, but it did not contain any information. All I wanted was a thumbs-up or thumbs-down signal from her, but she chose to share neither, merely requesting that I call this weekend. That wasn't good enough for me, and I called her at her home, but only got her machine. I tried to be upbeat and cool in my message, and told her that I'd call her on the Fourth. In our Thursday interview she said she'd be home all day, and I confessed I would, as well. Calling this morning ran me into the answering machine again, so I put the ball in her court. I'd be home all day cooking, so please call me.

I've been adding up these happenings all weekend and something doesn't compute. One thing seemed significant in our interview, however. I had sent a many-paged dossier to her by fax several months ago and she said she never received it. So I hand-delivered another set of the same papers to her office as soon as I heard of that foulup. Later, I received confirmation from the headquarters of the parent firm, Beacon, that they acknowledged receipt of my papers, presumably by fax. Tracye's office also called to say that they had gotten my delivery. I felt relieved, if a little frustrated at the inefficiency. Then, in the interview, Tracye confesses that she can't find any of my papers, and would I please provide her with my list of references. I faxed them to her late Thursday afternoon after the interview. All the difficulties could be explained away as resulting from hapless administration. Not an auspicious way of beginning a relationship.

Monday, July 5, 1999

NCS is celebrating Independence Day today by not paying any of us temp stiffs. It's

called a 'day off,' a concept with which I am thoroughly familiar. No call from Tracye yesterday, though I left 3 messages on her home voicemail. This morning, thinking that she might be in the office, I called there but only got the machine. So I waited until a little after 11:00 A.M. and put yet another plaintive plea into the tape at the other end. What obtains? If she's hesitant to give me bad news, I certainly mis-read her confident manner during our interview. At this point, **any** news, other than that of a malignant biopsy by my physician, would be welcome.

As is often the case, my out-of-balance Paranoid Gland was making no secret of its secretions. The phone rang early this afternoon to the welcome sound of Tracye's voice. The job was mine. She was going to have the contract drawn up this week, and would like to have some biographical info about me for the next Southwest Charter newsletter. Apparently, all the faculty members were going to be briefly profiled, so I threw something together and faxed it over.

The 1990 Lanson Brut I stashed in the fridge Friday morning is making bubbly sounds that I can hear through the door of the GE. If there's any of it left by dinner time, I'll go with a veal dish I will improvise in an hour or so. Tracye says she'll call back this evening with more details, and I have to remember to ask her about length of the academic year, benefit package, and other preoccupations that escaped my notice in our earlier conversations.

Throughout all the parries and thrusts of the search for this particular job -- beginning with the job fair I attended this spring -- there has been one unique quality consistently present. While there may have been communications difficulties between me and the parties representing Southwest, and I may have mistaken it for disinterest in employing me, at no time did I ever have to submit to anyone from a human resources department. My initial contact at the fair was with an excited, exuberant member of the governing board, and my last ones have been with the

person who will supervise me, the school's principal. A significant part of the success in this search has been the absence of a human resources person intervening in the evaluation process. I'm serious. I have no doubt that the narrow minds and young misconceptions which form the front lines of that department in any corporation wiped my name from the ledger of potential candidates for many jobs as soon as they saw I either was too broad in education and experience for their narrow minds, or I triggered too many misconceptions concerning my age, degrees, or other inconsequential factor. While I fully expect to succeed wonderfully teaching philosophy to kids, if I fail, it will be because of my job performance, not because I am not permitted to prove myself to begin with.

I think it's time to close the final page of this venture. No matter what happens, teaching philosophy to 11 and 12 year olds will be a very different experience than what has happened in the past couple of years. Maybe that's a different book with different challenges, but it seems discontinuous with this one. So I'm out of the unemployment line, for the time being. My sympathies to those of you who remain, and those who show up to take my place.

### **Epilogue One**

Tuesday, November 16, 1999

Thirty-eight years ago I was sitting on a chartered Braniff Lockheed Electra, heading for San Antonio, Texas. I had shown up at the U.S. Air Force enlistment center that morning, as I promised I would, to begin a four-year tour of duty. This comes to mind only because, like then, I remain desperate for some kind of employment.

Teaching philosophy in a middle school, you ask? That lasted two weeks into the semester. The two months of preparation prior to school's opening gave me very little

confidence in either the outfit running the show or the principal they had hired to keep things going in the trenches. Our first paycheck was delivered on time in July, but we were warned not to cash them yet, since the funds weren't available. The ruse I try to use with my creditors, too. The school's academic orientation changed with the batting of Tracye's eyelashes one day, and all of us had to go back to Square One with our lesson preparations and textbook orders. Finally, I was astonished and appalled, once classes began, by how much of a teacher's actual teaching day is consumed by discipline. Imparting knowledge is well down the list of priorities in a contemporary American public school room; discipline, keeping order, and preventing mayhem all are more urgent than the subject matter.

The range of options for the public school teacher are bounded by a perimeter of disorder. Stay within it, or lose everything. One choice is to be a minimalist: keep felonies and assaults down to levels less than experienced in Attica. Perhaps a few lost souls will pick up a thought or two while the rest of the class acts out noisily. The Minimalist can say, with some minimal justification, that he or she is spending most of the class time teaching, but what few students do try to absorb material are incessantly distracted not only by the ambient din bouncing off the walls, but also by the uncertainty that they will be spared bodily harm that hour. This is no small consideration. There's certainly an inverse relationship between physical terror and learning (the 1960s experiments of Stanley Milgram come ruefully to mind), and the less a person is convinced they will escape the hour with all appendages intact, the more attention he or she will pay to that subject rather than the one being spouted by the teacher.

Another option is to be a discipline-centered teacher. Your approach is to head off all possible noise and non-academic physical activity at first syllable or twitch. It's a full-time job,

if you are so inclined, and few if any attempts at covering information from the lesson plan occur. The classroom ends up marginally safer than the one administered by the Minimalist, but with less subject matter offered to the faithful. Of course, whichever extreme you choose, students become aware of it and attempt to exploit it for their own amusement. If, as is probably a good estimate, less than half the students in any course have more than a nodding interest in learning what is being taught, then each room has a dozen or more kids with a desire for some level of classroom disruption. The Discipline-centered teacher essentially throws down the gauntlet to this dozen plus. This has two effects which defeat teaching as it is customarily assumed. First, it unifies and focuses the efforts of the malcontents; rather than concentrating on tormenting one another, they find it more appealing to torment the teacher. And second, the effort often enlists into the cause students who might have been marginally interested in learning previously. The reason for this is that they detect the fact that the teacher is dedicated more to order than teaching. They are likely to be reached only by a teacher who would walk on hot coals to deliver the message to them, and they quickly surmise that nothing of that sort is likely to occur in this classroom. So they defect to the side of the disruption, intensifying it.

Of course, there are mid-points between these two poles, but all of them require both a significant sacrifice in real teaching and a gargantuan chunk of time pissed away to bring a semblance of order to the room.

Well, it's time to pass out the blame cards, and you might think that I've got a tall and varied stack, but I don't. It begins and ends with the parents. Since we had an opportunity in August to interview all parents and guardians who were to deposit their charges with us this semester, we heard with our own ears what darlings we were being blessed with. The line

spoken by Chico Marx, in *Duck Soup*, never fails to fit situations like this: “Who you gonna believe? Me, or your own eyes?” What the parents wanted us to expect was greatly at odds with what our eyes witnessed. Of course there were exceptions which I am glad to mention. Chloe Abel, Kia McGee, and Sarah Lloyd had a desire to learn, and understanding of what they had to do in a classroom setting in order to accomplish it, plus engaged, supportive parents.

It was obvious that most children had experienced an incessant, and near-total collapse of adult guidance and meaningful supervision early in their lives, and what resulted was surly, disruptive disrespect penetrating into nearly every area of their lives. And we were thrown to them as Christians to the lions, muttering our impotent prayers while they systematically devoured us, and an educational institution.

### **Epilogue Two**

Friday, May 12, 2000

This had better be the last damned epilogue. After my sudden departure from middle school teaching, NCS was available for another project. I had begun teaching one course at Longview Community College that fall, so a few bills were paid on time. For this spring, I was able to arrange a total of 4 courses split between two campuses, so food began to appear on the table with midriff-challenging frequency. In addition, I discovered a web site, Hire-Ed.org that connected the user to the HR page of nearly every college in the country. Through it, I discovered literally scores of full-time Philosophy openings, many of which were located in California, which has a union pay scale of unparalleled generosity. I made a concerted effort to put together a decent dossier to submit to all these institutions, and rounded up a few references. In addition to far-flung beach and mountain junior colleges out west, my own part-time

employer, the Metropolitan Community Colleges of Kansas City, were also advertising for the same sort of person. The newest campus, Blue River, never had a full-time philosopher in residence, and they finally decided to locate one. My papers went in there, too.

No need prolonging this tale. Schools in California, Arizona, Florida, Washington, and Illinois wanted nothing to do with me. Most said nothing; a couple sent a form letter of regret. But I must be a decent fit for Kansas City. I made the final cut of 6 applicants, and then I bowled them over in the interviews. Word from the committee was that I was the unanimous pick of the nine who comprised it, and the president of the college, after nosing about in my past, but obviously with too little thoroughness, endorsed their good taste and offered me the job. I took it, and will start in August at about 35K plus benefits. Unlike Southwest Charter, I know the drill in MCC and do well with it. I'm a keeper. And maybe I no longer will need one.

### **Epilogue Three**

Yes, Virginia, there is an Epilogue Three, and it's the saddest of them all, but probably the least unexpected. With a permanent, full-time job under my belt, I felt it was time to bring Mata's lack of financial responsibility during these last three years to the table. She had become increasingly more defensive about her inability to bring home any meaningful income from the Primerica follies, and I felt it was time to address that. Finding a time when she could be guaranteed to stay in the same room, if not listen, was going to be a challenge, as was finding some sort of goals for her to consider for her half of the marriage's financial responsibilities. Both were easy to work.

The side of her family that she actually likes – the Griers – were having a family reunion in Fort Worth on Memorial Day weekend, and we decided to drive down there in the Benz. On

the drive back, I decided that Mata and I would have the money talk, whether she was cooperative or not. And I worked out a kind of schedule of our mutual and separate responsibilities as a starting point for our discussions, assuming we had any that were civil. The schedule called for me to pay all the monthly bills of the marriage, but not her Primerica expenses. She in turn, whether from Primerica or some other source, would be responsible, at a slowly increasing rate for other financial needs. They included one-a-year expenses like tax bills of all types, major purchases, and sudden repairs. Most importantly, she would also need to rebuild our decimated retirement funds on a regular basis. She would need to contribute \$300 a month at the beginning, but increase that to \$400 by the end of the year and \$500 by this time next year. In addition, the IRAs would remain untouched no matter the seeming emergency, and we were to incur no new debt without both of us agreeing to it.

The surprising thing about the drive back from Fort Worth was that Mata agreed to everything and described it as very reasonable. She said she was expecting something much worse. I was relieved by what she had to say and began to feel better about our prospects than I had since returning from Japan. But it was wishful thinking. Mata usually tells people what she think they want to hear, which makes her a popular person, but then continues to do what she was going to do anyway. Only people who are intimately close to her know about that second characteristic.

She never objected to any of the conditions I suggested and never implemented any of them. We worked on another timetable in lieu of her making immediate financial contributions: when would she reach the level of RVP (Regional Vice-President) with Primerica? We had a sit-down with her supervisor in August, 2000, to set a reasonable expectation. Shw wanted my

birthday, November 27, but I thought that was out of reach and wanted to set something more realistic. We went for New Year's, but that was never attained, so I revised it to her birthday, February 24. No progress, let alone a big promotion, by then, so I tried to have another discussion with her about the agreement we had (I thought) come to on the Memorial Day drive. She avoided it when she could, and lashed out at me angrily when avoidance was impossible. It got so bad that I had to write her a letter in late April 2001, begging for cooperation and a change of heart. In it, I first mentioned splitting up, and said that no changes on her part would be interpreted by me as a desire on her part for the marriage to end. And no changes positive changes ensued. Negative ones did, however. I began to notice new bills arriving from credit card companies. In spite of the 'no unilateral debt' clause in our agreement, Mata had begun to accumulate credit cards to finance whatever she desired to finance in her personal spending. None of it ever went to our mutual needs in the marriage. Of course, she could only obtain those cards by using my name and income information, so they suddenly became my cards, and applying to my already puny credit rating.

In October 2002, I moved out of the house and financed a pleasant enough one in Independence, Missouri, about a mile from the new campus of the college where I was teaching. My primary hope was that this would be a wake-up call to Mata and we would eventually come to an understanding about the marriage and she would move out here with me and we would start afresh. But the wake-up call seemed to tell her that she was well rid of me. I filed for divorce and we worked on the terms of it together. The court appearance coincided on a week she was spending out of town, so I appeared alone. Barely able to choke back the tears when the judge asked me to affirm that the marriage had irretrievably broken down, I went through with it with

great sadness.

But we went away together for five days over Thanksgiving to see my newest grandchild in Oklahoma. We slept together, were affectionate together, and I decided to use the upcoming holidays as an opportunity to ask if she wanted to revisit a new start for us. But within two weeks, she was sleeping with a man she had met through a dating service, and who now wants to marry her. The holidays for me were the most desolate and painful I have ever experienced, and the pain is unabated as I type these final lines, nearly seven years after the ordeal began.

At the beginning of this journal I had a marriage (I thought) but no job; now I have a job, but no marriage. The emptiness I feel inside now is greater than that chronicled on these pages in those frustrating years, and no end is in sight. I wish I could leave this task stronger than I began it, but then I would just be doing what Mata does: telling you what I fancy you want to hear. I only want to hear the sound of her voice, speaking my name softly as she comes up behind me and rubs my shoulders as I type these last words.