ALLEN JOHNSON, JR.

THE LIGHTER SIDE OF ENLIGHTENMENT!

ALLEN JOHNSON, JR.
Dedicated to my wife, Jill,
my son, Ben, and my friend, Barry Ward,
because they all love to laugh!
And dedicated to my fun-loving,
English mother-in-law, Rose Marshall, who,
when she heard the title of this book, said:
“Ooo! I know about Nirvana!
That’s where Las Vegas is!”
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Introduction

I HAVE felt for some time that the New Age movement was too serious and, therefore, in danger of becoming a religion. I believe that any journey towards spiritual awakening must be filled with lightness, fun and humor. Mistakes—or “bumbles”—if they are not too damaging, give us a wonderful opportunity to laugh at ourselves and avoid taking ourselves too seriously.

As a free download, this book is a gift to others like me, who clearly see the light ahead but know that they must continue to bumble and stumble through the mundane indignities and trivialities of daily life on earth.”

The book, *Bumbling Towards Nirvana*, is itself a bumble . . . a hodgepodge.

Some of the pieces in this book were written about enlightenment, some to pass on an insight or ask questions, some for fun or a good laugh, and some out of irritation with modern life. I have included a scattering of short poems, because a poem that is clear and understandable—and mine are—can cause us to see differently.

Someone once said that “life is just one damn thing after another!” Well, this book is like that. So, welcome! Come and bumble along with me. If you ever start to get the idea that I don’t know where I’m going in this book, you’ll be right! But that’s the way it is, isn’t it? The fun and adventure is in the fact that we never quite know where we’re going to end up in this amazing mystery we call life!
Bumbing Towards Nirvana

NIRVANA . . . Complete Enlightenment . . . I am headed there for sure, but I won’t arrive. For me, Nirvana is an ideal, and ideals are beacons. One does not arrive at such beacons; one just follows their direction. Besides, there is way too much bumbling going on in my life.

Often my mind is not attending to what my body is doing. For example, I am setting the table while thinking of something more interesting than what I am doing. Trying to hold three steak knives in a hand that already has three glasses in it (because the other hand has three plates in it) I drop one of the steak knives, which lands point down on the top of my foot. Swearing, I bend over to inspect my foot and crack my head on the tabletop.

My wife has heard the commotion. “What’s wrong?” she asks.

“You had to be there,” I reply, taking the easy way out. After all, who wants to explain a world-class bumble?

I simply must meditate more. Meditation helps me to stay more in the present and reduces the number of bumbles in my life. It also moves my mind closer to joy and creativity.

Our busy little intellects are the great obscurers of joy, always yapping at us like a Shiatsu or a Pekinese . . . worries, plans, problems . . . yap, yap, yap! The trendy term “multi-tasking” really means multi-thinking. Eckhart Tolle says that this thinking is not something we do—it happens to us . . . compulsively and incessantly, but meditation can quiet this.
Conscious breathing is a simple and effective way to meditate. As Tolle says, a breath has no form. Concentrating on something formless inhibits thinking and quiets the yapping. You don’t have to do conscious breathing for an hour or two. Even two or three conscious breaths can be helpful.

As I said, when I meditate with conscious breathing, I bumble less . . . fewer knives in the foot. From the point of view of my foot, this is desirable. Also, when you’re bumbling towards Nirvana, what you want is less bumbling!

Nirvana is supposed to be the perfect present, and—while I have experienced the perfect present—my imperfect body assures that, for me at least, Nirvana is a goal. I am stuck in the mud of time, doing the best I can with my talents and imperfections . . . Bumbling Towards Nirvana . . .
Did Jesus Laugh?

THERE WAS a very well-written and beautifully produced New Age magazine called IONS published by the Institute of Noetic Sciences. The following excerpt of a letter that I wrote to IONS is self-explanatory:

Dear Editors,

I received the recent issue of IONS and found it very interesting. . . .

One thing troubled me about the magazine, however: I searched it in vain for a trace of humor. It makes me wonder if you are becoming religious—that is, taking yourself too seriously. The Bible, for example, is totally without humor.

There is no reference in the gospels to Jesus laughing. Jesus was supposed to have been fully human. If so, he would have laughed. What is more human than laughter?

My belief is that when priests or holy men translate sacred texts they expunge what they don’t like. It is possible that early translators feared humor might prevent scripture from being taken seriously. For this reason, they may have removed all traces of humor.

I’ll bet you that God loves humor and fun.

I read one time that God should be approached playfully. Several days after I read this, I was resting and thought: “Hey, God. Do you want to come out
and play?” At once my mind was flooded with joy and an amazing pattern of woven bands of light. I call what I saw “the warp and woof of God.”

Anyway, my complaint about the New Age movement has been that it takes itself too seriously. Therefore let me contribute a bit of humor that you can print just for the fun of it! It’s a short poem.

**Headlines of Two Miracles**

*Spontaneous Remission Inoperable Tumor*  
*New Ager Found With Sense of Humor.*

With warm regards and thanks for a good magazine, Allen Johnson, Jr., www.allenjohnsonjr.com.  
e-mail: allen2@allenjohnsonjr.com.

This letter raises a couple of questions that people don’t usually ask:

Did Jesus laugh? Are fun and humor compatible with spirituality?

What is even more interesting to me than these questions, however, is the response that my letter elicited. After the letter was published, e-mails came pouring in. One was from two Bible scholars . . . a long, rather defensive letter that gave me numerous examples of humor in the Bible. Most of the examples were far-fetched. Even so, their letter taught me that I shouldn’t make absolute statements like, “The Bible . . . is totally without humor.”

All the other e-mails were in agreement with what I had
written. Writers expressed their agreement with considerable feeling. One writer said that when he read my letter, he broke down and wept! Clearly, my letter had raised some questions that many others had been asking—questions that had touched the feelings of quite a number of people. The reaction my letter got makes me believe that the question of humor and spirituality is one that should be explored even if the exploration only leads to more questions.

For example, since humor is so human, wouldn’t it be easier to relate to Jesus if we had at least one example of him laughing?
And Yet . . .
The body language of male vulnerability

MEN SPEND so much time being in control that moments when they admit their vulnerability are rare. And yet, we are all vulnerable. The image of male strength and total control is bogus. Men are most honest—most complete in knowing themselves—in those rare moments when they admit their vulnerability. Since film is a medium that can capture body language, it is a good medium for showing powerful moments of male vulnerability.

There is a good example in the film *My Fair Lady*.

At the end of the film, Henry Higgins, engagingly played by Rex Harrison, is singing “I’ve Grown Accustomed to Her Face.” In the song, he vacillates from being in control and totally self-reliant to admitting that he is in love and desperately needful of Eliza. After an angry proclamation of his independence, he suddenly softens and begins to show his true feelings. The song pauses and Higgins shrugs—head tipped slightly back . . . a pensive look in his eyes as he gazes within at his true feelings—he sings, “and yet . . . I’ve grown accustomed to her looks . . . accustomed to her voice . . . accustomed to her face . . .”

Ah . . . the wonderful “And yet . . .” The moment when we give up all pretence of total control. Yes, we are strong, independent, in control . . . no doubt about it . . . and yet . . . there is more to it than that. These two words “and yet . . .” admit the possibility of more than strength and control. They open the door of our Spartan, male prison to a gentler, sunnier Athenian world of surrender to beauty and love.
Watching *My Fair Lady*, I was struck by the power of Henry Higgins’s moment of surrender. I knew there was a similar moment in another film I had seen, but I couldn’t recall it. After several days of trying to remember, I finally realized that it had to do with a black man. I still could not recall the moment, however, and was forced to let the rusty cogs of my sixty-six-year-old memory grind slowly on with little help from me.

One morning when I woke I had it! The moment I had been groping for was the climax of the delightful film *Crocodile Dundee*. The hero, Mick Dundee, believes Sue, the girl he loves, is going to marry another man. He decides to leave New York City and heads for the subway. When Sue realizes she is about to lose Mick forever, she finally makes up her mind that it is Mick whom she really wants. She pursues him into the subway and sees him at the other end of the platform, but they are separated by a tightly packed crowd of people who are waiting for the train. She calls to Mick, but he can’t hear her. In the middle of the crowd, a rugged-looking black man, possibly a longshoreman, starts to relay what Sue is shouting to Mick. She shouts:

“I love you!” and the black man, realizing he is going to have to say this to another rugged-looking man, shrugs and tips his head back and calls to Mick: “I love ya!”

This moment of tenderness—in which a rugged man risks looking a complete fool by relaying a message of love—is wonderfully moving. I am sure that the reason my mind related this moment to Henry Higgins’s “and yet . . .” moment is that the body language was the same—head tipped slightly back, the small shrug, eyes gazing inward . . . the body language of male vulnerability . . . “and yet . . .”
More Is Less

When putting words together on the page, less is often more.

Years ago, I was deeply influenced by a joke that, like so much original humor, came from Mark Twain. The joke—told to me by a wonderful mentor I had—was:

“Please excuse the length of this letter. I didn’t have time to write a short one!”

It is easy to be verbose. It is harder to cram meaning into a few words. When a very few words have meaning, they are much more likely to cause a burst of light in a reader’s mind. This is particularly true with poetry.

No one reads poetry anymore. Part of the reason for this is the verbosity of poets who, in love with their own words, go on and on and on and on. Couple poetic verbosity with a deliberate attempt to be obscure and you have a recipe for monumental boredom. Sometimes in a poem it is possible to convey an insight with very few words. The following poem is an example.

The Maple Tree
The maple tree rises behind the wall
A thundercloud of green
Mysterious in its shadowed inner depths,
Marrying the earth and sky.

No one has told me that this is a good poem, but it is. There is one word in this poem that causes the reader to see
differently . . . the word “marrying.” Unless I am wrong—which has been known to happen—the word “marrying” makes us see a tree in a completely different way. The purpose of poetry is just this . . . to help us—with a small explosion of meaning in the mind—to see in a different way.

When putting words together on the page, less is often more.
Just the thought of a good novel makes my spirits rise. The possibility of moving easily into another time and place . . . into another life . . . brings to my mind a feeling of freedom. It’s like flying—but finding a good novel . . . there’s the rub.

What is a good novel, anyway? I suppose everyone has a different answer to this question. My answer lies in another question: Why do people tell stories?

Some time back—along—shortly after the First World War—art became very negative. Artists and writers turned from trying to depict ideals to trying to depict chaos, alienation, and degeneracy. Academics and critics, who have a great deal of intelligence with which to get confused, supported this trend, and it became fashionable. Sadly, this trend continues. It has helped to spawn the degenerate pop culture that afflicts our society today.

Much modern fiction is bleak, despairing, alienated, or degenerate. I can’t read it. Lavish praise for new novels in the New York Times Review of Books convinces me to try them. After a few pages, I usually feel my life force diminished. I am discouraged. I know that if I continue the book, I will be downright depressed. Often it is not only the content of the book that is depressing; it is the tone of the author’s mind and personality. I believe that reading a novel is as much about getting to know the author as it is about getting to know the characters. Most authors of modern fiction are people I don’t want to know. It is better not to read discouraging stories by discouraging writers.

A friend of mine points out that in the days of prehistory
people must have sat around the campfire telling stories. He believes they did this to encourage each other. “Surely they didn’t sit around the fire and try to discourage each other!” he says. I agree with him.

People also told stories in order to bond. Stories connect us with each other and with loved ones in the past. They help give continuity to life.

The best novels tell stories that show people connecting. They show us people encouraging each other in adversity and sharing the joys and pains of life. There may be characters that are evil, or a complex mix of good and evil, but I want no moral ambivalence in the character of the author. The best novels inspire, and this inspiration can only come from the mind of an author who is strong and clear in the vision that life, while not easy, is still fundamentally good.

There is another mysterious power often found in good novels . . . their ability to engage the reader. This is perceived as a welcoming. Being drawn into a novel by an engaging writer is like coming to a home on a cold night and being invited into a warmly lit room where a fire is burning and an old friend is waiting by the hearth. You can feel it in a single page or in one paragraph . . . even in a line. It is often felt most strongly when the writer is using the first person . . . “Call me Ishmael.”

If I don’t feel something engaging, positive, or uplifting in the first few pages of a novel—some goodness of character and vision in the author—then I know the book is not for me.

Then there’s the whole question of craftsmanship and clarity. How well does a writer write? How clearly does he or she write? Clarity is difficult to achieve, but it is fundamental to good
writing. If a reader has to struggle to understand what has been written, the writer has not done his job. Once again I believe that clarity in writing results from the quality of the writer’s mind and vision. Muddled writing comes from a muddled mind.

Lately there has come a stupid fad of narrating novels in the present tense. Even newscasters have started to narrate the news in the present tense in an attempt to make the news seem more immediate. Telling a story in the present tense is fundamentally dishonest. The instant something happens, it is in the past, and the only honest way to tell of a past happening is with the past tense. If I open a novel and read something like “I am looking out of my office window and see a young woman getting out of her car…” I drop the book like a hot rock.

My own experience is that reading for inspiration means that I have to go to the past. With a few exceptions, I have not been able to find inspiring contemporary fiction. Many of the best books from the past are out of print, so anyone who wants to find inspiring novels from the past will have to poke around old bookstores and libraries. This kind of search is more likely to be fruitful if one has a list of favorite authors and titles.

Here is a list of some of my personal favorites. Since I don’t aspire to be a critic, I have included only brief comments:

MARK TWAIN (American)
*The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*
It has to be said that the section at the end of this book—where Tom and Huck contrive elaborate schemes to rescue Jim—is a bit tedious.
*Tom Sawyer*
JOHN GALSOWORTHY (English)  
*The Forsyth Saga* (composed of three trilogies)  
Galsworthy was a superb craftsman. Every chapter can stand alone.

KENNETH GRAHAME (English)  
*The Wind in the Willows*  
This “children’s” novel is really for all ages. It is unique, funny, heart-warming and inspiring.

J.B. PRIESTLEY (English)  
*The Good Companions* • *Lost Empires*  
These two books are satisfying to read. Priestley wrote well and was very human. He was also a fine essayist.

A. J. CRONIN (English)  
*A Song of Sixpence* • *The Green Years*  
*The Citadel* • *A Pocketful of Rye*  
Cronin was a medical doctor. He was afflicted with a very rigid Catholic morality, but what a writer!

WILLA CATHER (American)  
*O Pioneers!* • *My Antonia*  
*The Song of the Lark* • *Death Comes For the Archbishop*  
Willa Cather is the most inspiring writer I have read.

MILDRED WALKER (American)  
*Winter Wheat*
LOUIS BROMFIELD (American)
*Early Autumn* • *The Green Bay Tree*
*Possession* • *The Rains Came* • *Night in Bombay*
Though much of his writing is about disillusion, Bromfield always has a strong impulse toward renewal and discovering new meaning in life. He is a wonderful, satisfying writer.

JOHN STEINBECK (American)
*Cannery Row* • *Sweet Thursday*
I cite two of his lesser works because they are the most uplifting. They are funny and fun.

KENNETH ROBERTS (American)
*Arundel* • *Rabble in Arms*
These books are very engaging. They have a wonderful feeling for early New England and create a first-hand experience of the American Revolution. Men seem to like them better than women.

RAY BRADBURY
*Dandelion Wine*
Ray Bradbury’s prose is magical and poetic but still clear! Remarkable!

HARPER LEE (American)
*To Kill a Mockingbird*
This is the best novel of the South that I know.
HOWARD SPRING (English)

*There is No Armour • The Houses In Between*
*A Sunset Touch • These Lovers Fled Away*
*Time And the Hour • All the Day Long*
*I Met a Lady • Winds of the Day*

Howard Spring—for years a reporter for the *Manchester Guardian*—wrote with great clarity. His good character and values shine through these pastoral novels. No one described the beauty of unspoiled England better than he did.
AS PART of my bumbling journey towards Nirvana, I recently read a book by Eckhart Tolle called *The Power of Now*. I was interested enough to send for some recordings of Eckhart Tolle presenting his ideas to a small group. These DVDs are very convincing, primarily because Mr. Tolle comes across as totally genuine. His delightful, breathy chuckle is so odd and attractive that it makes him totally believable as a genuine teacher. I don’t know why a chuckle should lend more credibility than a PhD, but it does.

I have wondered for years if there was a spiritual shortcut that could take someone around psychological problems so they wouldn’t have to work laboriously through them with therapy. Using the brain-as-computer metaphor, psychological problems could be thought of as bad programming. Therapy could be considered reprogramming, but the brain is much more complex than a computer, making therapy much more difficult.

Tolle’s model is a spiritual shortcut that goes around the bad program rather than trying to fix it. What Tolle proposes, involves becoming aware of the life inside our bodies and our internal “silence” as a way of bringing our consciousness completely into the present moment where “there are no problems.” In the present, timeless moment, he says, I can find my true, pure self, which is distinct from my self-created, defensive, time-centered self or “ego.”
This ego he describes “feeds” on problems, problem-solving, and compulsive thinking. When we move into the perfect present, we avoid all this and yet remain totally aware and involved in life.

Mr. Tolle holds that this way will bring us to enlightenment—“the peace that passes understanding”—without need of long therapy or the strict disciplines practiced by many religions. In a question session, however, Mr. Tolle admitted that this would not happen at once. He said that he had known people with very severe ego problems—who followed his way—to get beyond eighty percent of their problems in two years. This would seem to indicate that some kind of practice is necessary.

I suppose that while the perfect present can be found in an instant, it still takes time to unlearn the compulsive-thinking/problem-solving program in which we are all stuck. After reading Tolle, it struck me that just starting to view the insecure part of ourselves—the ego—as not being our true selves is helpful. It allows us to some extent to stand apart and objectify the troublesome part of ourselves and possibly not take it so seriously.

I feel I have learned a lot from Ekhart Tolle, but when it comes to time, I am more in tune with Agatha Christie’s way of thinking. While Tolle wants the perfect present, Agatha Christie finds the past and the future just as delightful as the present.

I consider Agatha Christie a kindred soul and one of my teachers. Her autobiography is my favorite book. In it she reveals herself to have had more joy in living than almost anyone I have come across. In the foreword to her autobiography, there is a paragraph that shows how she feels about her immersion in time. She writes:
“Life seems to me to consist of three parts: the absorbing and usually enjoyable present, which rushes on from minute to minute with fatal speed; the future, dim and uncertain, for which one can make any number of interesting plans, the wilder and more improbable the better, since—as nothing will turn out as you expect it to do—you might as well have the fun of planning anyway. And thirdly, the past, the memories and realities that are the bedrock of one’s present life, brought back to you suddenly by a scent, the shape of a hill, an old song—some triviality that make one suddenly say ‘I remember . . .’ with a peculiar and quite unexplainable pleasure.”

I couldn’t have said it better. In fact, to be perfectly honest, I couldn’t have said it as well!
Clarity and Brevity

When writing, it is difficult to be clever. Shaw was clever, as was Dorothy Parker.

It is even more difficult to be clever while appearing that you are not trying to be clever. E.B. White’s letters have this apparently unstudied cleverness.

Most difficult of all is being clever while appearing to be dim. This usually produces something funny. James Thurber was a master of being clever while appearing dim, as was Robert Benchley. It is hard to imagine anyone less dim than Benchley and Thurber.

Since cleverness is entertaining and requires great nimbleness of mind, it is much admired, and yet I don’t admire clever writing. Regardless of how off-handed cleverness is, I always sense an element of self-conscious ego behind it . . . something self-serving. I never quite trust cleverness.

In my own writing, I strive for brevity and clarity. These two qualities go together. One facilitates the other. We are all cursed with some ego, but when a writer achieves clarity and brevity, his or her ego becomes transparent and the flow of words is purified, moving into the reader’s mind like a sunlit mountain stream . . . transmitting light that can flood the reader’s mind with insight.

Insight, by the way, is not only illuminating problems. An insight may bring us suddenly into contact with one or more of the uplifting fundamentals . . . Beauty, Love, Truth, or even the ecstatic combination of all three . . . God.
Ideals

IDEALS REPRESENT perfection—something we humans can never achieve—but ideals are not goals; they are beacons that guide us through life. There are many ideals, but the three fundamental ideals are Truth, Beauty, and Love. Truth—the belief that there is a reality on which we can all agree—is our intellectual beacon. Beauty is our artistic beacon. Love is our emotional and spiritual beacon.

After World War I, ideals fell by the wayside, being replaced by negative concepts like nihilism and alienation. Only the young remained idealistic. It is their natural state. Many young people of that time, however, made the mistake of believing that ideals were perfectly attainable in life. This kind of idealism was rightly considered naïve by their more cynical and realistic elders. Thus the concept of “idealism” became synonymous with naïveté, and artists and intellectuals of the early part of the twentieth century continued to “throw out the baby with the bathwater” and reject idealism.

Is there a chance that the concept of ideals will come back into favor in the twenty-first century? We have to wait and see. Shifts in society’s values aren’t orchestrated. They just happen—usually as a result of massive global events such as the Industrial Revolution or the world wars. There are some promising developments, however:

Daniel Pink, in his book *A Whole New Mind*, asserts that material abundance, automation, and outsourcing are increasing the demand for jobs that rely on right-brain skills. He predicts
our values will become more right-brained. Pink’s idea that values in our society are shifting to bring the right-brain influence into better balance with the left-brain influence is one of the most optimistic things I have read in a long time. What will it mean if our left-brain, aggressive, logic-dominated, masculine society shifts to include more of the feminine, nurturing, intuitive, creative, emotional qualities? If the yin and the yang of our society come into better balance, might we dare to hope that many would pick up and dust off the fundamental ideals—Truth, Beauty, and Love?

The ideal of Truth could help Academia to reject the influences of political correctness and post-modern thought.

The ideal of Beauty could help writers and artists avoid alienation and connect with the rest of us. (Who knows, people might even start reading poetry again!)

The ideal of Love could help religions move away from judging, condemning, and promoting their own power structures.

I can’t help being a little disappointed that our values and ideals appear to be driven by economics. Wouldn’t mankind be a little further along if it were the other way around?

In any case—regardless of causation—I believe a return to ideals would be . . . well . . . yes . . . ideal!
Spring of Joy

It gushes forth,
Bubbling,
Sparkling,
Deep and pure,
Reflecting joy . . .
My little boy’s laugh.
Pistachio

PISTACHIOS ARE highly addictive. Eating one, you experience a combination of crunch, softness, butter, lavender, salt, and other indefinable flavors that can combine in an infinite number of ways. The taste-center of your mind says: “My word! What’s this? Another, please! Quick! I really don’t care if you break your thumbnail . . . another! Right now!”

You fumble in the bag for the nuts that are easiest to open, and your mind becomes ever more insistent as you descend into addiction.

There is a secret behind pistachio addiction. Each nut tastes subtly—mysteriously—different. The smallness and uniqueness of each nut teases your mind into leading you down the path of just one more nut to your ultimate destination . . . the bottom of the bag.

There is only one way to stop eating pistachios before the bag is empty.

Shell eight or ten nuts and pop them in your mouth all at once. The tantalizing smallness and uniqueness is gone. The flavors blend together into a boring amalgam. Your taste-center says, “pistachios . . . big deal,” and stops clamoring for more. At this point, it is possible to quit, but whatever you do, don’t eat one more single, unique, tantalizing . . . pistachio.
Dogs

One could do a lot worse than to try to be like a dog. After all, dogs are morally superior to us.

Of course there are bad dogs—dogs that have been bred or trained to be mean or even vicious—but, on the whole, dogs are good. Unlike a horse, you can trust a dog. It is possible to groom a horse for hours—then walk behind him and he will kick you into the afterlife. A dog, on the other hand, won’t betray you. They are consistently kind, trustworthy, loving, forgiving, loyal, and fun. Very few of us measure up to them. How do dogs manage to be so good? I think I know. They shake off the bad stuff.

Dogs can move in a way that causes their skin to shake. They shake off water, sleep, and emotion. If you spank a dog, immediately afterwards, he will shake off the spanking. If a dog gets cross with another dog, he will shake it off. If you scold or frighten a dog, he will shake it off. Don’t try to learn to do this. It just makes you look silly. My wife caught me trying to shake like a dog the other day and gave me a most peculiar look. (I should say, she gave me a look that implied that I was most peculiar!) I believe, however, that if humans could shake off bad stuff like dogs do, psychotherapists would be out of business.

There is the popular idea that dogs smell bad. Sometimes they do. They are prone to ear mites, impacted anal glands, and rolling in carrion—charming little attributes that make you wish that you were a cat lover except that disgusting dog-smells tend to be localized, whereas a cat can make the whole house smell bad.
Ah, but did you ever hug a big outdoors dog... stick your face in his long winter coat and inhale? You will smell the whole outdoors... dried grasses and leaves, the cold winter air, a hint of evergreens from the woods. It is a grounding smell that instantly makes me want to be a boy again, roaming the woods with my slingshot and a canine friend scouting ahead with his nose. And the pads of dog paws have a wonderful, pungent, earthy smell. Check it out, but don’t let your wife see you smelling your dog’s paws—especially if she has just caught you trying to shake!

My Springer spaniel is thrilled when I howl with her. It takes her a while to get into it, but she thinks it’s great fun. My wife accepts our howling together as normal. I wonder if she’s getting a bit odd.
The Challenge of Shredded Wheat

DAILY LIFE is filled with challenge. Getting from one place to another in an automobile without causing injury or damage is an unrecognized challenge most of us face every day. Keeping clean, well-groomed, well-fed—but not too well-fed—being patient, maintaining kindness and humor in the face of incompetence . . . these are just a few of the challenges that fill our daily lives. When we meet these challenges successfully, we achieve small triumphs. As we grow in maturity, we become increasingly adept at winning these small battles. We come to take these tiny victories for granted. The flow of small victories through our lives, though barely perceived, is a soothing balm that helps us to maintain the belief that we are competent, successful, and valuable creatures worthy of having been created in God’s image. When we have one of those days when all the small things go wrong, we lose our self-confidence. A multitude of trivial things going wrong wears you down. Then we really start to make mistakes. My cousin used to say, “It’s not the lions and tigers that get you; it’s the gnats!” There is no cure for a “bad day” like this except to get through it, go to bed and make a fresh start in the morning.

This dynamic of winning or losing the small battles is more important than we think. If we find a small battle that we consistently lose, we would do well to stop fighting it. One such battle for me involves shredded wheat, which I frequently prepare for my son. A child needs shredded wheat to be crushed in the bowl, and I prefer it that way myself.
For years I have noticed that it is impossible for me to transfer shredded wheat from the box to the bowl and crush the biscuits without getting crumbs on the counter. What’s the big deal, you might well ask? And I wouldn’t blame you . . . but consider the humiliation of losing the same small battle over and over again . . . hundreds of times . . . for years!

To begin with, shredded wheat biscuits create crumbs in the packet. The paper in which the biscuits are wrapped tears in an irregular fashion, usually scattering these crumbs on the counter before you even start. If you tear this paper with great care, you are still faced with the problem of dumping out the biscuits or pulling them out of the packet. If you dump, crumbs cascade everywhere. If you pull them out, crumbs stick to your fingers and fall onto the counter. Once in a great while, you get the biscuits into the bowl without spilling crumbs. True, but you still have to crush! When you crush, the little fibers of wheat spring maliciously from the bowl. If, by some miracle, this doesn’t happen, these same fibers have stuck to your hands and when you try to brush them into the bowl, many go onto the counter.

This is a battle that it is impossible to win. It is a bad way to start the day. It undermines my self-confidence, which causes me to make more mistakes. The quality of my day often disintegrates from this point. Since I frequently deal with shredded wheat, the quality of my whole life is affected. I know, I know! You’re sitting there smugly thinking I should switch to bite-sized shredded wheat. Ah hah! They do not taste the same, and besides, when I think about shredded wheat biscuits, I know that one morning I am going to beat the little bastards!
Mutual Transformation

Light transforms a piece of glass into a prism.
A prism transforms light into a rainbow.
Loading the Nasal Receptors

FOR A dog to be secure and emotionally healthy, he must periodically load his nasal receptors. This loading is done at the spot where another dog has recently urinated.

There is nothing casual or unfocused about the loading process. It involves prolonged, intense sniffing, moving over the entire urine splatter pattern.

When I see my dog’s intense concentration as he sniffs, I can’t help wondering what is going through his mind. Is he thinking . . . “hmm . . . January 5th” . . . or . . . “small female . . . spayed” . . . or . . . “large, mean male?” What? I know it is not simply that he likes the smell. He is too focused for that. He is gleaning information. What is it?

I’ll grant you that this question is not on a par with “Is there a God?” Knowing my dog’s thoughts as he loads his nasal receptors is, nevertheless, one of the mysteries of life.

If I had to guess, I would say that he is thinking thoughts that are so doggish that they would have little meaning to you or me. I have, after all, never had the urge to load my nasal receptors in this way.

Have you?
My wife and I have a twenty-six-year age gap. This explains why I find myself, at age sixty-seven, picking up my ten-year-old son at grammar school. As I wait for school to let out, I listen to the young mothers who have abandoned their Chevy Suburbans in order to visit with each other. Most of them are in their late twenties or early thirties. They are all of another generation, and while they use a similar vocabulary to mine, there is one big difference in the way they speak that sets them apart from me:

When they narrate conversation, they use substitutes for the verb “to say.” Their conversation goes something like this:

“Janie was like . . . ‘blah, blah, blah, blah . . .’” (Instead of, “Janie said . . . ‘blah, blah, blah, blah . . .’”)

Or even worse:

“. . . And I go, ‘blah, blah, blah, blah.’” (Instead of “I said, ‘blah, blah, blah, blah.’”)

I listen to these young women chatting away a mile a minute, saying, “I go” or “I’m like” for “I said” and, though most of them are attractive and humanoid in appearance, they strike me as creatures from another planet. I mutter to myself:

“Johnson, you’re gettin’ old.”

On the other hand, there’s an even stranger phenomenon that makes me think I may be getting younger:

Last spring, after I had knee surgery, my wife had to look after me for a couple of weeks. Somewhere in the care-giving process, she had a subconscious shift and spontaneously started
to call me “son.” She is still doing it.

It is quite a boost for a sixty-seven-year-old man to be called “son” by his forty-one-year-old wife, but it does cause some confusion when she does it in public!
Nostalgia for the Future

IT HAS been fashionable for some time to look down on nostal-gia—certainly the second definition in Webster’s Dictionary (. . . an excessively sentimental yearning to return to some past period . . .) is a state of mind that is worthy of contempt. Life moves forward, so longing to return to any part of the past is silly. On the other hand, feeling connected to the past gives a sense of continuity that deepens and enriches the meaning of life.

As one grows older, the past comes closer. Old memories become more meaningful than yesterday, and yet as one’s parents, siblings, and childhood friends die, there are fewer and fewer ways to confirm the reality of memories. One good example of this is Jets.

When I was a boy, the ultimate after-dinner treats were dark-chocolate-covered, cream-filled bonbons called “Jets.” The creamy center of a Jet was sweet, yet slightly salty. The flavor of Jets, while indescribable, was wonderful. Everyone in our family considered Jets to be the ultimate treat, but now that my parents and sister are gone, I can find no one who remembers Jets. I have researched Jets online to the full extent of my ability with no result. I am absolutely sure Jets were real, but it is frustrating not to be able to validate this memory.

While I value memories of the past, there have been those who want no memories from the past. For example, there was an Indian guru-type philosopher who went by the name of Krishnamurti. His central theme was that we should all give up the
past completely . . . wipe our memories clean of past experiences and thus live in the moment. As a young man, I experimented with this concept and found it to be impossible to implement. Furthermore, I decided I wouldn’t want to implement it. Later, when I read a biography of Krishnamurti’s life and discovered that his childhood was completely strange and empty of meaning, I understood his desire to forget the past.

*Webster’s* first definition of nostalgia is “homesickness.”

When we are children, we form a strong feeling of what it means to be home. If we are lucky enough to grow up in a secure, loving home—especially if it is a place of beauty—we experience a deep sense of acceptance and belonging that will never be duplicated in our adult lives. As a child, I formed this sense of home. It has stayed with me all my life, and yet I don’t long for a return to the past. I believe that I will only find this sense of total belonging and acceptance in the future . . . after death.
The Gateway

I HAVE a little English watercolor that is fraught with meaning. It is a painting of a roadway leading to a view of the sea and the Cornish coastline. It is a good little painting, but it’s not exceptional in quality. It is the composition that gives it meaning.

The distant vista is framed by trees on either side of the road. This artistic device creates a gateway, and the gateway says to me: “Pass through here. Just ahead is beauty and joy.” This is the symbolism of optimism.
The Cherry Tree Like Me

It is old.
Main branches lopped-off long ago . . .
Nothing green but the mossy trunk . . .
Gnarled and weathered, yet . . .
Every lopped-off branch puts forth
Blossomed magic wands
Conjuring a cloud of pink.
Old tree
Young attitude . . .
Like me.
MY MOST cherished possession is a ring that was given to me many years ago by a dear friend.

When she was a young woman, my friend crafted jewelry, and this ring is one of her creations.

The ring is a wide band of gold with three little gold bars and two peridots set into a geometric pattern. The design is striking because the gold around the pattern is almost black. It has been oxidized. The bars and the stones stand out brightly against this darkened gold.

It is very difficult to oxidize gold. Only a very powerful acid will do it. My friend knew, however, that the blackened gold would create the contrast that would make the ring something special.

I hope that whatever rust has gotten into my soul will make some parts shine more brightly.
ART... ONE OF the hardest words in the English language to define.

Definitions of what constitutes art are bound to be subjective. My art may be your nonsense and vice versa. My definition is as good as yours, and yours is as good as mine.

We can dodge the problem by turning it over to the experts, but recent trends in “modern art” make me think the experts are pretty dim.

Of course, we can rely on the “test of time.” If, after three hundred years, some creative work is still considered art by most people, then it is. Maybe, but who’s got three hundred years? Such a standard gives us no way to judge contemporary work.

Well, here’s my standard. You can take it or leave it, and you probably will!

I say that art is: any creative work that increases the meaning of existence.

“That’s all very well,” you say, “but what is meaning?”

Ummm... yes... well... this is a bigger question. I’ll tackle it in another article or possibly in another existence!
I have decided not to wait to die before exploring what meaning is. I have an idea. Why not blurt it out?

I am beginning to think that meaning is whatever connects us... to each other... to nature... to God. I suppose the opposite of meaning would be alienation.
I Hate a List

There is something mind-numbing about a list.

Once I was asked to judge a high school poetry contest. Some of the teachers had required that their students write a poem about the things in their lives for which they were the most grateful. Instead of giving them the freedom to write about a passion—which might have sparked creativity—this dictum elicited lists that were stunningly boring.

From time to time I get a “humorous” e-mail that starts: “You know you’re old when . . .” or “You know you’re a redneck if . . .” followed by a string of behaviors that qualify you for being old or a redneck. No matter how clever these behaviors are, before I can read a fraction of the list, I am totally bored.

Lists are the downfall of most pop-psychology and self-help books. If I flip through a book and see lists with “bullets” alongside each item, I look no farther. Why would I want a whole list of things that I can do to improve myself when it is practically impossible to improve even one flaw!

I admit that some lists are necessary: lists of things to buy at the supermarket or lists of errands that have to be run. Necessary, yes, but are these lists interesting?

Hardly!
When I was a boy, there were no antibiotics and few vaccines. Kids had all the childhood illnesses—measles, mumps, chicken pox—and bad colds or sore throats that could turn into bacterial infections were cause for concern. An outbreak of polio struck terror into parents’ hearts. The upshot of all this was that children with careful parents spent a good deal of time in bed.

My mother was too careful. Once, when I was four years old, she found me sharing a lollipop with our golden retriever, Co-Co. I would take a lick . . . then give him a lick. We were taking turns.

Mother ran into the house and called Alf Walker, the family pediatrician. Fortunately, Dr. Walker was down to earth and had a sense of humor.

“Don’t worry, honey,” he told Mother. “That dog will be just fine!”

During one of my childhood illnesses, my mother introduced me to *The Wind in the Willows*. I am sure my lifelong love of this book has something to do with the fact that Mother read it aloud to me, but there is more to it than that. It is a lovely work and embodies an approach to life that I have always wanted to follow.

I am sure it is odd for a sixty-two-year-old man to identify with a water rat, but Ratty, in *The Wind in the Willows*, is definitely my kindred spirit.

He loves the water. He loves boats. He yearns for
adventure but finds himself caught in the coils of responsibility. He writes poems. He has a cozy home and is loyal to his friends.

All my life I have enjoyed boats, the beauty of nature, and the warmth of home, hearth, and friendship. Nowhere are these aspects of life better portrayed than in *The Wind in the Willows*. I had always wanted to do something associated with this beautiful book, but I had no idea what it could be. I put this dream aside and turned my attention to other interests. Years later, my old dream came back to me all by itself.

For some reason, I wrote a poem called “Bother and O Blow!” based on Moley in *The Wind in the Willows*. It was a good poem, and I mused to my wife, “I wonder if I could write a series of poems based on *The Wind in the Willows*?” I decided to try. After I had written a few poems, I felt sure I could do it.

“What should I call the collection?” I asked my wife.

“A Breeze in the Willows,” my wife answered at once, giving me the perfect title.

My wife is English, and we have a small cottage in the little village in Cornwall where she was raised. Our friend and neighbor there, Roger Michell, is a wonderful potter and graphic artist. He agreed to illustrate my poems. I worked with him all one summer making sure the illustrations and poems suited each other. When the illustrations were finished, what Roger had done was better than I had dared to hope for.

I thought it would be impossible to convince a publisher in the mainstream press to publish a series of poems and illustrations based on a children’s book, but—small miracle—we did. Even though the poems are good, I am convinced that Roger
Michell’s wonderful illustrations are the reason the book got published.

In the spring of 1998, Ten Speed Press published A Breeze in the Willows. The publisher did a superb job designing the book. When the book was printed, much to my pride and joy, I found we had a little gem. I wanted to make a good effort to introduce and promote the release of our book, and therein lies another story.

When A Breeze in the Willows was published, I sent out advance copies in hopes of reviews. I generated a list of publishers from my old prep school alumni directory. One of these was the publisher of the Little Rock Democrat-Gazette.

He received the book at home and, not recognizing my name, sent the package to the newspaper to have it “checked out.” The paper sent the package to the main post office. By the time the post office got the package, somebody had used the word “bomb.” The bomb squad was called. Soon they had evacuated the post office and cordoned off two blocks around it. The police and firefighters were called in. There were nine emergency vehicles. A television news truck arrived. Two men from the bomb squad suited up in body armor, snuck up on my little book of poems, and blew it up!

A young reporter poked through the remains of the package, found the address label, and did what somebody should have done in the first place—he called me up.

After I heard what had happened and had stopped laughing, the reporter said he was writing a front-page story for the paper, and did I know why the “panic button” had been pushed? I said, “Yes” and told him about the following poem:
Danger! Overinflated Toad*

Conceited? Yes, he’s so puffed up
One fears he may explode.
An ever-present danger when
A toad’s too full of Toad!

“Clearly,” I told the reporter, “this poem is the reason the bomb squad was called out!”

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The Funniest Line

THE FUNNIEST line I know of in a movie is in *Singing in the Rain*. It comes from Lina Lamont (brilliantly played by Jean Hagen), the quintessential dumb blonde who can’t get into talking movies because she has a voice that sounds like a wood rasp being scraped across the edge of a large pane of glass.

In a snit, she proclaims, “I’ve got more money than Calvin Coolidge . . . put together!”

That’s my favorite, anyway.
DURING THESE serious times when the media are concerned with weapons of mass destruction and the Department of Homeland Security, I would like to propose a counter-balancing measure: the creation of a Department of Foolishness. I propose myself as Secretary of Foolishness. I must be allowed to have my English wife as my chief advisor even though she is not a U.S. citizen.

The English word for verbal foolishness is “blather.” The English have a gift for it, and my wife is a particularly gifted blatherer. The greatest natural blatherer I have ever known was an English artist friend of ours, Roger Michell. Roger illustrated one of my books and, in the process of working with him on the book, my wife and I got to know him. The smallest bit of nonsense on our part would set Roger off on a blather. Blather is an improvisational art akin to playing jazz, in which ideas are bounced back and forth between the blatherers, losing import and becoming increasingly irrelevant with every turn. I would like to appoint Roger Michell Undersecretary of Blather, but Roger now lives in France, so I believe I will appoint our friend and neighbor, Gordon Polson, another Englishman, who—when not head-to-head with my wife exploring the mysteries of gardening . . . or communing with our golden retriever, Sunshine—can lead you down a very blathery path, indeed!

In case some of you are starting to think that these suggestions are somewhat frivolous, let me remind you how important it is to escape “meaningful dialogue.” Some of the most important stuff in the world—blather, for example—means absolutely nothing at all!
SOMETIMES THESE little pieces set off a chain reaction. That is to say, something at the end of one will suggest another. At the end of the piece above, I wrote that it is important to escape “meaningful dialogue.”

What a stuffed-shirt term “meaningful dialogue” is! (Even more pompous is when the noun “dialogue” is used incorrectly as a verb, as in: “We need to dialogue.”)

“Meaningful dialogue” is a pompous, self-important verbal exchange of ideas.

The term for a verbal exchange of ideas where two or more of us connect warmly at a human level is an old-fashioned down-to-earth term: “conversation.”

My biggest influence in writing little pieces like this has been the English writer, J.B. Priestley. Before he got the hang of simplicity in his writing, he wrote an overly effusive essay called Talking. It was a complex description of what is—and what isn’t—good conversation. One of his thoughts was that good conversation is a small group of talkers (usually two to four) constructing castles of ideas in the air. Like blather, good conversation is improvising with someone in the realm of ideas. Good conversation may contain blather, but unlike blather—which is pure nonsense—good conversation should contain some ideas that mean something.

Conversation is a take-turns affair that requires that each talker be an equally good listener. Since ideas—the improvised building blocks of these castles—have no substance, they must
be put together with lightness. So conversation must be playful. This is why one idea that is weighted down with seriousness or pretentiousness will bring the whole conversational castle down. Some ideas are so pretentious that they hit the ground before a good conversation can even get started.

“Meaningful dialogue” . . . Clunk!
I saw a faceless man
Whose features had been wiped away
By some calamity.
A blank expanse of scar and grafted skin . . .
An orifice from which he still could speak . . .
And though my eyes would not confront
This devastated face,
I heard the man speak simple words of warmth
To put me more at ease.
Then I knew that he was there . . .
Whole . . .
Like you . . .
Like me . . .
WE HAD been dropped off by some friends at The St. Austell Working Man’s Club in Cornwall, England. It was there we met the Colonel.

We went to a table, and he sat at the bar with a pint of bitters. His back was ramrod straight. With his handsome chiseled features, his iron-grey, close-cropped hair and mustache, and neat country tweeds, he looked to be the quintessential retired British Colonel. Since he was the only other person in the bar, we engaged him in conversation and found that his appearance did not lie. He was, in fact, a retired Colonel.

My wife needed to use the rather complicated pay phone in the hall outside the bar, but she had been out of England for some time and had forgotten the procedure. The Colonel politely offered to show her how to do it. When he returned to the bar, I thanked him.

“That’s the trouble with women,” he said, “no brains, no balance, and no balls!”

“Well, Colonel,” I replied, “I’m rather glad they don’t have any balls.”

“Yes . . .” he drawled, “cunning bit of plumbing, what!”
Can Female Fashion Be Logical?

Can FEMALE fashion be logical?

Yes! I say, and furthermore I’m prepared to prove it.

I know some of it is stupid. I grant you that. If you push me, I might go as far as “exceedingly stupid”: Spike high heels, for example, that exert thousands of pounds of pressure per square inch and dent all but the hardest floors; “bee-stung” lips created by collagen injections; flappers binding themselves to remove all visible sign of breasts and . . . well, you get my drift.

I am quite certain that it is not my own rather substantial age that makes the latest female teen fashion seem silly. It has caught on to wear jeans and other pant-like garments from which someone has removed the top four inches, thereby exposing hipbones, navel, and lower abdomen and upper buttocks. A young woman’s bottom—the English term—is normally an attractive item. Two thirds of a bottom—as delineated by these attenuated pants—is not, and the poor girls are always trying to tug them up.

It was a relief to me to finally realize that there is a hidden logic behind this recent, apparently silly fashion. The logical purpose of this fashion is to make visible the silver stud in the navel and the butterfly tattooed just over the base of the spine. It’s really quite logical when you think about it.
The Principle of the Thing

HOW CAN we tell when we are being petty? There is a good indicator.

Whenever I hear myself—or anyone—say, “It’s the principle of the thing,” I know that pettiness has crept onto the scene.

“It’s not the amount of money that’s involved; it’s the principle of the thing.”

“It’s not that the insult was so terrible; it’s the principle of the thing.”

“It’s not that what she said was really so hurtful; it’s the principle of the thing.”

Every time we need to reassure our listener that we are standing on principle, it is because our egos have been affronted by some trivial issue. We don’t want to appear petty, so we affirm that we are only in a huff because we are standing on principle. Now we are not only petty; we have achieved self-righteousness too!

This is the kind of trap into which our little egos lead us!
Bleeding Strong Words to Death

LANGUAGE, LIKE mankind, is living and always evolving. This is as it should be, but lately—due to sloppy thinking—the media have been degrading the English language. Never mind endemic little grammatical mistakes like improper use of the indefinite article. (*A octopus bugged me four times all at once.*) What I deplore is the way the media are bleeding the meaning from some of our most powerful words.

Meaning is the lifeblood of a word. Without meaning, a word is dead. Lately two of our strongest words have been used incorrectly by the media so much that they have lost their meaning. Take, for example, the powerful word, “hero.”

A hero is someone who does great brave and noble deeds. Medal of Honor winners are heroes. Firefighters who save people from burning buildings are heroes. Thanks to the media, great bravery is no longer required for hero status.

In the early days of the Iraq War, a young female U.S. soldier was captured. She was rescued from a hospital where she was found hiding under the bedcovers. The media dubbed this young woman a “hero.” As far as I know, she did nothing to justify hero status. The meaning of the word “hero” has been degraded so far that one frequently hears from the media that members of the armed forces who are in harms way are heroes, regardless of what they have done.

The word “artist” used to carry great weight and prestige because it was reserved for the cream of creative talent. The very finest composers, musicians, actors, writers, painters, and dancers
were considered artists. The music business has bled that power-
ful word white. Rap singers and whining country-western sing-
ers are now called artists. The word “artist” now means “success-
ful performer.”

There seems to be no way to protect our language from
the media. In another fifty years, I reckon Americans will no lon-
ger be able to communicate precisely. People will walk around
looking bemused and stupid, and communication will have
become a guessing game!
My Other Half

I dreamed, one night, a game of hide-and-seek.  
I, a man of almost fifty years,  
Played with her, a girl of five—  
Dainty, dark, gamine . . . a gentle sprite.  
In seeking me, she trod with care  
The timbers of a part-constructed house.  
I did not need to hide,  
For she was blind.  
I sat and waited quietly in her path.  
Concerned that I would give her fright,  
I softly spoke,  
“I’m here . . . ahead,” I said,  
And I was found.  
We hugged, and I was sure I would adopt this child,  
And she would have to seek no more.
ONE EVENING, after watching Fox News for too long, I realized I had a migraine. I don’t get migraines. After some thought, I began to suspect the garish, swirling, jagged, imploding, exploding, constantly changing color graphics of the Fox News Channel. The more drastic graphics were coupled with a sound effect like a jet plane flying over at about fifty feet. On an impulse, I decided to try to lodge a complaint. I picked up the phone. Information gave me the number for Fox News in New York City but I must have misdialed because I didn’t get a computer. Someone answered.

“Evans. Production,” the voice said.

“Is this Fox News?”

“Right,” he answered, “Production Department.”

“Can you tell me who’s in charge of graphics?” I asked.

“That’d be Julia,” he told me.

“May I speak to her?” I asked.

“Nope . . . can’t talk.”

“Busy?” I said.

“No, she can’t talk . . . can’t say words . . . she’s a chimp,” he said.

“Chip?”

“No, no . . . chimp . . . she’s a chimpanzee.”

I started to laugh.

“It’s not so funny. How’d you like it if your boss was a chimpanzee? I mean . . . I’m for animal rights and all that, but this is going too far!”
“Why did they make a chimpanzee your boss?” I asked him.

“Well . . . to tell you the truth, she is very good with graphics . . . better’n me. I have to admit it. But here’s the thing . . . she wasn’t worth a damn before the LSD.”

“LSD?”

“They put it in her bananas.”

“I got to go,” I told him. “I was gonna complain, but I don’t suppose there’s any point in that . . .”

“Nope, none at all,” the guy said. “I tried it once. She just climbed up in my lap and gave me a big wet kiss in the ear. She’s really a very nice boss; it’s just kind of demeaning having to report to a chimpanzee.”

I hung up the phone and checked out the convoluted, exploding color graphics and jet engine sound effects one more time.

“Well, that explains that,” I said, groping for some Advil.
Perfection

LAST WEEK, on a family outing with my wife and son, I wandered into an art gallery. It was a very good gallery, containing the finest collection of paintings I have ever seen assembled outside of a museum. I wandered in amazement. Each painting seemed better than the last. As I left, I started to wonder why I didn’t covet any of the remarkable works I had seen. This morning it came to me; all of the paintings in this excellent gallery were too perfect.

I have always believed that we love people for their flaws and imperfections, not for their successes. Now I think that is true of paintings, too. An absolutely perfect painting would be as hard to live with as an absolutely perfect person. This is not to say that I want people or paintings to be deeply flawed. I don’t want a river to be running uphill or a boat floating in a different plane from the water. Nor do I want a dishonest or cruel wife or friend. Still, a painting that has the kind of freedom that allows feeling to dominate technique is one I can live with. Just as I can find comfort in a wife or friend who admits to foibles and makes mistakes like I do.

When Arthur Rubenstein heard a young pianist who exhibited totally flawless technique, he would say:

“What you played is amazing, but when are you going to play me some music?”

There you have it. In art, as in life, it is not about . . . perfection.
RECENTLY, JIM Reed, a writer friend of mine, wrote a piece in which he referred to revisiting the “pockets of joy” that had occurred in his life. The term got me thinking. There are pockets of joy in life . . . mostly in childhood. As we age, we get so taken up in the responsibilities of life that we diminish in our capacity to have these joyful times.

As for me, joy is always lurking around the edges of my consciousness. If I look at it directly, it jumps behind a bush.

The fact that joy exists at all in life means so much. For me, the existence of joy verifies the existence of God. Why this should be, I have no idea. In my mind, there is a very direct connection between joy and God . . . way down . . . below the level of reason.
The Tolerant Center

IN THE previous national election, there was much talk of “polarization.” People on the extreme right fear and scorn those on the extreme left who, in turn, scorn and fear those on the extreme right . . . and round it goes.

Most of us hunker down in the center under the down comforter of tolerance, smiling sadly at each other and ducking the barbs and insults that fly back and forth like nasty little arrows.
WE HAVE a room in our home that has Bahamian colors. It has shells, wood-carvings, photos, and watercolors from the Bahamas. The room is lovely. When we head for this room we don’t say, “Let’s go to the Bahamian room.” We say, “Let’s go to the Bahamas.” After all, in addition to being a place, the Bahamas is a state of mind.

I am sitting in the Bahamas now looking into the next room—a little library snugged down by shelves of books, red brick-colored walls, and an old desk with a comfortable old landscape painting above it. Copper pots gleam from a shelf above the painting.

After I make tea, the first thing I do in the morning is turn on lights in the library. When my wife and I are having tea together in the Bahamas, the picture light that shines down on the painting in the library and the small lamp on the desk create a scene that draws the eye.

Yes, I want light in the next room.
Some time ago I came to the conclusion that Christ taught a very demanding way of life. Reading Matthew, I see that what Christ taught was, in fact, so demanding that nobody could or would live it. Lately I have concluded that going to church is the way people try to have their cake and eat it; that is, try to stay right with God without having to live the demands of Christ. For example, in Matthew 6:19–21, Christ admonishes not to store up treasures on earth, but heck, we all store up treasures on earth. Look at the luxury cars outside the church and the Rolex watches and diamond rings within. You have to wonder what a poor Jewish carpenter would make of it.

Then there is the passage about not worrying about bodily needs in Matthew 6:25–34. While I agree that it is useless to worry, some of the examples in this passage don’t make sense to me.

The passage says the birds don’t sow or reap. That’s true, but birds work their little tail feathers off feeding themselves and their young. If they don’t worry, it is probably because they’re too busy!

Then there’s the idea that the lilies “do not labor or spin.” Well, yes . . . but you shouldn’t compare them to us. We don’t have the advantage of photosynthesis!

There are some astounding contradictions between Christ’s teachings and Christian religious services.

In Matthew 6:1–6, we are admonished not to give or pray
publicly. If you consider taking up the collection as public giving (which it surely is) and hymns as musical prayer (which most of them are) then—taking into account all the long-winded prayers from the pulpit—two-thirds of your average church service is directly contrary to Christ’s admonitions. Well, there’s still the sermon. Christ did seem to approve of sermons.

I never have understood the long-winded prayers, anyway. Prayers that are full of praising, thanking, and beseeching seem to me to be an attempt to manipulate God . . . as if He can’t be trusted to do the right thing. God is treated as if He is some Asian potentate who might chop off your head if you don’t approach him properly. There is an admonition attributed to Jesus that agrees with this:

“And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think that they will be heard for their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what things you need before you ask him” Matthew 6:7–8.

I wonder if all these groveling, long-winded prayers that you hear on the radio and on television come from an inner knowledge that those who are doing the praying are ignoring many of Christ’s teachings.

Then there’s the real toughie: “Do not judge . . .” Matthew 7:1. We all have a hard time with this, yet many Christians seem absolutely obsessed with how morally wrong other folks are. I’ve heard Christians say that homosexuals who have AIDS deserve it. On the other hand, I know some wonderfully compassionate and nonjudgmental Christians. Personally, I much prefer these Christians to the Christians who are obsessed with the specks in other folks’ eyes.
Speaking of “eyes,” in Matthew 5:29–30, after being taught that looking at a woman lustfully is tantamount to adultery, we are told that “if your right eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away,” and, “if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away.” No point, really, in keeping it!

Well, durn! Not being a keyhole peeper, I, for one, look lustfully with both eyes, and I don’t have the slightest intention of gouging them out nor of cutting off either hand, nor do I blame Christians for passing lightly over these particular admonitions!

The Way is impossibly hard. Anyone who tries to follow it is going to wind up a hypocrite somewhere along the line—double trouble, because there are a number of admonitions against hypocrisy.

If you’re a fundamentalist, you’re really up a creek. Fundamentalists are supposed to take everything literally, but they accumulate riches, pray publicly, give publicly. And how many one-eyed or one-handed fundamentalists do you know? Can it be that they don’t read Matthew?

In the Bible, there are some wonderful guidelines for living. Forgiveness, for example, may be the most powerful spiritual tool that we have. And you certainly need help from the Holy Spirit to achieve it. I try to use this one. On the other hand, “Be perfect . . .” (Matthew 5:48) is—like self-mutilation—another one that I pass over. It’s a terrible strain trying to be perfect. “Muddle through” is more my way, trusting that others—including God—will forgive my mistakes.

Is skepticism non-spiritual? A touch of skepticism might be helpful to those who choose to follow televangelists.
I think God gave me the power to discriminate, and so I use it to pick the workable life principles out of the Bible and I skip the rest. Since my brain is less than perfect, I make mistakes, but as long as I own up to them, I’m at least saved from hypocrisy.

When I was writing this little piece, I asked a close friend of mine who is a committed Christian for criticism on what I had written. He told me that the rather extreme admonitions in Matthew are Christ speaking metaphorically. For example, if someone says: “I’d like to give him a piece of my mind,” it is not meant literally. “Piece of my mind” is a metaphor equal to “tongue lashing” or “chewing out,” all of which mean reprimand. I am willing to grant that the admonitions about cutting off hands and plucking out eyes should be read as metaphors. Certain statements, however, have a very direct quality.

“If you don’t put your hands up, I’ll shoot!” for example, has this direct quality and needs to be taken literally. Admonitions like: Don’t pray publicly and Don’t give alms publicly have this direct quality. They do not feel like metaphors. If you say these admonitions are metaphors, then you can say the same about any teaching in the Bible. If one direct statement is a metaphor, why couldn’t any teaching be considered a metaphor? Worse than this, once you say a direct statement is a metaphor, you have to
ask what the metaphor means, and this opens the door to interpretation—I think it means this; you think it means that; and he thinks it means something else. As soon as this happens, you need lots of denominations to accommodate all the different opinions.

My Christian friend also told me that the parts about giving secretly and praying privately were intended for the posturing Pharisees, but if the Pharisees gave in to the temptation to feel holier-than-thou and superior, why couldn’t the rest of us fall into the same error? I remember feeling pretty puffed up and holy back during my churchgoing days. If we think we’re so much better than the Pharisees, haven’t we already become like them?

These last thoughts are couched as questions, because I don’t have all the answers. As a “skeptical believer,” I don’t have to have all the answers. Thank goodness I don’t have to have all the answers. I couldn’t come up with them.

In spite of my doubts and questions about the Bible, much of it rings true. Behind all the inconsistencies, a picture of an extraordinary, charismatic man emerges. A man whose love accepted whores, tax collectors, thieves, and all the other sinners who, like you and me, were so far short of perfection. Such a man is certainly worthy of great love and loyalty.

I can sum all of this up with a two-line verse I call:

_The Skeptical Believer_

_I believe, but I ain’t no pigeon._

_God made man, but man made religion._
Trashing the World

There was a time when we used to dump our garbage in the oceans. Great garbage barges were towed out to sea and dumped. We no longer do this. We have evolved. Now we create landfills to hold our rampant packaging and worn-out consumer goods, and we are busy poisoning our atmosphere and the oceans, but... this piece is about our mental not our physical environment: digital pollution. Now we have learned how to trash the world with our pop culture pumped out over satellite television.

Our money-driven pop culture is a degenerating situation. Since people quickly get bored with a given level of gratuitous sex and violence on television; the level of sex and violence must be continually ratcheted up, and the quality of television continually sinks farther into the mire. “Reality” TV is the latest example of this. To feed the insatiable public taste for sex and violence, the producers must scour the country for our stupid-est, shallowest, and trashiest people. They need people who will do anything in order to be seen on television. Sadly, such people are not in short supply, and the media use them in endless tasteless, trashy ways. Satellites beam our pop-culture trash to every corner of the earth. Since we are trashing humanity’s mental and physical environment, is it any wonder we are hated?
Preshoptual Agreement

WOMEN SHOP differently than men. Women drift through stores in a Zen-like state connecting—or not—at a spiritual level with something they may—or may not—want to buy. The process is vague and incredibly time-consuming.

Men, on the other hand, shop with a goal in mind and like to—as Danny Kaye said in The Court Jester—“get in, get on with it, get it over with, and get out . . .”

Yesterday, when my wife wanted me to help her with Christmas shopping, I agreed with the provision that we have a “preshoptual agreement” that she would shop like a man. As Santa often says: “Ho! Ho! Ho!” I might as well have made an agreement with my dog not to bark when someone comes to the door!

In all fairness, my wife did pretty well. The agreement didn’t break down until she entered the Hallmark store “to pick up a card for my mother” where she was seduced into gratifying the sentimental needs of various aunts, nieces, and in-laws. After standing for ten minutes with our parcels, I knew the agreement had failed and decided to sit down even though there were no chairs or benches available. I folded myself comfortably into a niche created by a wrapping paper display and the opening of the store into the mall. Knowing, at some level, that the preshoptual agreement was fragile, I had brought a book and was soon immersed in the delightful essays of J.B. Priestley. Sixty-nine-year-old men don’t usually lounge on the floor in malls, however. I looked up to find myself being discussed by two socially
conscious busy-bodies—a type commonly found in the Seattle area—who were trying to decide if I had collapsed or was a derelict. I shooed them away saying: “I’m waiting for my wife.” I realized that had my clothes been a bit more disheveled, I might well have gotten twenty dollars, which would have helped with the Hallmark purchases!
Potatoes

THERE’S NOTHING like regular cooking to cause you to burn out on food. Not only do you have to face the same foods over and over at the table; you have to face them in all stages of preparation. As the cook in my family, I have burned out on potatoes.

I have suspected for some time that potatoes are only a vehicle for more tasty substances like butter, sour cream, salt, or cheese. Potatoes themselves have little flavor and are dry unless saturated with something fattening. In my childhood, potatoes had skins that have now been bred out of existence. While the potatoes were just as bland as they are today, the skins had character. They were flavorsome and chewy. A bite of baked potato skin was unattractive to look at but, once spread with butter, delicious and satisfying unlike the white interior, which—with enough butter—might be delicious but is never satisfying.

Recently, I began to think that the fault was not in potatoes but in my being in a preparation rut. I looked in a comprehensive cookbook for some method of preparation that would help me turn out delicious potatoes. The only thing I found that looked different from what I had been trying was a recipe for potato pancakes. That night I labored creatively to make potato pancakes. I wound up with a sadly diminished and corrupted batch of pancakes. There really is no such thing as delicious potatoes.

Having said all this, there is a fish and chips shop in the little town of Camelford, Cornwall, in England that turns
out chips that are so delicious that I can make a whole meal of them—never mind the fish. These chips are made from fresh potatoes and not fried to be crisp. They are slightly soft but chewy, and larger than American fries. I tried to get the shop owner to tell me his secret and only discovered that the chips were fried in “ground-nut” oil—something I finally determined to be peanut oil. Sigh. I guess I have to buy some peanut oil, but I am not hopeful . . . not hopeful at all.
The Old Words

Do I have faith in words?
Can some group of words
Change my soul . . .
Change my heart . . .
Change my mind?
Well, yes . . . the old words can because,
They can be found.
I know just where they are . . .
On my bookshelves . . .
In my books.
But what about the new words?
The amazonoblebarnesamillionbooksatbordersglut . . .
Where fuddled browsers close to tears see—
Writing, writing everywhere,
But not a thing to read.
(A thousand, no, a million monkeys somewhere type,
And words pour out absorbed into a murky info-
sea . . . oh dear!)
So to delight my soul, enrich my heart or clear my mind
I know just where to go . . .
Back . . . always back . . .
To the old words.
The Wrong Duck

My first wife’s father, Johnny Oberg, was a character. A short, amazingly wiry Swede, Johnny had been at sea for most of his life. When he came to the States, he wound up as a steward on yachts. A self-taught horticulturist, superb cook, and raconteur without equal, he spent most of his time on the yachts. His wife and three children lived in a little house on Northwest Fourteenth Street in Miami. During World War II, John worked as a cook in the Biltmore Air Force Hospital and was able to live at home for a change.

The family had a pet duck that went missing. The children were grief stricken, and John and his wife searched the neighborhood in vain. After three days, the duck still had not turned up. Finally, one misty, early morning when he was driving to work, he saw the duck in someone’s yard. He quickly parked and eased himself out of the car, planning a strategic approach so that he could reach the duck without alarming it. Creeping from one group of bushes to the next, Johnny Oberg finally reached the short hedge that the duck was behind. In the dim light he could just make it out through the foliage. He eased up as close as he dared, leaped over the hedge, and grabbed the duck around its neck. The duck was made of concrete . . . a yard ornament.

When Johnny told me this story, he would narrow his eyes and look over his shoulder, showing me how quickly he had looked around to see who had watched him pounce on the concrete duck.
“Oh, Al,” he would say in his thick Swedish accent, “thank God no vun vas vatching!”

I know the feeling. When we feel really stupid, we surely don’t want anyone watching.

Recently I was checking out at the supermarket and there was a stunningly beautiful woman in the next line over. She preceded me out of the market, and her car was parked near my car, so I had a chance to follow her through the parking lot. The view from behind was by far the most advantageous!

I got to my car, opened the trunk, and reached into my shopping cart. No groceries! I’m sure the feeling was very much like pouncing on a concrete duck.
Glut for the Gut

THE PORTIONS many restaurants are serving now are obscene and appetite-taking. As a former restaurateur, I know the rationale:

The cost of food is the smallest part of a restaurant’s overhead. To boost profits, the simplest thing to do is charge $18.95 for a plate of spaghetti and meatballs. The only way to justify this is by giving portions large enough to choke an Italian horse. Since the spaghetti, tomato sauce, and ground meat don’t cost much, pile it on and sock ’em for the $18.95.

My wife and I are onto this, and recently, at an Italian restaurant, chose to order children’s portions of spaghetti and meatballs. You guessed it . . . we couldn’t finish them!

People are getting used to huge portions . . . cramming them down . . . expanding their already stretched stomachs. People like us settle for a doggy bag—if the food is worth taking home (which it often isn’t).

Health experts tell us that we now have a national obesity crisis.

Well, duh!
I seem to be writing about food. I’ve gotten in the food groove and can’t find my way out. Well then, this is a good time to touch on the neglected question of how to eat toast. If this strikes you as trivial, I would agree and suggest you skip the following.

Like potatoes, toast is only a vehicle for butter. Toast is nothing in itself. Only under dire circumstances will someone eat dry toast . . . after getting over a stomach bug, for example.

Now, the purpose of toast is the taste of the butter . . . a taste best perceived on the tongue. When one puts a bite of toast in the mouth butter side up, most of the butter is presented to the roof of the mouth, but there are no taste buds on the roof of the mouth.

It’s really quite simple: Always eat toast upside down. Your tongue will thank you for it!

On the other hand . . . like all pat little theories, this one has a caveat:

Put too much butter on your toast and try to eat it upside down and, it winds up on the front of your shirt.

Sigh . . .

Let’s bumble on, shall we?
Narcissism?

SOME YEARS ago, I noticed that celebrities sometimes married people who look like themselves.

The first time I became aware of this was when Frank Sinatra and Mia Farrow married. Their facial bone structures were very similar. The most recent—and possibly the most striking—example of this phenomenon is the uncanny resemblance between Arnold Schwarzenegger and Maria Shriver.

Why does this occur? Is it ego gone to the extremity of narcissism? I don’t know. You decide.
Thoughts on Writing ‘My Brother’s Story’

IN 1998 I began working on My Brother’s Story, a book that I hoped would be a novel for adults. (I don’t dare use the term “adult novel,” because the term “adult” now means pornographic.)

Since I am primarily a children’s writer, I was not completely sure I could pull this off. When My Brother’s Story was finished in 1999, it became clear that I had failed. It seems I had written a “young adult” novel. After the book was published, however, I was comforted to discover that the “young adult” label was really a marketing designation and that my book transcends age and appeals to the young at heart of all ages.

My Brother’s Story is the story of identical twin boys who are separated when they are two-and-a-half years old. It is about their struggle to get back together.

My own boyhood was idyllic, but underneath the fun, there was a dark aspect to my childhood. Possibly the theme of reuniting twins—one privileged and one deprived—may reflect my own attempt to integrate the idyllic and the dark parts of my own past. This aside, however, I have always been fascinated by the idea of having an identical twin.

We all are alone in the world. Our aloneness is softened by the empathy and understanding of those who love us, but there is no one who completely knows our hearts and souls.

Identical twins are different. They share a closeness that transcends the aloneness the rest of us experience. Also, in exploring the nature versus nurture question, it is interesting
to examine the lives of twins who have been separated and who have grown up under very different conditions.

In my book, the twins theme runs parallel to the theme of love between the races in the South. This too reflects my past, in which I was loved and supported by the black people who helped to bring me up.

When I lived in the Northeast, I ran across intellectuals who didn’t believe that love between the races existed in the South during the time of segregation. They told me I had mistaken Uncle Tom-ism for love. They were wrong. Deep affection and respect was common between good black people and good white people in the South—probably more than anywhere else in the country—in spite of the vile social system of segregation. This fact is a testimony that love can transcend the most difficult barriers.

In My Brother’s Story, the relationship between Linc, a black man, and Johnny, a white boy, is based on the goodness of both characters. As they live together in the swamp, they come to know each other. As they help and comfort each other, inevitably they come to love each other.

The idea of goodness leads to an important issue. In modern times moral ambivalence has become fashionable in fiction—even in children’s fiction. Characters are considered “two-dimensional” if they are clearly good or clearly bad. Children love good good guys and bad bad guys, however. I will go so far as to say children need moral clarity in their stories. They need ideals. The Lone Ranger was ridiculously good. In fact, he was perfect. I loved him when I was a boy. Even today, the shining nobility of the Lone Ranger captivates my own little boy. Linc is
not perfect, but he is an essentially good man. He is a man you can count on to do the right thing, and I make this quite clear in My Brother’s Story. I believe stories that have moral clarity help protect and reinforce the innocence of children. The experience of going into schools on author visits and reading to kids has given me a firsthand chance to observe how thousands of children react to my characters and has convinced me that I am giving them what they need.

Another goal I had when I wrote My Brother’s Story was to show the richness of life as it existed in the South before World War II. I wanted to show how extended families were woven together by storytelling. To do this I drew on stories that were told around my grandparents’ dinner table or at family suppers on their pavilion.

I also wanted to show how children made their own fun in those days. There was no adult-structured play in those days. The pursuit of fun—a child’s proper occupation—was spontaneous, creative, and—in the case of boys—often involved the tantalizing risk of getting into trouble.

My Brother’s Story tells of some wonderful things that existed in the 1930s that we no longer have . . . a profusion of fireflies, for example. It is by no means nostalgia when I say that it was magical to watch hundreds and hundreds of fireflies sparkling in the soft summer twilight. I don’t know what has happened to this phenomenon in the South. It’s possible that fireflies fell victim to pesticides.

My book also shows in some detail the wonderful joys of train travel. When I was growing up, our country had a rail system that was the envy of the world. Trains, most of which had
Pullman cars with sleeping accommodations, served thousands of towns and cities efficiently. Our passenger rail system is no more but, if I have done my job well, those who read *My Brother’s Story* can still enjoy the thrill and adventure of a train trip.

The way of life that existed in the Thirties and Forties was better in some ways than the way we live today. With the exception of modern medicine, modern automobiles, and computers, I would swap the modern way of life for the 1940s’ way, if such a thing were possible. Lacking the ability to move back in time, however, I can at least try in my writing to preserve the memories of what life was like when I was a boy. *My Brother’s Story* should help give young readers a sense of continuity with the past.

Who knows . . . someday, when technology becomes more transparent, there may be a return to a more pastoral way of life. *My Brother’s Story* may help point the way to a slower, richer way of living . . . a way in which we have the time to be more connected with our natural world and with each other. Meanwhile, my hopes are much less grandiose than this. I simply hope to continue to hear that the young at heart of all ages consider *My Brother’s Story* a good yarn.

**Author’s note:** I have just completed an author-read audio book of *My Brother’s Story*. Within the next few months, this book will be available online as a download.
A Mystical View

I HAVE dabbled around the edges of the New Age movement for thirty years. It is because people in the New Age movement have a worldview that is closer to mine than to the rationalist worldview or the religious worldview (the two dominant ways of seeing existence in our culture). I only stick my toes in the New Age waters, however. For one thing, there is so little humor in New Age writings. Also, I am too much of a realist to be interested in some guru’s idea of the material world as a dream . . . or in some New Age apologist telling me that quantum mechanics and science proves that matter is mostly space. I know from personal experience that if I drop a knife point down onto my toe it will create even more space in that particular piece of matter . . . namely, a cut!

I have a mystical world view that comes from a profound and growing sense of the mystery of existence. This sense of mystery comes from within, and it fills me up when I watch my own consciousness or watch the “material” universe.

By what mysterious creative process, for example, is it possible for me to read a work of fiction and be so drawn into its world that its characters and happenings (which never existed) are as real to me as a conversation I just had with my wife. I know for sure that I, the reader, am collaborating with the writer in creating this world even though the writer is dead! What freedom reading bestows . . . transcending space and time and even death!

Similarly, I only have to look at one leaf among the
millions outside my window to be stunned by the mystery of what it is and does. My college degree was in botany. I learned a lot about what goes on in a leaf. I have forgotten most of what I learned. What stuck, however, was a sense of the awesome complexity of the physiology of a single cell—never mind a whole leaf, a tree, or a forest! All the science I have learned has only increased my sense of the mystery of existence.

Oddly enough, as this sense of mystery grows in me, so does my sense of beauty and joy. Having embraced the total mystery of existence, I seem to be freed from the compulsion—but, I hope, not the ability—to use my intellect. It is there, as a tool, when I want it, but I don’t have to figure everything out. All I have to do is marvel at the mystery in which I am immersed. Putting aside the need to solve problems all the time has given me the space to know joy and to feel connected to the ultimate source of joy.
READING THE last paragraph in the former piece, I feel it is a bit of a crock. Connecting with joy is all very well, but of course, it is not as easy as my piece suggests. How often joy is crowded out of life by the mundane. We need our reason and intellect all the time to navigate safely through life, but there are other layers of recurring, multiplying, little, mundane problems, plans, and worries that engage the intellect at its dumbest level. Perhaps this is why truly great intellects often don’t bother with mundane problems. Einstein, for example, often didn’t bother to wear socks or comb his hair.

Television news gives us a-whole-nother (as we Southerners often say) layer of problems . . . impossible to solve yet always able to engage our pernicious little intellects.

Opinionated people—usually “control freaks” at the mercy of their egos—often watch a lot of television news. They believe that they need knowledge of national and world affairs to fuel their opinions. (Just think . . . if you have a broad knowledge of world affairs, you can pass judgment on world leaders and even whole countries. What a vast scope for expansion this gives the ego!)

We do need to be well-informed on world affairs in order to vote intelligently, but television won’t help you there. Television news is shallow, sensational, and biased. If one wants to really know what is going on in the world, one has to (dare I say it?) read. Also, the truth is that we are usually faced with voting for the lesser of two evils—a gut choice, not an intelligent one.
So, as far as television news goes it’s the ostrich-head-in-the-sand approach for me!

Let’s see, there must have been a point back there somewhere. Let me look back at the title . . . oh, yes . . . being human . . . hmm . . . well, we are most human when we connect warmly with others. Egos prevent warm, human connection.

What is the ego and from where does it come?

When we lack a role model to show us how to be, we have to make ourselves up. I think of the ego as a self-created personality (as opposed to one whose growth has been nurtured and guided by a mature role-model). Since we create our egos when we are very young, they are based on immature and unsound premises. For example, a boy who doesn’t have a good father role-model may believe that a man should be aggressive and domineering. Such a false assumption may well be incorporated into his ego-construct.

Being immature, egos do not serve us well in adulthood. Since their foundations are unsound, they are fragile and have to be defended, and thus they cause us to be defensive.

While egos may collapse altogether—a “breakdown”—or explode through their own weak boundaries and become grandiose, intact egos want complete control. Complete control makes them feel safe. Whenever I meet a “control freak,” I know that the ego is running the show.

But, of course, when we are over-controlling, it becomes hard for us to connect. Connecting warmly with another human soul requires sharing, equality, flexibility, empathy, and compromise, and above all, humor and the ability to laugh at ourselves . . . qualities that over-controlling people lack. So . . . if
we want to connect warmly with our fellows, we must grow out of our egos and develop more mature, open, and flexible personalities.

Mistakes help. At some point they force you to laugh at yourself. If, however, an ego has been constructed by someone with a strong will, growing out of it may be a hell of a tough job. It can take many years.

I should live so long!
Day Moon

The morning sky of palest blue contains
A pearl-pink waft of cloud above the sea
Dissolving as I watch,
And high above,
The massive, tiny sphere of white and palest blue
Waits . . .
Colorado Chic

Note: I was in the library looking through historical novels by women and noticed that many chapters began with fulsome descriptions of women’s clothing (not to mention makeup and hairstyles). I had an amusing thought: What would a Western written by one of these women be like? What follows is the start of a Western as written by a woman:

Luke had changed his outfit twice. He was going to the square dance at the Governor’s home and was determined to make an impression on the Governor’s beautiful daughter, Annabelle Preston.

“Shucks, Shorty,” Luke said. This shirt don’t go with these here chaps worth a hang. I ain’t never goin’ ter git ready.”

“It ain’t the shirt, and it ain’t the chaps, Luke. Once you strap on that there hand-tooled gun belt yore color coordinatin’ will be jest stunnin’. Naw, the problem is yore bandanner. That there mauve don’t go with the yaller terbaccuer juice stain on yore moustache.” Luke shot a stream at the spittoon and wiped his mouth on his sleeve.

“Well, Shorty, this here terbaccuer juice blends in right well on this here shirt,” he said, looking at his sleeve.

“Tie on this here taupe bandanner,” Shorty told him. It’ll highlight the yaller stain on yore moustache real purty. . . .”
LAST WEEK I had a surprise in the dentist chair. As the hygienist prepared her tools, I began to experience the most delicious relaxation. I felt the muscles in my abdomen letting go as if they had been injected with Novocaine. I hadn’t even known they were tense, but when muscles let go with a wonderful feeling of relief, they must be letting go from tension. A day or so later I found myself wondering why this had happened.

If my body is capable of relaxing to that extent, I wondered, why can’t I do it at will? And why did it happen in the dentist chair? I knew the reason instantly. It was because I had given up control. The hygienist was in control . . . not me.

As a recovering control freak, I think it was a good sign that my body was able to let go to that extent, but now I won’t be satisfied until I can relax deeply at will. My biannual tooth-cleaning is not enough relaxation!

A kinder way of saying “control freak” is “overly responsible person.” I am not sure why taking responsibilities—or life, for that matter—too seriously would translate into abdominal muscle tension, but I know it does. I am going to find a way to disconnect responsibility from muscle tension. I already know that deep, abdominal breathing helps this kind of muscle tension. Massage helps, too. I don’t want a partial solution, however. I want something every bit as good as the dentist chair, and I intend to find it. I am going to learn to control that damn muscle tension if it kills me!

Oops!
Water

A minnow hangs suspended . . .
Transparent, tiny silver shaft of light . . .
Time stops for a perfect instant.
My Cap Gun

As I approach seventy, I have bought a cap gun. It is beside me on the table as I write, and I am exceedingly glad to have it. Here’s the story:

When I was ten times younger—seven, to be precise—I owned what I considered to be a Dick Tracy cap gun. It was a three-and-a-half-inch, nickel-plated automatic. A perfect design for the hand and heart of a small boy, it would fire off a roll of caps with great precision. It was an ideal weapon for shootouts with my friends. Sometime after the Second World War, I lost the gun and was never able to replace it. I remembered it, however, as one of the most perfect things I had ever owned and have always been on the lookout for another one in antique and junk stores.

My generation has never gotten used to the fact that almost anything can be found on the Web. Two months ago, I remembered this and did a search for Dick Tracy cap guns. Within seconds there, on my computer screen, was the favorite possession of my boyhood. Within a week, the gun was in my hands, perfect but for the fact that the nickel plating had worn off the pot metal. An antique fixtures store soon put this right. Now the re-plated gun beside me matches perfectly the shining memory from my boyhood. The little automatic is every bit as ideal as I remember it and possessing it is an intense source of satisfaction to me. Why is this?

Nostalgia for the past is too general an answer. I don’t long for the past. I long for the way I was in the past. As a boy,
I was joyful a good bit of the time. If I wasn’t in the middle of something fun, I was anticipating the next fun experience. More often than not I was in a state that could be called Nirvana. The bumbling journey towards Nirvana that I am describing in this book is really an attempt to get back to that boy I was sixty-odd years ago. The cap gun is a tangible connection to him. As I sit here admiring my gun, I think: “That boy was real and, by God, he knew what he was about!
Shortcuts to Nirvana

IF YOU are getting tired of all this bumbling, the keys below provide shortcuts to Nirvana. (If, like me, you hate lists, you’ll skip this one.)

TRANSFORMATIONAL KEYS:

SEEKING (insights for change)
ASKING (prayer)
FORGIVING (giving up negative feelings from the past)
ACCEPTING (surrendering control)
BREATHING (feeling the liberation of breath)
FEELING (the life force within)
QUESTIONING (acknowledging the mystery of existence)
ADMITTING (mistakes)
LAUGHING (at the ego)
BLATHERING (talking nonsense to have fun and dissolve self-importance)
REMEMBERING (joy from childhood)
GIVING UP (ambitions and expectations)
CONNECTING (giving attention, warmth, and acceptance to others)
CREATING (beauty and meaning)

Like the old spiritual, Swing Low Sweet Chariot, says:
“If you get to heaven before I do,
Just cut a little hole and pull me through!”
’Preciate it, yawl . . . I sho do!
Bother and O Blow!*

When a mole must do spring cleaning,
He will work quite hard and so,
Moley shocked himself by saying,
“Bother and O Blow!”
But his heart was filled with longing,
And his molish will was rent
By the soft insistent calling
Of spring’s sweet discontent.
So the Mole said: “Hang spring cleaning!”
And he bolted from his home,
And he scratched and scrooged and scrabbled
Up through the fragrant loam.
And his snout popped into sunlight,
And thus it came to pass
That a Mole did roll in pure delight
In the warm, sweet meadow grass.

*This is my favorite poem from my book A Breeze in the Willows (Copyright 1997 by Allen Johnson, Jr.). It is reprinted with the kind permission of Ten Speed Press, Berkeley, California, and is available from your local bookseller, by calling 800-841-2665, or by visiting www.tenspeed.com.
Is There a Wave?

YOU KNOW those long bumps that move across the surfaces of oceans . . . waves . . . yes . . . quite . . . but is there such a thing as a wave? Strictly speaking, a wave isn’t a thing. It is more of a feature of the ocean, like a pimple on a face but not as discrete. The thing about a wave is, it is always changing. By the time you say, “Look at that wave,” it has already changed. It is not the same wave that you indicated. So where is the wave you saw, and did you see it? How could you have seen it if it was changing the whole time you were looking. At which point in time did the wave that you were trying to point out exist?

Like sea foam . . . a collection of bubbles. Choose one. Oh . . . it’s gone. Was it there? The whole collection changes as bubbles evaporate . . . gone . . . no sea foam. But there was sea foam . . . wasn’t there? Wasn’t there?

“Big deal,” you say, “some things are evanescent.” So what? Well, these changeful “things” can tease one into realizing how impermanent everything is. Take me, for example—seventy-odd percent water. (You are too, by the way.) You and I might very well be at the mercy of waves just as the oceans are, if it were not for bones. Without our skeletal frames, every motion would set up waves. We would be all wibbledy-wobbledy. Without our skulls, our heads would be sloshing around as if they were bags of Jello. Our attached features and facial expressions would be shifting and wobbling around . . . ever-changing. A new me in the mirror . . . every time I looked. Walking would be out of the question. Our locomotion would be strictly amoeboid. Yes, it is
bones alone that give us bags of liquid our cherished illusion of permanent form. (Have you thanked your skeleton lately? Without it you’d be Mr. Squishy!)

Since this appears to be going nowhere, I think it is safe to assume that this is a verbal bumble—also known as a “blather”—and since you may not be in the mood for a blather, I should probably stop writing this... or should I? I am feeling indecisive... downright wibbledy-wobbledy. Well, what would you expect?
The Gobble-Kiss

NOTHING IS as representative of the death of romantic love in our society as the gobble-kiss. In current films, boy and girl kiss and, without further ado, jump into bed and act like rabbits. This scenario has no potential for romantic love—which depends on unresolved tension between man and woman—but what about the kiss that precipitates this impulsive sexual behavior?

Kissing techniques have changed. We no longer have Grace Kelly in *Rear Window* looking with torrid intensity into Jimmy Stewart’s eyes and slowly bringing her slightly parted lips to his. Now, we have the gobble-kiss.

When male and female actors (women are no longer called actresses) kiss on screen, they now begin to lick and gobble at each other like two fat men at a watermelon eating contest. Not only is this an utterly unromantic way to kiss; it is not even a fit way to eat watermelon.

Like all old guys, I have been left behind . . . on the rubbish-heap of history.

Sigh . . .
Too Coincidental to be Coincidental

THERE’S A story about an old-time Southern black man who was marveling over a thermos bottle.

“It’s amazin’!” He said. “It keep hot things hot an’ cold things cold!”

“What’s amazin’ ’bout that?” asked his friend.

“Well . . . how do it know?”

When my wife and I moved to Alabama, we lived in a small apartment on the outskirts of Birmingham while we built our home out in the country. We had a temporary phone line and began getting phone calls for someone called “Bernie Wedge.” After quite a few such calls over a period of six months, from a variety of people—young and old, male and female—we decided Bernie was either very popular or a drug dealer. Clearly he had a phone number very similar to ours.

When we moved into our new home fifteen miles out in the country, wanting to get away from the Bernie Wedge fan club (or customer base), we made no arrangements with the phone company to give out our new number.

When we had been in our new home a couple of weeks, the phone rang. Yep, after my wife answered, she held the phone down by her side and looked at me blankly.

“They want Bernie Wedge,” she said.
Mr. Robertson

ANYONE WHO grins all of the time must be hiding something.
O

XYGEN. WE’VE got to have it. Isn’t it wonderful that we are submersed in this transparent sea of air that has just the right amount of oxygen in it? Twenty or so times a minute we take oxygen atoms—new atoms in every breath—into our bodies. They become part of us and play a vital role in our life process.

Is it possible that these atoms that are crucial to our life process—that are embedded in our cells, allowing them to convert sugars to energy—are not us . . . in the sense that teeth, hair, and fingernails are us? These atoms are very transient—being replaced with every breath—but water is transient too, and water is seventy percent of our bodies. That seventy percent must be us, or we are only thirty percent of ourselves . . . whatever that means! It is hard to see that the oxygen in our bodies is not us. If it is us, there are implications.

The mystical concept that everything is a part of a greater unity suddenly takes on meaning at a physical level. If the earth’s atmosphere is a part of the earth—and it surely is—and we are immersed in this atmosphere from which oxygen atoms become us with every breath, are we not a literally one with the earth? It boggles the mind!
My Little Painting*

Iris crown
A verdant slope
That reaches to
The new-plowed fields.
Trees invade the hedgerows.
Then beyond,
I see more green,
Perhaps some pastures . . .
Then a cottage
White against some wooded hills
And distant . . .
Mountains?
Do the clouds deceive?
This tiny window
Draws me out . . .
And out . . .
My soul expands.

*My small gem of a landscape painted by Nancy Lloyd.
You Can’t Get There from Here

THE TITLE of this piece comes from the old joke about the country feller giving directions to the lost city slicker.

“It ain’t no use,” he says. “You can’t get there from here.”

Well, “here” for me is a home with a teenaged boy in it. “There” is Nirvana. Ergo, “you can’t get there from here.”

Teenagers are only half-civilized. The process is ongoing . . . involving continual cajoling, prodding, explaining, and threats. Did you ever try to sort out a quarrel between two teenagers? They will quickly bring you to their level. Only alcohol can so quickly cause the loss of hard-won spiritual maturity.

Alcohol can be given up but, if you’ve got a kid, you’re stuck with him. You can’t drive him downtown and dump him off on the street . . . no matter how much you might want to.

So I notice that these Buddhist monks, gurus, and spiritual teachers who live in the bliss and peace of Nirvana don’t have kids.

Bliss? Peace? With a teenager in the house? No, no, no, no, no, no . . .

Like I said: “You can’t get there from here!”
SEX IS God’s joke on man.

No matter how hard you try to live with good taste, values, and a sense of beauty, there it sits—hard-wired in your brain—way below the level of the highfalutin’ goals mentioned above. Sex really isn’t interested in these goals.

Sex does help us to mature, however.

One of the standards of maturity is being able to postpone gratification. That’s the spiritual purpose of sex . . . to teach men how to postpone gratification.

Sigh. . . .
Let Us Think

I OFTEN hear Christians expound on what God wants. It strikes me as presumptuous. How do they know? For that matter, why would a complete and perfect God want anything?

Well, perhaps Christians make their presumptions from reading scripture. But suppose—just suppose—error has crept into the Bible. Maybe back in the musty, dusty past some underfed, fearful tonsured translator—anxious to avoid the rack—succumbed to the bishop’s threats and took out a paragraph here . . . put in a paragraph there. Maybe the bishop said, “Brother Otto, it would be nice to have a monopoly on this God business. Insert a passage in which Jesus says he is the only way to God.”

I don’t know if something like this happened or if Jesus really claimed to be the only path to God. I do know, however, that this claim—which excludes so much of mankind—is still very much around. It comes at me at unexpected times.

In the past year I have attended three funerals. At each of these funerals, I was told by the minister or the eulogizer that I must accept Jesus in order to get to heaven.

A funeral is not an appropriate place to proselytize. People come to funerals for closure or to express love, sympathy, and support—not to be recruited. But the idea that Jesus is the only way to heaven is the linchpin of evangelical Christianity. And—even at funerals—Christians feel compelled to tell me (in my own best interest, of course) that God will love me and take me into heaven if I accept Jesus as “my personal Lord and Savior.”
Doesn’t that “if” make God’s love conditional? Well, my experience is that conditional love is not love at all. I don’t believe that God’s love is conditional, so I conclude that this idea of Jesus being the only way to God does not reflect the truth. This is why I have such a hard time joining the Christian flock. I’m just not good flock material . . . not sheepish enough, I guess, and besides, I have this pernicious habit of thinking.
PERFECTIONISM IS a mental illness. The sufferer is caught in the smoothing, cleaning, and arranging of his or her material world. It’s a fool’s game because there is always a piece of dust floating around waiting to pounce on the item you just dusted.

There are two cures for perfectionism . . . kids and dogs.

A perfectly neat house with a kid (or kids) and/or a dog (or dogs) in the house?

No, no , no, no, no. . . .

Mess, dirt, spots on the rug, and dog hair . . . learn to love it.

It is liberating!
Pink Dogwood

Pink dogwood . . .
Wanton hussy!
Blushing, languorous limbs
Sprawl across the fence.
Voluptuous . . .
Showing every curve
In soft abandon.
MR. TOLLE tells us that there is no “after” death . . . only the perfect present . . . always there . . . always available to us. I quite agree with him, in theory . . . in fact, however, my dogs, my teenager, my body, and my inadequacies keep me stuck in time. As far as I can see, being human means that death is the only way to transcend the material world. So I ask the question:

After the death of the physical body, is there a soul that goes on . . . taking the personality along with it? It is an age-old question. The intellectual left-brain—the part with the problem-solving program—tells us that survival of the personality without the physical brain is impossible. The emotional right-brain—the part with the love, joy, and beauty program—knows that the most wonderful aspects of existence are not material and could be eternal. Here’s a thought . . .

Perhaps immortality is a choice . . . depending on which program we hook our identity onto. A caveat:

If we identify with the feeling program we better also choose its light side, because the dark side is most definitely there too.
I have a stuffed toy possum in my music studio. He resides on top of a cymbal on my son’s drum set. He has a jaded, cynical expression that is vastly amusing.

It has occurred to me that my possum is the dark side of Pogo. I am a big fan of Pogo Possum, the wonderful comic strip of the Fifties and Sixties that was created by Walt Kelly. The main character, Pogo, was a totally cheerful, optimistic, happy chap. One wouldn’t think he had a dark side, but of course we all do. This stuffed possum of mine is the possification (as in personification) of Pogo’s dark side. I am going to call him Ogop.

Do you know where I’m going with this? No? Well that makes two of us.
HAVING WRITTEN two pieces that mention “the dark side,” I think I’d better come to grips with it.

What is “the dark side”?

For me it means the hidden part of a personality that contains hatred, anger, violence, and sexual feelings (which also overlap into the light side).

Let’s say, for example, that there is love shining out of a personality. Somewhere at the opposite pole of this feeling—buried in the dark subconscious of the personality—is the opposite feeling . . . hate.

Existence is dual. There is no space without matter, no up without down, no good without bad, and no light without dark.

I first became aware of my dark side when, as a young man, I was studying The Course in Miracles—an interesting but nutty program for rooting the dark side out of one’s nature. At some point, under the urging of The Course, when I was trying to get rid of every little trace of anger . . . awful, violent feelings came crowding into my mind. It was like my dark side said: “Oh, yeah? You want to be Mister Sweetness and Light? I’ll show you what you’re really like.”

The Course in Miracles had one miraculous effect on me: It taught me how to forgive. Much of it, however, was bad psychology. (Incidentally, The Course in Miracles was written by woman who was experiencing automatic handwriting—a phenomenon that may indicate the disintegration of a personality.)

If we accept the existence of a dark side in our personality,
it raises an interesting question: What is the point in trying to be good, if we all carry around this dark side? This is where the Christians have a handy theory. The dark side (to them, original sin) can only be solved (forgiven) by the miracle-of-God’s-love (grace). I am not so sure they are far wrong about this, but you can approach it from another direction.

If we view God as a vast sea of love, light, and joy that somehow permeates everything, then, once again, it could be a question of identification. I can accept my dark side as a fundamental reality in the duality of existence and yet still identify with love, light, and joy.

There’s a story about the wise old Indian chief who tells his son that every man has two wolves inside who fight each other. One wolf has anger, hatred, and violence, and the other has kindness, love, and peace.

The young brave asks his father: “Which one wins?”
The chief answers: “The one you feed.”

This story implies that we can choose either darkness or light in our lives.

There is an element of choice in why I identify with the light side of my nature and not the dark, but I can’t take credit for this choice. If I look honestly at myself I know that I make this choice because I have resources. I was given certain strengths, talents, and interests as part of my genetic make-up. I was also given love, guidance, inspiration, forgiveness, and support at crucial times in my life. These are the influences that make it possible for me to identify with my light side, and they were gifts. That’s grace, is it not? And the only proper response is gratitude.
The First Christmas Eve*
—An original carol—

Wanderers traveling through the night
Seeking the comfort of shelter and light,
Would no inn or home receive
Wanderers on The First Christmas Eve?

There was a star that appeared in the east
As a sign to man and beast.
Would the eyes that saw believe
The star that shone down on The First Christmas Eve?

Wise men saw and without questioning
Followed the light from afar.
Shepherds in their awe and wonder
Knelt in the light of the star.
Traveling still were the husband and wife
Carrying their sweet burden of life.
Who would their weary need relieve,
Sheltering them on The First Christmas Eve.
Then in a stable in Bethlehem,
A setting so plain for the perfect gem,
The maid lay down her weary head.
Straw from the manger she used for a bed.

There she rested through the night
Waiting to bring the gift of light,
Waiting for the morrow’s birth,
That would bring light to all the earth.

Every hope for every babe and
Each shining star we believe,
Every deed of love and comfort
Honors The First Christmas Eve.

As we go forward through the years,
Filled with hopes and dreams and fears,
Let’s look back and all receive
Strength from remembering The First Christmas Eve.

*Click audio to hear or download this carol.
Servant or Master?

READING OVER some of these pieces, I am struck that I am in conflict with my intellect—the problem-solving part of my brain. Some might think that I am anti-intellectual. Well I am anti the kind of intellectual who lets the intellect be the master.

Certain intellectuals—usually those who possess extremely keen intellects—become puffed up by how smart they are and start to look down on those who don’t know as much. This is a double error. Intellectuals can take no credit for their intellects. They may have developed their intellects, but they did not create them. Intellects—for that matter, any strengths or talents—come to us as gifts. Also, what counts is not how much knowledge one has but how one uses it.

If the intellect becomes the master, it usually joins with the ego to create hubris—pride on steroids.

The intellect must always be the servant. I view mine as my Jeeves although it is devoutly to be hoped that I am not exactly like Bertie!
In the Backwash of a Smile

My wife is a very smiley person. She smiles at kids, grown-ups, happy-looking people, grumps, old ladies, teenage boys, and dogs. She smiles at everyone. Being English, she is a strider. On a busy street, she usually winds up five or ten paces ahead of me before she realizes it and slows down.

Once, shortly after moving to the West Coast, we were on a busy street in downtown Seattle. My wife was striding along ahead of me in her best English fashion. As I doggedly followed her, I noticed that everyone I met was smiling at me. I smiled back, thinking delightedly what an amazingly friendly city Seattle was. Then I realized the approaching pedestrians were smiling because my wife had smiled at them. I was riding a little wake of happiness behind her in the backwash of her smile.
HERE IS a Repository of Mistakes in my brain. It becomes available for viewing at three in the morning.

Three in the morning is a low time. One’s metabolism has sunk to its lowest. Physical and mental defenses are weak. It is the hour most people die. It is the hour for viewing . . . mistakes.

I wake around three a.m. for whatever reason—possibly a need to go to the bathroom—and, returning to bed, I compose myself for the remainder of my night’s sleep. If I am lucky, I have a book in progress to occupy my mind while I drift back into slumber. Sometimes, if there is something of great interest coming up in my life, I am able to think happy, positive thoughts at three a.m. A new guitar that is soon to arrive will do the trick, or an upcoming trip to a beautiful spot. If, however, my mind is without these distractions and my limited skills in meditation fail to give me some blessed nothingness, I usually get invited to view my ROM.

No, no . . . this is not computer memory—though in a sense it is. My “ROM” is my Repository of Mistakes. All my worst mistakes are there. Mistakes that I have long since forgiven and promised to forget are kept bright, shiny, and whole in my Repository for viewing at three a.m. As I groan and cringe in embarrassment and guilt, they are paraded before my eyes: An old girlfriend seeing me make a fool of myself; unnecessary harshness to a loved one; disloyalty to a friend; mistakes, big and small, old and new—all there for my personal, private viewing. They do not shrink or dim with age. All are fresh and clear,
dominating my mind with their reality . . . THE FLIMFLAMS!

If I am very lucky, my wife wakes up too.

“I’ve got the flimflams,” I mumble. She understands at once and puts her arms around me saying “there, there” . . . “poor thing” . . . the same words of comfort that were desired by Elwood Dodd’s psychiatrist in the movie, *Harvey*. These magical words usually soothe me back to sleep. All too often, however, my wife sleeps on, unaware of my problem. When this happens, there is nothing for it but to get up, have a cup of chamomile tea, and read a chapter of Patrick O’Brien. The main characters in the O’Brien novels, Jack Aubrey and Stephen Maturin, are so wonderfully human and so clearly flawed, that I am able to return to my bed drowsy and comforted in the knowledge that I am not alone.

As I write this, I wonder if it may be our flaws that make us human.

I have often noticed that people are more lovable for their mistakes than their successes. Successes can be admired but are more often envied. Mistakes, on the other hand, when they are admitted, draw us into the human fold. Is it possible that we could strengthen our sense of community, if we were more willing to admit and laugh at our own mistakes and weaknesses? Community strengthened by admitting flaws? It’s an interesting idea that seems particularly appropriate for us imperfect humans. Perhaps, if I develop this theme and really come to believe in it, it will help me at three in the morning with . . . THE FLIMFLAMS.
Self-Hypnosis in Less than a Minute

SOME TIME after I wrote the above piece, I realized that I can deal with “the flimflams” with a quick and simple technique of self-hypnosis that I learned years ago. I don’t know why it took me so long to use it for the flimflams. It seems a bit dim. Anyway, self-hypnosis was taught to me when I was a young man by a well-known psychiatrist in Manhattan who had written a book on the subject. The technique is called the “eye-roll.” It can be used to test for how hypnotizable someone is or to access a hypnotic state. It works like this:

Without tipping your head back, you look up with your eyes as high as possible, as if trying to look through the inside of your forehead. Keeping your eyes directed up, you slowly close your eyelids. Someone watching you do this can tell how hypnotizable you are by the amount of white that is showing just before your eyes close (all white showing—highly hypnotizable . . . half white/half pupil showing—moderately hypnotizable . . . all pupil showing—not very hypnotizable). I am only moderately hypnotizable, but the eye-roll works very well for me.

If you want to try self-hypnosis in less than a minute, do the eye-roll and then, when your eyes are closed, think: “At the count of one I will be in a highly receptive state.” Then, while visualizing the numerals, do a backward count from three. When you reach one—if you’re like me—you will be in a light, hypnotic state and can then give yourself helpful and healing suggestions.

Always try to state hypnotic suggestions in a positive way. For example, instead of saying: “I will not be anxious.” Say:
“I will be completely free of anxiety.”

I was having some minor skin surgery once and did the eye-roll to get myself into a relaxed state. The doctor asked me what I was doing. I explained and told him how to do it. He tried it right there and it scared him badly. He must have gotten a bit dizzy from the eye-roll because he grabbed the table I was on and shouted: “My God!” I found this very amusing. He must have been a bit of a control freak!

Anyway, this way of doing self-hypnosis takes less than a minute and, for me, is so effective that I consider it an “off” switch for a stuck negative emotion such as sadness, irritation, embarrassment, or guilt. It works in calming other types of compulsive thinking such as worry, planning, or anticipation.

In addition to helping to free the mind, I use self-hypnosis to shut off involuntary physical reactions such as emotionally induced intestinal cramps and even leg cramps.

If I get the flimflams or my mind gets to racing in the middle of the night, I need all the help I can get. I combine the self-hypnosis with prayer (ask the Holy Spirit for help finding peace) and then move into conscious-breathing meditation. Nine out of ten times this triple combination gets me back to sleep.

I suppose you could say that the whole business of my controlling moods and sleep patterns indicates that I also am a control freak. I have been over-controlling at times, but it always involved a compulsive element. Self-hypnosis involves control, all right, but it is not about being compulsive. It is about the opposite—stopping compulsivity. It is a way to give the reasonable part of the brain some control over the nutty part . . . not a bad idea, if you ask me!
I HAVE coined several new terms:

The first term is “messtics.” These are would-be mystics who in their desire to be mystics—with no regard to reason, logic, or common sense—dive wholeheartedly into a swirling mess of quasi-magical ideas that I call “goop.”

The second term is “goop” (defined above).

The third term is the term “Gobbledegogoop.” It is derived from “gobble,” a repetitive, meaningless sound made by the stupidest bird (the turkey) and the above-mentioned term “goop.” Gobbledegogoop is the language of messtics. Here is an example of Gobbledegogoop:

“When I entered the crop circle, I felt a kundilini surge of energy move from my fourth chakra to my seventh chakra. I knew I had crossed a lay-line grid that had levitated my spirit essence through the crystal I held into the fourth dimension of the Sun god Ra. The Celtic pentagram had focused its energy into my pineal gland and I floated free of time, space . . .” and—I might add—of all reason, meaning, and common sense!

I believe there are true mystical experiences. I have had one myself. There are experiences that transcend time and space, but—as in every other area of life—it is necessary to get the wheat away from the chaff. Some of the wheat—authentic mystical experiences—happen to, or with, people who are gifted in this realm. Take Henry Goss, the gifted dowser:

I have very little doubt that Goss was the real thing; that
he had genuine, powerful psychic abilities. It also seems clear that, unlike Goss most dowsers, while highly motivated, have little talent for dowsing.

One area of mystical experience that does not seem to depend on talent is the area of near-death experiences and visions. Some of the most ordinary people have had these. To me it is the very ordinariness of these people that makes them so credible and compelling.

I hope that it is clear that I am not pooh-poohing mysticism and genuine mystical experience. I am pooh-poohing messatics . . . would-be mystics who babble on in gobbledegook.

Where are these messtics? For some reason, many of them seem to be in England. It was Secrets in the Fields, a book on crop circles written by an Englishman, Freddy Sylva, that got me going on all this.

There is a chapter in Mr. Sylva’s book called “The Dragon Awakes.” I doubt if any reasonable person could read this chapter and know what it means. It is filled with Gobbledegook. This is a shame, because many crop circles (check out the stunning photos in Mr. Silva’s book) are so perfect, complex, and beautiful that I can’t conceive that they resulted from human intention.

I would like to suggest another way to think about crop circles:

Instead of trying to explain them away with gobbledegook, let’s just look at them with wonder at the incredible beauty and mystery they represent.
Jill’s Garden

Hummers hum and dart and probe
While just behind
The Portuguese laurel rises:
(Shining, greenness . . . Perfect stillness . . .
Quietly holding . . . Precious darkness.)
Lilies explode
Honeysuckle bumbles up and out
Across the lattice work.
Shasta daisies riot.
Asters . . . Echinacea . . .
Glow like jewels.
Three nosey roses
Peer in the window.
FOR ME the three most important words in the English language are home, love, and God. While these words are used in many ways, if you consider them in the sense that makes them important . . . they are all the same thing.
‘FUN! a boyhood’

FUN! A boyhood was my first—and probably my favorite—book. It was a very small book, and it may not have had much literary merit, but it was about the best time of my life . . . my boyhood.

A boy’s true business is getting-into-trouble-having-fun (hyphens used because the two activities are often inseparable). As a boy, I had a gift for having fun. I was very, very good at it.

We are told by enlightenors and enlightenees (my words) that we must try to remain in the perfect present and not be influenced by the past. This is not my way. The eight prime years of my boyhood—from age six to fourteen—taught me about joy. I know from those years of my boyhood what I am capable of, and I live accordingly. The needle on my joy compass points two ways, straight back to my boyhood, and yes . . . straight forward!
Continuum

Mythology’s
The past that never was.
Science fiction is
The future that will never be.
We are in between
Creating both.
THE LONGER I LIVE, the more I see everything in terms of the right-brain/left-brain balance. I even believe that quieting compulsive thinking with meditation is really calming down the left-brain.

The whole right-brain/left-brain concept is a metaphor like yang/yin that reflects the undeniable duality of existence.

I doubt if we will ever be able to use our own consciousness to explain itself, but I have the feeling that consciousness takes place somehow in the interface between the two brains.

I know very little about the dual brain we possess, but I do know that it is more complex than we can imagine. I know that both brains work together in ways we may never fully understand and that each brain has different strengths: The left-brain’s being verbal abilities, linear reasoning, problem-solving for survival, factual knowledge and mathematics; the right-brain’s being visual perception, love, joy, empathy, spirituality, seeing the big picture, and wisdom.

Thinking about right-brain/left-brain metaphor, it is easy to see that in our society left-brain qualities became over-valued at the expense of right-brain qualities.

In my opinion, when someone has a spiritual crisis, as Mother Teresa apparently did, it is because, at some point, their spirituality was developed with too many words and rules, placing it into the left-brain where it does not belong.

Jesus’ wanting to replace the Jewish laws with love, seems to me to be totally in keeping with my belief that God
and spirituality are matters for the right-brain. In any case, I know that as I bumble towards Nirvana, I see the imbalance in our society between right-brain/left-brain qualities as being the cause of many if not all of the contradictions, tensions, and problems of existence.

I believe that as we bring, love, empathy, compassion, and the other right-brain qualities into better balance with left-brain qualities, we will bumble less and even get a taste now and then of Nirvana.

Onward!