

*the best of*

# SCHLAGBYTES

*volume one*



*Family*

*Personal Travels*



DR. CARL A. HAMMERSCHLAG

# WELCOME TO SCHLAGBYTES

Schlagbyte's are the random musings of my rational mind and intuitive soul. For the last six years these weekly ramblings have sustained me. They have allowed me to get out whatever pain and suffering were stealing my spirit, and also allow me to celebrate the awe, wonder and joy in my life.

These are my opinions, you may or may not share them. Over the years many of you have posted responses to these Bytes, some laudatory others confrontative. We have become a readership, who respond to each others' opinions. Some bless me, others curse me and more than a handful, think I'm hopelessly irrelevant.

Schlagbyte's fall into five categories:

- Current events (politics, philosophy)
- Spirituality (values, beliefs, Native Americans, awe)
- Healthcare (policy, practice, ministry/industry)
- Lifestyle (movies, television, sex, romance, humor)
- Family (kids, grandkids, vacations)

After perusing the archives I've decided to put together "The Best of Schlagbytes." They are the perfect reading during your morning toilet trek. They're brief, they'll make you think, and if they piss you off you can wipe yourself with them.

Welcome to my world and enjoy the journey.

Carl A. Hammerschlag, M.D.

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## RE-ENACTING BATTLES – 9/21/97

In one week I visited two famous battlefields: the first in Montana at the Custer National Battleground Monument where the boy-general thought he could beat 3,000 Indians who were lying in wait for him, the second at Antietam in Maryland.

I went to there to watch the 135th anniversary re-enactment of the Battle of Antietam. I went to see this because I happened to be in Washington visiting my daughter (neither of us would ever be likely to go by ourselves). Re-enacting bloody battles seems a little like celebrating the flu epidemic of 1918; I don't see much to celebrate about war.

I was not prepared for the event to move me so—20,000 re-enactors, the largest number any of the participants had ever been in. Drums and fifes playing as I look into the faces of these young boys marching by. Except 135 years ago none would get up when it was over.

I sat right at the edge of the battlefield to watch the tableau unfold...calvary officers in vintage uniforms with sabers...cannons of the exact bore and caliber as those at the battle. Explosives were placed in the ground to simulate the damage...blue and gray falling from the shrapnel. The noise is ear-shattering.

Horses move the cannons around as the battle unfolds.

Before me I see the flags and faces of the 7th Georgia regiment, the 25th Tennessee volunteers, the 8th Albany regulars in their brilliant red Zoave uniforms. Tasseled hats and pantaloons--what a target! Sixty percent of the Zoave regiment were annihilated at the Battle of Antietam.

There is pandemonium out there with people dying slowly everywhere...hand-to-hand combat...in the distance, the drums. I am thinking every high school class in America should see this slaughter because we must find a better way. I am awakened from this reverie when, at the end the announcer says that here, 135 years ago, more Americans lost their lives in a single day than in any other conflict in our history. The audience breaks out into applause, and I am thinking, "What are they applauding for? For the skill of the actors, the memory of the sacrifice of these young people, for war and violence?" I would have preferred silence.

At this poignant moment, my daughter says to me, "Look at this, 20,000 men; if each has a penis that averages six inches, that's 120,000 inches. If you divide that by 12, that means 10,000 feet; that's almost two miles. Can you imagine there's two miles of penis here, and I'm not even going to get one inch."

To which I responded, "I'm railing on about crucial existential issues, and you're thinking about sex. Am I missing something?" And she says, "Not you, Dad. Me."

## HAPPY BIRTHDAY – 4/27/98

I celebrated my birthday last Saturday, and my daughters treated me to a surprise happy hour birthday at a local watering hole. One of my daughters picked my wife and me up and brought us to a table with six chairs. "Who else is coming?" I asked. "You'll see," was the response. Another daughter came, and then two more, one of whom had flown in from Texas.

I love to be surrounded by my women. Their presence is enough to make me smile and dribble peanuts of joy. If you add to this delight a couple of margaritas, my grin becomes frozen. One of them brought along a balloon hat that she had made for me on her way over. She chanced upon a balloon artist and asked him if he could make a birthday hat. "How old is the birthday boy?" and she said, "Old, quite old." "I think I've got just the one for him." He made a Pink Panther, this one replete with boobs and nipples. I put it on immediately and became a conversation piece for passers-by.

From an adjoining table, a young man leans over to me and asks, "Where did you get that hat?" I said it was gifted to me and it's an amazing hat. I put on this hat and said the magic word three times and was suddenly surrounded by beautiful women. "What's the word?" he asked. "Babaloo," I said. "Here, try it on, say babaloo three times, and see what happens."

He puts the hat on, says it three times, and after a minute or so (instigated by their mother), my girls surround him and nuzzle him until he exclaims, "I am a believer. This hat has changed my life!"

This is how I see it: wear a Pink Panther balloon hat with boobs, surround yourself with beautiful women you love, and let others see your joy because that kind of energy is contagious. We need to be revealing and receiving more of that. What a birthday!

## SPEAKING ENGLISH – 5/25/98

Starting in 2001, the Arizona Board of Education will require that high school graduates pass a statewide test before they earn their diplomas. Because this test will only be offered in English, critics have suggested that the test is racist, saying it discriminates against Spanish-speaking kids for whom English is not their first language. It will likely cause them up to drop out of school before graduation, they say, and it violates their civil rights.

This thinking completely eludes me. The only way to ensure that Spanish-speaking kids ever get a chance to compete effectively in contemporary life is if they are able to compete in the language of power. Children from Spanish-speaking homes must embrace English, learn its subtleties, nuances, and master it; otherwise, they will be unable to compete on the open market and control their futures.

This does not mean to give up one's mother tongue. It means to speak it in your home, teach it to your children, tell stories, sing songs, celebrate in your language, but when it comes time to demand one's share of the pie, you must do it in the language of your country's power.

If I were a Spanish-speaking parent, I would welcome the opportunity for schools to commit themselves to teaching my children anything necessary to allow them to share in the American dream. I am an English-speaking parent, and I know that half of today's high school graduates can't write a grammatically correct letter. All parents, independent of their ethnicity, must be able to expect accountability from teachers and their children in the pursuit of a quality future.

## THE CARING AWARD – 11/30/98

Last week I met some of the most incredible people in the world at the National Caring Awards. The Caring Institute chose 15 Americans (ten adults and five young people) to receive this recognition. I was so honored this year, and I couldn't be more proud of a Nobel Prize. To be recognized as somebody who cares is how I would most like to be seen.

I wanted to accept the award graciously while at the same time feeling a bit embarrassed. At the ceremony, I told the assembly that everything I knew was taught to me by others. I shared this award with my wife and children and also with my Native relatives who helped me to relearn what I once thought I knew about how people get sick, how to stay well, and how to let my spirit soar. I shared it with the thousands and I hope tens of thousands of caring people who also belong here. I stood in awe of my fellow honorees whose accomplishments made me feel as if I was working only halftime. Finally, I shared the award with my 85-year-old mother who was in the audience that morning, survivor of the Holocaust who saw her first-born son as a living testimony to the invincibility of a people. She taught me that I never stood alone but on the ashes of those whose mouths were still open and for whom I also spoke.

I spoke for the allotted three minutes, sometimes stumbling and with tears. When it was all over and we sat together on the bus going to the celebratory luncheon at the National Press Club, my mother leaned over and said, "You could have spoken a little longer." My mother is the only one in my family who has ever said that.



## 1968 REVISITED – 12/14/98

My wife and I had a Sunday to ourselves in Washington D.C. and took a nostalgic stroll from our hotel near the Capitol, down the Mall to the Washington Monument and then by the Reflecting Pools to the Lincoln Memorial.

There are benches facing the pools where we stop, and I am flooded with memories, Anti-war demonstrations, Yippies, naked frolicking, smoking dope...a lifetime together through good times and bad.

We walk on to the Lincoln Memorial, passing 'The Wall' on the way, always a moving place for me. Now, at sunset, I'm standing at Lincoln's feet. Faced with the most painful confrontation in American history, Lincoln comes down on the side of preserving the Union. Lincoln's "Gettysburg Address" is the finest speech ever delivered. It embodies all that is noble about the American dream. Lincoln delivered that speech in two minutes. Think about it--everything that ever needed to be said about an ethic of life and sustaining values was told in two minutes. When I tell my wife, "Can you imagine he delivered this speech in two minutes?" she looks at me and says, "You could learn something from that." (Only my mother thinks I should talk more.)

## YO-YOS – 6/1/99

Among the splendid gifts that I received on my birthday was a yo-yo. My daughter gave it to me purportedly to teach it to my grandchildren. She knew I'd play when they weren't around and encouraged me to do it in airports, in my office, and in the writing loft.

I tried to teach it to the kids, but they are so short and close to the ground that the yo-yo just bounced on the floor. In their frustration, they asked me to demonstrate. I went through my whole repertoire: Walk the Dog, Around the World, Over the Falls, Shoot the Moon, Rock the Cradle. I explained that the whole secret of doing yo-yo tricks is getting your yo-yo to 'sleep'. The faster a sleeping yo-yo spins, the longer you have to do the trick. My grandkids were fascinated, and I loved showing off.

It reminded me of the glory days of my youth when one of the most anticipated events of the year was the arrival of the Duncan yo-yo man. Duncan made the best yo-yos, made out of wood in those days. Now they're made out of molded plastic with ball bearings, which allow them to sleep for minutes. Great for tricks!

The Duncan man held contests in the schoolyard. Winners would get the rhinestone-studded championship yo-yo. If you owned one, it commanded immediate respect.

Interrupting my reminiscence, my granddaughter asked, "Papa, Papa, how come you still know how to play with your yo-yo?" By this, I was sure she meant, "How could anyone your age do a kid's trick?" But, my psychiatrist's mind saw her question as a metaphor for life. As kids, we try to get our yo-yo to sleep. As seniors, we try to wake it up.

## FATHER'S DAY - THE GREATEST GIFT - 6/28/99

At 6:30 am on Father's Day, I was leaving Lake Placid, New York, to drive two hours to Albany for a flight to Boston and then back to Phoenix where my family was waiting for me with a huge barbecue. I couldn't wait!

Lake Placid is a picturesque mountain village made famous by hosting Winter Olympic Games. It is now a national winter sport training site. In winter, this place is covered with a 100-inch snow base. To live here you have to love downhill and cross-country skiing, bobsledding, snowshoeing, ice-skating, hockey, and ski jumping, or you'd never survive. In the summertime, this countryside is a carpet of green.

State Route 76 snaked around the Adirondacks through a dense overgrowth of trees--stiletto-like beams of light penetrating through like strobes illuminating this forest tunnel. The Ausable River, one of America's great blue ribbon trout streams, ran next to the road. It has its own fishing fly and the only fly to have its own beer named after it. The rush of its waters accompanied Hayden's "Misa Brevis" on the radio, and I was thinking, "What a wonderful way to start Father's Day."

Until now I'd always had a jaded view about Father's Day, thinking it was the creation of some advertising/PR firm trying to elevate Father's Day to the status of Mother's Day. A crass entrepreneurial attempt at equality through gifts of aftershave, ties, and soap-on-the-rope.

But this Father's Day had me thinking not only of the great gift of that morning but also the treasures that would come at night--to find my babies and their babies waiting for me. I want to say thank you to whatever PR genius created this excuse for a barbecue, so that I might appreciate anew what this holiday is all about --looking forward to seeing the greatest gifts of all.

## THE FIRST CAMPING TRIP – 8/2/99

I took my grandchildren camping for the first time...well, three of them--the seven, five, and four-year-olds. I left the two-year old at home. We spent the night on Spruce Mountain in a clearing that had a 60-mile view of the sacred Hopi and Navajo peak, Mount Humphrey. In the old days, the Indian people who wandered here called this the top of the world. The forest here is thick with ponderosa and cedar, and there are deer, wild turkeys, and bear.

The children and I set up camp, collected firewood, and then went exploring. Marching single file down a deer trail, we hunted for wild chickens and other formidable beasts. We found abandoned mine shafts and imagined those grizzled men with their burros digging ore out of these hills.

We cooked Spaghetti-o's on an open fire--each one of us with our own can that I rigged with coat hanger handles to maneuver on the coals. The kids thought it was the best gourmet treat ever. For dessert, we roasted marshmallows and made s'mores. The kids ate until they couldn't stuff another one of those graham cracker/marshmallow/chocolate extravaganzas between their lips.

Away from the city, a billion stars illuminated the night sky, and we told stories huddling around the fire. The children were enrapt. (I believe my greatest achievement to date may be that my grandkids would rather hear me tell stories than watch tv).

During the night, the moon shone so brightly it awakened me, and I looked over at my grandkids. They were illuminated like a Kirlian photograph with a silver aura surrounding them. I reached out to touch and bless them. If I can still camp out with my grandkids, tell stories, and watch them find as much joy in this awesome splendor as on their video screens, then this earth of wonder and fairytales may still be here for my great-great-grandchildren.

## FISHING WITH 'THE BOYS IN THE HOOD' – 9/13/99

Once a year, for the last ten years, my sons-in-law and I go on a fishing trip. This annual male bonding experience is intended to help me come to peace with the fact that they are regularly sleeping with my daughters. I've come a long way since those adolescent years when I saw them only as rapist swine. Now I have four grandchildren and am feeling better about them.

One of the things that happens on this annual four to seven day event is that my three sons have a chance to gather in unison to torment me. Not only do they torture me about the real or imagined things they do to my daughters, but they also believe it is their personal responsibility to deflate any ego I may have, or as they say, "Evacuate the gas that gets blown up my ass."

In the past, I've always been able to handle this assault because my brother, John Koriath, accompanied me. The two of us retreat into what the boys call psychobabble. This year, John and Kathryn had just had a baby, so he didn't come. I knew I was in for uninterrupted bloodletting.

Instead of camping, we decided to stay in a very chi-chi resort. Our three-bedroom 'cabin' had 30-foot ceilings, a dishwasher, garbage disposal, and sauna. There was a stocked fishing pond in front of it. This was clearly going to be a different kind of adventure, and I was trying to get into it, but while we were packing the truck, I noticed they were bringing their computers and cell phones. I went apeshit! "You're not seriously taking your office with you; this is about leaving work behind, appreciating the natural world, not a technological one. We aren't even camping anymore!" I railed.

The boys finally said, "This is a different kind of camping trip, old man; we're just moving uptown. Get your head on straight and get into it. Isn't that the psychobabble you're always sprouting? If you're gonna be there, be there?" When your own rhetoric is shot back at you, it shuts you up immediately.

"But you can't bring those things on the lake," I insist, to which they reply, "We'll only put the movie disks in during that slow fishing time in the middle of the day."

They didn't play computers; instead, we played Monopoly. After a sumptuous meal, a good cigar, and sippin' whiskey, we played Monopoly. I used to play Monopoly, but it was a different game. My sons are baby boomers and generation X-ers. They love the hunt of taking care of business. Monopoly is now a game of vengeance. Not only do you acquire things at somebody else's expense; you plot to hunt down your enemies before they do it to you. My boys have a strategy before they go into the game: two of them will get together and make deals that will cripple a third, all the time knowing that they will soon eat each other. Don't get me wrong; I was a full participant in this debauchery, but I was giggling and dribbling pistachio nuts from my nose, pontificating about Hobbesian human nature.

I tried wheeling and dealing. I was eliminated with startling speed, accompanied by a heap of abuse. I retired to the sauna. After a day's fishing, a quiet time in a sauna is a treat I can live with.

The following evening, I went out alone to wet a fly in the pond outside. The minute the dry fly touched the surface, a fish would scoop it up--bass, perch, crappie--it was wonderful. I can't remember having more fun. When I sat down to re-tie a fly, I looked up at the setting sun brilliant red and orange, below the towering clouds, touching the tops of big Ponderosas. The smell of pine overwhelming, I thought, "It's worth whatever dumping my boys dish out to come to a place that takes me to another way of seeing."

## RESURRECTION OF A FAMILY – 9/20/99

Sometimes I have an easier time complaining than reveling. There is little question that, as institutions, marriage and the nuclear family are under assault. But there are also signs of its resurrection, as this story in my local paper reminded me.

Shirley and Van Hughes are both 50 years old. They have already reared two sons of their own, but four years ago decided to become foster parents.

Almost simultaneously with their decision, police found ten children abandoned, hungry, and covered with lice in a trash-strewn house in downtown Phoenix. The kids were taken by child welfare officials and placed in different foster homes and shelters. They were kept apart for years. The Hughes first took Maria in 1995 when she was four years old. A month later, they took in Enrique who was five and then three more over the next year. Over the next two years, caseworkers began planting the seeds for them to take the older siblings as well. Shirley balked, but finally they did it. The Hughes legally adopted ten children in the summer of 1999.

At the final hearing, Shirley Hughes' ten children were asked by the court if they wanted Shirley and Van Hughes to be their parents, and they all nodded yes. The interviewer asked the kids how they felt, and Juan, speaking for them all, said, "Now I have a real family, a mother for the rest of my life, somebody who wants me forever."

This is the largest adoption of a sibling group in history. When their story appeared, the Hughes got calls from local and national media and lots of ordinary people who called with words of encouragement and offers of help. An exterminator with seven kids gave them free pest control for a year, some sent money, and a 12-foot dining room table was donated, so they could replace the two picnic tables they now used at mealtimes.

Shirley says she's always been used to getting up early and going to bed late and the kids are great, but she acknowledges, "As teenagers they may be less friendly animals." The Hughes are happy and want other people to know about it because they're hoping they might find room for just one or two kids.

I cannot imagine a greater act of humanity, but I also know that I've been there and done it and now enjoy the freedom from the daily rigors of child rearing! Say God bless the Hughes and all those who resurrect hope and families.

## PARADISE LOST – 3/13/00

Plan an outdoor party on a spring day in Paradise Valley, Arizona, and the likelihood is the sun will shine. It was my grandson's fifth birthday; to honor this occasion, his parents threw a birthday party picnic for 30-plus kids which was to include a petting zoo and pony rides.

It hadn't rained in the Phoenix area for six months, but on his birthday, there were early morning sprinkles and the forecast was ominous. Their rudimentary backup plan (that nobody believed would ever be necessary) was to use the garage as the zoo.

By the time the party began, it was clear there would be no petting outside. My daughter, now closing in on panic, sees the animal trailer coming. My son-in-law has been avoiding moving his vintage BMW convertible out of the garage as long as he can. But it's clear the animals are coming in.

The horse trailer backs up to the front of the garage, and the ponies are led out kicking, manure all over the driveway. Then they bring in a steel mesh enclosure about ten feet in diameter and sprinkle the floor with wood shavings. Next comes two pot-bellied pigs, three goats, five chickens, two ducks, and three rabbits. The ducks and chickens are flapping, the wood shavings are flying everywhere, and the animal droppings are epidemic. My son-in-law, returning to the garage for the convertible cover, is greeted by this tidal wave of peristaltic fragrance and rendered apoplectic at the sight of this farm relieving itself in his house.

I couldn't hold it any more and was laughing so hard that peanuts were dribbling out my nose. Next to me, a little partygoer comes up to my daughter and says, "Excuse me, but the animals are pooping on Allison." To this my daughter responds, "I guess Allison will have to move." Pondering that for a moment, we collapsed together. This is the evolution of our species. We have moved away from the land to dwell in urban sprawl, and when we can afford it, we recreate pastoral splendor in our garages. There we teach our children to get out of the way when being dumped on.

The kids rode horses in the rain and loved it. The animals were cuddled, and my son-in-law squeegeed the garage floor until it smelled like a botanical garden. Paradise was regained.



## NINJA MASKS – 4/24/00

A couple of my grandkids are over at the house, and I ask my five-year-old grandson to turn on the light in the hallway so that his three-year-old sister can find a toy box in the corner. He is within eyesight of me, less than ten feet away, but he tells me he won't do it. I ask why and he says, "It's too scary." I tell him I'm watching him and there's nothing to be afraid of. He points to the wall, "See those masks over there?" Hanging on the wall at the end of the hallway are, indeed, three ferocious looking Balinese masks. "Those are only masks," I say, but he says they could turn into people. He knows because it happens all the time in his computer games. "Those masks could turn into people, fast as Ninjas." "I wouldn't let anybody get to you," I say reassuringly, to which my grandson says, "You're too slow, Papa; they would grab me and kill me."

I am older, celebrating another birthday as a matter of fact, and I have slowed down, although to my grandson that apparently means decrepit. I can also remember what it was like to be afraid of the dark. I used to see boogey monsters coming out of dark tenement alleys, but I always thought I'd be able to outrun them. And deep down, I didn't really think they'd murder me.

The images of fear and violence have changed nowadays. Movies and computer games have graphically featured unimaginable horrors...decapitations with the severed carotid arteries spurting blood, an assortment of tortures unbelievably grotesque. Violence has escalated into an art form, and now you can be destroyed in your own house with the lights on and your parents and grandparents watching. Ours is a culture that has transformed ordinary childhood fears into unacceptable paranoia, and it's become a communicable disease.

Together we walk over to the hallway light, and I say to my grandson, "Tell me when we're close enough so I can let go of your hand." He never lets go as he turns on the light, and I look down the hallway, never taking my eyes off the masks.

## GRATEFUL DEAD TO CHANTING HEAD – 5/15/00

It's Earth Day, and I'm sitting in a big room (actually a yoga studio) whose wooden floors are covered with blankets and cushions. About 160 people are squeezed together, ass to belly, waiting quietly for a yogi to begin chanting. In spite of the cramped quarters, nobody is complaining.

The crowd is comprised largely of baby boomers and generation X'ers but also a number of aging hippies. It's an ensemble that greets each other warmly, and the mellow ambience feels like the crowd in the parking lot of a Grateful Dead concert. The yogi comes in and wends his way into a corner where he sits in a lotus position behind a harmonium. This is a miniature keyboard instrument, powered by a bellows, which sounds like an organ with terminal consumption. With the first notes, a hush falls over the crowd. This music and chanting is hypnotic, and it generates a blissful calm.

My son-in-law then leans over and whispers in my ear, "Old man, can you remember the last time you sat in a crowd like this without a joint being passed around?" I do remember those days, and it makes me smile to think that it's still possible for people to come together in harmony and appreciate the planet and everything that lives on it. We need to be getting together like this more often to celebrate a Happy Earth Day.

## LAKEVIEW, OREGON – 5/22/00

A couple of weeks ago, Stacey Perry, my beloved office queen, got married in her hometown. Lakeview, Oregon, has a population of 3000; it's a place where everyone knows your family history and the car you drive. The only secrets in Lakeview are public, so when Stacey wanted to include some Native American blessings and Jewish rituals in her wedding ceremony, word got around quickly.

I got a call a couple of days before from Pastor Dan, a sweet man who also happened to be one of the town's morticians. Pastor Dan said there were rumors flying around about what was going to happen in church. One suggested that we were going to light a sagebrush fire in the sanctuary. I assured him it was just a little sage in an abalone shell that I'd light and that it was the Native American equivalent of frankincense and myrrh. The incense created sacred space and would bring us all together to bless this couple with our heartfelt prayers. It was a wonderful exchange, and we agreed on the sage, eagle feather, prayer shawl, yarmulke, and the Hopi wedding vase.

A whole entourage of friends and relatives from Phoenix flew into Reno (the closest major airport) and then drove four hours to get to Lakeview. When we drove in, the Elk's club marquee announced the wedding reception the following night.

At the motel we were greeted by a bag of homemade chocolate-chip cookies, and two hours later we were at the wedding rehearsal which was followed by dinner at the clubhouse of the Fraternal Order of Eagles...well-stocked bar, an unbelievable potluck dinner, and Aunt Shirley, a one-handed guitarist who sang "Ghost Chickens in the Sky" as the after dinner entertainment.

The next morning I went fishing, while the women of Lakeview, visitors included, decorated the reception area. The fishing could hardly be described as splendid, but the wedding ceremony was a highlight in my life. Protestant minister, Catholic soloist, Jewish psychiatrist with sage bundle, and an entire community connected in ecumenical spirit to witness this most ancient ritual that binds us together as social beings.

I've lived in Phoenix, Arizona, for 30 years; most of its millions have arrived since then. We have freeways that connect downtown with suburban communities with stucco walls, red-tiled roofs, palm trees, swimming pools, big malls, and lots of fast food franchises. Even though I live here, it doesn't feel like a hometown community. I don't know, much less celebrate, with the people on my street. I miss it and know it's possible to feel connected even in a city. I was raised in New York City, where there were 3,000 people on my block. It was a neighborhood though. We spoke the same language, celebrated the same holidays, and knew every shopkeeper by name. I miss the camaraderie I felt in Lakeview, but it does remind me that the heart of America is open and still beats strong together.

## THE BOYS' TRIP – 9/25/00

Every summer I go on vacation with my sons-in-law. This is a male bonding ritual called The Boys' Trip. It was intended as an aid in coming to peace with the fact that those rapist swine were molesting my babies. For their part, they seem to love teasing and humiliating me. Their competitive hormonal strivings are usually expressed by assaults on my encroaching senility and imagined loss of manhood. This decade-long swordsmanship has been made bearable by the presence of my friend and brother, John Koriath, who keeps me from ripping their throats out.

This year we went to Doe Bay, the second time we've been there. We love this verdant retreat on Orcas Island; it is one of the last outposts of the communal 60's and thrives on good karma. Here you can hide without phones, faxes, or computer plug-ins. You eat exquisite, healthy food and soak naked in hot tubs and sauna. We come here to separate ourselves from the world, where the most important decision is whether to eat first or go to the tubs. We come to this place of breathtaking beauty to fish, kayak, soak, be massaged, and liberate our souls.

There were so many exquisite moments; here are some highlights.

John and I took a long stroll (The boys call it a sweetie walk.) and came upon a gingerbread house surrounded by an explosion of rainbow flowers. It was an antique gallery but also served homemade pastries and coffee on the back patio. We didn't have a cent between us; I was reluctant to ask the proprietor to extend me credit. I come from the streets of New York, where the karma is do it to somebody before he does it to you. John, however, did not hesitate and asked him if we could sit and eat and pay him later. He told him we were staying just down the road at Doe Bay and were out taking a walk. He responded without hesitation, "Sure, that's why I came here; it's a place that believes in good karma. I know you'll come back."

Another happened on our salmon fishing expedition where we didn't catch a fish. When the mate winched in the last line, he saw something on the hook; as it came closer, he announced, "It's just a little sole." which pretty much summarized what the trip is all about anyway.

Finally we were gifted eight Dungeness crabs but had no pot to cook them in. We stopped at a local restaurant and asked if they'd cook 'em for us and we'd have dinner there. The cook said the place was closed for dinner, but we could use her pots and cook them in the kitchen. Only on Orcas, where good karma is still alive and the Age of Aquarius still dawns.

## THE OFFICE OLYMPICS – 10/2/00

One of the sacred places in my life is my writing loft. Nobody disturbs me there without suffering the outrage of trespass. Except for my grandchildren who announce their arrival at the foot of the spiral staircase, "Papa, we're coming up." Nothing takes precedence over those moments when we get to play office basketball.

On the wall opposite my couch hangs an inaugural Vancouver Grizzlies calendar that has a small basketball net attached to it. The basket is suspended over a trash bucket. We roll up paper balls on which we put our initials (for later sale when we become famous) and throw them into the basket. There is a complex scoring system; depending on how old you are, you get to move a little closer.

When a shooter comes to the line, I serve as the stadium announcer. My grandsons represent all of the boys in the world who are sitting in the stadium cheering them on; the granddaughters stand for all the girls of the world, similarly cheering, and I for all of the old people in the world who also shout, until the loft becomes a screaming multi-generational Olympic venue.

The winner gets first choice of candy from the stash in Papa's top desk drawer. When I win, I tend to get a little exuberant. With all the old people in the stadium standing up and waving their canes, banging their walkers, I do an impromptu song and dance routine. Today my eight-year-old granddaughter said, "I'm not sure I can keep playing with you, Papa. You are so ridiculous." I'm hoping that as long as there is candy in the drawer, I can get away with it.

## CALLING CRAB POT – 10/9/00

On the recent Doe Bay Boys' Trip, we chartered a boat to take us salmon fishing. The captain was a chain-smoking, gravel-voiced Vietnam vet in his mid-fifties. Captain Bart was a geologist, hotelier, land developer, and bar keeper who now ran a fishing charter service. The first mate was an old friend from Alaska, now getting too old to haul gill nets and learning the charter business.

We all got together pretty well as we sailed around the gorgeous San Juan Islands. The lines were dropped, and we waited for the big fish. In the meantime, we indulged in libation, revelry, and repartee.

We didn't get a bite all afternoon, and Captain Bart was feeling bad about the inactivity. He mentioned that, if all else failed, we would stop on the way home to check on his crab pots. After a couple hours, my sons-in-law were ready to go back to the hot tubs, so when the Captain made his crab pot announcement, the boys began militating for return. They finally convinced the first mate to vote for getting the crab pots. I pleaded with the captain to stay on such a beautiful day, the sun coming down, birds flying, and maybe a feeding fish. Captain Bart voted with John and me for a while but finally announced, "I'm calling crab pot." The game is over when the captain calls crab pot.

On the way home the boys, flush with victory, announced that, if I didn't change my senile ramblings, they were going to call crab pot on my coming on any more trips. My brother, John Koriath, said he wouldn't call crab pot on me even if he had to change my underwear. When the boys pressed him, he finally acknowledged that if he had to wipe me, maybe he'd call crab pot too. Under those conditions, I agreed; I wouldn't want to come.

Then I wondered what it would take before my boys would call a vote for my final crab pot and leaned over and made John swear to me that he'd sit on my committee when they called my last crab pot.

## THE ANNIVERSARY – 1/1/01

A couple of weeks before Christmas, my daughter comes to me and says, "Your wife tells me you're not available on Sunday morning, the 17th." It was true; I was going down to the reservation for a ceremony. She responded, "You need to be here--no ifs, ands or buts." She rarely makes such demands so I know something important is happening. I give her my solemn word that I'll get back at 11:00 am. In the days before, I get subtle hints from other members of my family about the importance of getting back in time, or I'll be in deep poo-poo. As socially obtuse as I sometimes am, even I know something important is going to happen. Elaine and I are celebrating our 40th wedding anniversary on December 26 at which time we will be out of the country.

I do get back and am told to dress up in western garb and not to look outside. Finally there is a knock on the door, and a young cowgirl announces, "Your carriage is ready."

Outside the gate are a horse-drawn carriage and all my children and grandchildren. My daughters are in long wigs and saloon girl costumes, my grandkids on scooters and bicycles. We are trumpeted into the ornate carriage. Then with kids leading, we parade through the neighborhood. Cars are beeping, people are waving, and kids are laughing. I feel like the marshal of my own parade (maybe closer to Alan Bates in the King of Hearts) with a peculiar group.

One driver asks, "What are you guys doing?"

"Celebrating a 40th wedding anniversary," somebody yells.

To which he responds, "No shit! Forty years to the same person--that's unbelievable." I ponder his amazement as the procession continues. I'm thinking this has to be heaven until we stop and are led under a wedding canopy. It was made from the prayer shawl I gave to my often maligned son-in-law at his wedding; he conducts a marriage renewal ceremony. One of the few times I admit I was at a loss for words.

I'm still thinking about the guy's amazement. How do you stay married for 40 years to the same person? It's not easy--mutual respect, tolerance, family, prayer, a sense of humor, a willingness to struggle, and a commitment not to give up the struggle are crucial elements. Equally important, I think, is giving each other space. Space to be yourself even if it's not your partner's space. Space to indulge your idiosyncrasies without driving your spouse insane. Space to spread your branches, knowing your tree trunk is solid.

On this Sunday morning in a horse-drawn carriage, surrounded by my immortality, I touched the face of God.

## MY INDESTRUCTIBLE MOTHER – 2/12/01

My mother has been getting shorter and shorter of breath of late. It's gotten to the point where she now has to rest after taking a shower or getting dressed. Her doctor says she has a leaking mitral valve so every time her right ventricle pumps blood into the pulmonary artery and into lungs, only half gets there; the rest gets pushed backwards. He recommended she consider surgery because she is still in good shape, and he thought the chance of operative success about 90 percent.

She goes to a heart surgeon, who spends a lot of time with her; after the exam, he tells her he can fix the valve, but she ought to think seriously about it. At 87 years of age, there are more risk--no matter how good a shape you're in. It's a long time to be under anesthesia, and brain circulation isn't always great. The surgery could be a success, but you might not. Your mind is sharp; you're playing bridge every day; you go to concerts and take care of your own house. Even if surgery gives you several more years, you ought to know it's going to take eight months to a year to recover fully from this major operation. There are also medicines that will help you breathe better for a long time.

My mother asked him what he would recommend if she were his mother. He said, "First of all, I'd tell her the odds are more like 60 percent, and if she were as fully functioning as you, I'd tell her not to do it." It didn't take my mother a millisecond to decide. She said she felt as if a weight had been lifted from her chest. "What's the point?" she said, "For a couple more years, I could also end up sitting in a wheelchair with my tongue hanging out; that's not me."

She had been scheduled for an angiogram for which I made arrangements to be there. The test was now unnecessary so I said maybe I wouldn't come out. "Come anyway," she said. "You have a ticket. You made the time. Let's have a party and celebrate life." It didn't take me long to decide a party might be a good idea.

My heart is heavy. Her decision is irrevocable; her leaky valve is not going to get better. I have always had a sense my mother was indestructible. My mother has survived Nazis and two husbands and spent a lifetime working. Now she plays bridge (sometimes twice a day), gives luncheons, bakes, e-mails her grand-kids, and does exercises to a videotape every morning. Yeah, let's party and celebrate life.

She greeted me with homemade pea soup loaded with kosher knockwurst, one of my all-time favorites, followed by cheesecake and coffee. Then she invited friends, and we played bridge until I pleaded mercy and went to bed.

In the morning, she said she wanted to go over some things and sat me down with a pad and pencil. She wanted me to write down her lawyer's name, what bank her CD was in, the address in Germany to send



a copy of her death certificate to discontinue her reparation payments. "There is always \$5,000 in my checking account to cover my funeral expenses," she said."

I raised my hands and said, "Enough, Ma."

She said, "Hey, this is my party, and it's not over yet. I just want you to know what to do with my stuff when the party's over." We laughed and cried.

I'm thinking your mother always has something to teach you. It doesn't matter if she is here or not; she is indestructible. I'm hoping I can party with my kids when we have this discussion. Sit around together, listen to some Jerry Garcia, open a bottle of vintage port, light some sage, and talk about what happens when the party's over.

## TO TATTOO OR NOT TO TATTOO – 4/23/01

Maybe it was because my birthday fell on Senior Citizens Day this year that I felt older. I tell myself I'm still the vibrant, participatory, stimulating, bon-vivant I always was. Still scuba- diving, wading in wilderness streams, practicing yoga and doing circuit training...but I'm also taking pills, I'm not as fast or strong, I can't remember stuff as well, and my body aches longer.

Wish it didn't feel like such an assault on my manhood; growing old is hard in America. For decades, our views about aging have been formed by a media obsessed with youth. Magazines, tv, and movies all cater almost exclusively to the young so that getting old seems unattractive. Our life expectancy keeps increasing so we are seeing more and more older people who no longer act their age. Seniors are triathletes, body builders, cyclists, executives, artists, jugglers; they even get tattooed.

I thought about getting a tattoo to celebrate my seniorhood. Actually I thought about it before, but my old preconceptions told me it looked cheap. The body was not a billboard for messages, and Jews didn't intentionally mess with the perfect body God created for them. I asked my brother, Rabbi Gershon Winkler, about the Jewish prohibition of tattooing; he said it was based on the ancient Babylonian Talmud, written in Aramaic thousands of years ago, where it said Jews were commanded not to mark their skin with the symbols of their enemies. They couldn't bear the markings of Ammonites, Hittites, Moabites, Canaanites, and Philistines, but a thousand years later, others interpreted it to mean no skin markings at all. It's all interpretation. Nowadays, I'm less concerned about the taboo than I am about Hepatitis C.

I have also found a symbol that I can live with; it's a turtle. In Native American legend, the Earth is supported by a turtle which sustains and heals it. In every culture, the turtle is a positive symbol, an image of persistence, wisdom, fruitfulness, even holiness. I collect turtles; they remind me of what I'm supposed to be doing here. I'm thinking about becoming a tattooed turtle man.

Help me out here; what do you think? Are these the musings of a man who is

- a. denying reality?
- b. retreating into adolescence?
- c. raging against the coming night?
- d. A-OK?
- e. other (write in)

## THE TATTOO POLL – 5/14/01

The results of the tattoo poll are in!

I first want to say thank you to the hundreds of you who responded. Your humor, insights, encouragement, and ridicule provided me with hours of giggling punctuated by moments of hysteria. Seventy percent of the respondees thought it was okay (usually with an explanation). Twenty five percent of you felt that denial, an adolescent retreat or fad, raging against the night, or all the above were the likely reasons for doing it (but most felt I should do what I want). Five percent didn't give a rat's ass, basically believing that in 100 years it wouldn't make a difference.

Few of you just answered A, B, C, or D. Virtually everyone had his opinions. They ranged from applause to fear that I was going off the deep end. Some of you wondered why a discreetly placed turtle and not a three-masted schooner across my chest. Some wanted to watch it migrate as my body sagged. Some counseled that I concentrate more on being a light than a lampshade (which actually caused me a brief pause).

Thank you all for your considered responses; here is the rest of the story...For years my daughter had been talking about getting her nickname "3 B's" (blond, blue-eyed, beauty) tattooed in an obscure place. She checked out a tattoo parlor (now called a design studio) where, because of who she is, she developed a personal relationship with Michael whose portfolio and goodness of heart she assessed. She came to me and said, "Let's do it." and I was ready.

The studio was located in a corner business mall. Inside the curtained windows was a small waiting area whose half-walls looked over the entire studio, revealing everything that was going on. The studio was divided into cubicles that looked like beauty salon alcoves. We signed the requisite release forms and then looked at a library of body-art magazines until we were invited through the swinging door into Michael's cubicle.

My daughter wanted to go first and climbed on to a high barstool. Michael squeezed the brilliant, rainbow colors into tiny disposable cups. He covered the tattoo gun with a disposable plastic bag, put in a sterile needle, and in 45 minutes inked on three cute honeybee caricatures.

With an open space and over hearable conversation, they soon found out I was a psychiatrist which stimulated a conversation that ran the gamut from psychoanalytic interpretations of tattooing to how one maintained relationships, ceremonial banter of tattooed initiates.

Mine took one and a half hours; it was prickly, but not painful, and when it was done, I had a grandfather turtle discreetly inked. Michael told us we were the first father/daughter team he had ever done and that I was his oldest first-timer.

I can see my turtle, and I like him. Even if his jaw drops and shell sags, I'm hoping he will still talk to me. As The Song of Solomon (ii., 11, 12) says,

"For lo! The winter is passed, the rain is over and done, the flowers appear on earth, the time of the singing of birds is come, and the voice of the turtle is heard in our land."

To see photos of the tattoos, you can visit [here](#).

## DOING NOTHING IS DOING SOMETHING – 7/30/01

It's our annual fishing trip, and my sons and I are 20 miles, dirt-road-deep in the White Mountains of Arizona. Reservation Lake is a pristine jewel filled with big trout including the rare Apache trout. It is surrounded by ponderosa pine and alive with elk, bear, deer, and eagles. We are at the base of Mt. Baldy, the home of the Apache spirits. The nights here are so brilliant that the sky is a real-life Las Vegas billboard.

My four sons-in-law did not bring their laptops or DVD's which filled me with congratulatory joy. They did, however, bring along walkie-talkies. They wanted to talk to each other while they were fishing on separate boats--to describe, blow by blow, the competitive trophy fish hunt. I railed on about it, of course.

Late in the afternoon, they all went to take a shower 20 miles away. I declined the invitation and instead launched myself in a float tube. This is a place I love to be...alone, on the edge...the sounds of humanity washed away in the silence of splendor. It's dusk on Reservation Lake, and the hatch are hitting the water. An osprey swoops down to make a catch. Casting a dry fly, I watch it move on the surface. There is such magic in this moment. In my reverie, I flashed to a scene with my father on the Dyckman Street Pier in uptown Manhattan. The Hudson River had catfish, eel, and flounder. We'd sit quietly next to each other for hours. My father, a Holocaust survivor, was a soft-spoken, gentle soul for whom quiet predictability was life's most precious gift.

In those quiet moments, I'd imagine I might catch a shark. Maybe an old shoe would contain a diamond ring, even a dead body. These moments filled me with dreams.

My father might lean over and ask what I was thinking. I'd say, "Do you think there are sharks down there?" My father told me, "Anything you can imagine is possible." Then it would be quiet again, and we'd watch our lines. Doing nothing, just being in that moment, was enough.

I get a huge strike...could it be that big Apache trout I'd never seen? Forget the showers--make times to be in the moment!

## THE LIGHTS OF THANKSGIVING – 11/26/01

The weekends before Thanksgiving have become special ones for me. I go to the annual National Caring Awards ceremony in Washington D.C. Ten adults and six young people who embody the principles of caring are selected every year from among a quarter million nominees. These special people fill me with a sense of hope in the midst of a world filled with fear and vulnerability and allow my spirit to soar. Check them all out at <http://www.caringinstitute.org>--I'll just tell you about one of the young honorees.

Brandon Fernandez is seventeen years old. He was born with a 90 percent hearing loss and underwent multiple surgeries to restore his hearing. During that period, he developed a speech impediment and stuttered which made him afraid of speaking to others. In elementary school, a teacher yelled at him, thinking the shock would make him stop stuttering, but it only made things worse. Brandon withdrew and built a wall to protect himself against similar rejections. When he was 12, a teacher introduced Brandon to poetry and photography. Through them he found an amazing way to communicate his feelings and thoughts to others. When that teacher invited him to read his short poem in class; it took him ten minutes to recite it. During that time, no one interrupted him; not a single student laughed or made a sound during his recitation, and when he finished it, they applauded.

Since then Brandon has spoken at meetings in front of thousands where he talks about a program he founded called Expressions. In weekly classes at a local elementary school in his Brooklyn community, he teaches young children how to express themselves through poetry, art projects, and photography. He also teaches a class in self-esteem. Brandon has written a curriculum that will be available to other kids who want to start similar programs in their own communities. He says Expressions teaches that through speech, poetry, photography, dance, and painting, everyone has a voice with something to say.

When Brandon received the award, he gave a short acceptance speech and ended his remarks by looking directly at his mother seated in the audience and saying, "My mother named me Brandon which means 'he who brings the light.' I want to say, 'Thank You, Mom,' for always helping me see mine."

Happy Thanksgiving for all of our lights.

## HANUKKAH OLYMPIAD – 12/10/01

We are entering the season of miracles. Today is Hanukkah, the Festival of Lights, which commemorates the victory of the Jews over Antiochus Epiphanes who desecrated the holy sanctuary with idol worship. The victorious Maccabees entered Jerusalem and purified the temple whose altar had been defiled. They built a new altar and then rekindled the eternal flame that hung above it. The oil used to light that flame was supposed to be enough for only one day, but miraculously it burned for eight. We are told that, once kindled, the light of the spirit never goes out.

As part of the seasonal celebration, I promised my grandchildren to take them to see Harry Potter at the movies. In the process of getting it all together, however, we missed the show time. Their disappointment was lessened when we decided to hold an Olympic competition. There were three events: the first was shooting baskets with rolled up paper balls, the younger kids getting to stand closer to the basket. The second was rock throwing for accuracy and involved defeating the Silicamonsters of Tralfamador who live in the jungle up the street. We find them strewn about in their daytime disguises as bottles. We capture these monsters, line them up, and throw rocks at them; the most hits win. The third game is a timed rope-climb up into our treehouse, then swinging down screaming like George of the Jungle. Winners get to stuff their faces with candy, and everybody wins something.

As we light the miraculous spirit candles, I am surrounded by my grandchildren, who are still munching their Olympic game winnings. I look at them and understand anew what the miracle of lights is all about. We are all given enough oil to kindle some brief lights; we, in turn, kindle others. In this season of holy birth and rededication, recall the commitments to your eternal lights.

## A NEW YEAR'S BLESSING – 1/14/02

It's a New Year, which means that by any measure all of us, and everything around us, has become a little older. I spent New Years at the Rancho la Puerta, a world-class activity-oriented health spa in Tecate, Mexico. Pre-dawn hikes, yoga, dance, volleyball, Pilates, fitball, massage, vegetarian cuisine, hot tubs, after-dinner chamber music--this is a place that stimulates a healthy lifestyle. As I get older, I find myself needing this impetus to participate in aerobic exercise. It's getting too easy to sit and read the morning paper rather than work out.

I told my nine-year-old granddaughter about my upcoming trip to the Ranch, and we got into a discussion about how long I might live. She asked if I was going to die; catching herself, she added, "I mean soon, Papa. You're healthy now, right?"

"Yes, I am," I said.

"Do you have high blood pressure?"

"As a matter fact I do, but I take pills for that, and I keep doing all this exercise. I plan to be around for a while."

"I'd cry all day if you died. I'd cry for a whole year, and I'd come to see you every day."

It brought tears to my eyes. I told her she didn't have to come to visit me because I'd be with her wherever she was. We were quiet for a minute; then she broke the silence with "Let's play basketball," and it was clear this discussion was over.

My blessing to you, to all my relations: may you keep yourself healthy and spend time with someone you love, so that you're always with them.



## EXTINCT LANGUAGES – 1/28/02

The Associated Press recently reported that from 50 to 90 percent of the world's 6,800 languages will be extinct by the end of the century. Half of today's languages are spoken by only 2,500 people each; some of those people are the last speakers of their language.

Marie Smith, 83, an Alaskan Eskimo, told the AP interviewer that she was the last person of her tribe who could speak the Inuit language, Eyak. She said that it was horrible to be alone. She knew that when she died, her community would lose a rich source of their people's history. What wisdom her tribe had acquired, told in stories using their own language, would be lost forever and with it a piece of the tribe's soul.

A culture's wisdom is not transmitted through its DNA but through its stories. Biologic capacities may be genetically transmitted, but a culture's capacity to distinguish good from evil and walk an ethical path in life is transmitted through its myths.

Every culture has found unique and acceptable ways to explain the unexplainable. Existential questions such as 'How did we get here?' or 'Where are we going?' aren't more conclusively answered today than they were in Biblical times. Whether one speculates that biological matter was formed from atomic particles ignited by a cosmic flash, a lightning bolt thrown by Zeus, or grains of sand formed into a universe on the back of a turtle -- all myths have merit.

What happens when we lose languages is that we move to a limited menu of choices that help explain how we survive on the planet. Soon there could be only one language and one story. Such limitations take a little soul from the diversity of humankind.

Don't let your stories die, and tell them in your own languages because they contain traditional wisdom that has not been improved upon; they help us make sense and give purpose to our lives.

## FLAPPIN' LIPS AND STRUTTIN' HIPS – 3/25/02

I'm not one of those grandfathers who unravel photographs of my grandchildren at the flimsiest excuse. I do, however, love to tell stories about them. They are such spontaneous creatures who do and say whatever impulse moves them. My grandchildren do not take me seriously; they see me as just another kid.

One afternoon last week I played hooky and went to a Cactus League baseball game with my seven-year old grandson. I introduced him to my kind of game with beer, peanuts, and belching. I was explaining the scoreboard to him, how we could tell what inning it was and how many runs, hits, and errors there were. He listened for awhile and finally turned to me and said, "Papa, do you ever stop talking?" Not only do they not take me seriously; they don't take themselves seriously. They love to play, and they infect me with their joy, wonder, and wisdom.

We went to a yoga retreat with lots of visiting masters. The evening program was communal dancing and chanting. Two of my daughters are gifted yoga teachers, so we went as family to the evening events.

As I entered the student activity center, my grandchildren ran up and urged me to join them upstairs and play monster instead of going to the dance. They had already scoped the dance scene out and decided it was too ecstatic, not enough hip-hop. I was actually looking forward to dancing, but they had discovered an empty exercise room. Even though I wasn't in my monster mood, I was easily led off. The room upstairs happened to be lined wall-to-wall with floor-to-ceiling mirrors. One look at the place was an invitation to watch ourselves make faces. Then we decided to watch how we walked and under each other's gaze strolled across the room. I then suggested we try to walk with attitude. "Let's walk like we're telling the world who we are; here I come, world."

Without much hesitation, my ten-year-old granddaughter twirled around and started a seductive stroll down the imaginary runway. One foot in front of the other, she wiggled her hips, put one hand on her waist, and with the other, twirled her sweater. My grandsons screamed, and I whistled. The boys were somewhat reserved and encouraged me to go next. I did my best Superfly imitation with what I thought was an undulating cruise and began to sashay across the room. The kids collapsed in hysteria...thought I looked like a spastic stork.

The eight-year-old redhead followed. This fireball of activity moved to the starting line, put both his hands up in the Hook 'em Horns configuration (which I learned was a very cool, hip-hop sign), and proceeded to break-dance across the room to hoots and cheers. The seven-year-old who has hair growing out into a ponytail approached the line next. He shook his hair down like a racehorse at the starting gate and, with his arms outstretched, marched like a drum major while announcing his name as we applauded thunderously. He finally came to a stop in front of us and said, "It's more fun to be dancing up here." I'm thinking how wonderful it is to be dancing anywhere and how lucky I am to be dancing with my babies.

## WHEN BASEBALL WAS KING – 4/29/02

Reading the morning newspaper with my first cup of coffee is one of my most ingrained habits. Increasingly, however, I've noticed that the habituation does not help me to come to every day with joy. A couple of weeks ago, I skipped the ritual, started my day earlier, and took the afternoon off to watch my grandson play in his first Little League game.

He was wired in anticipation and couldn't wait for his first game to begin. He is a gifted athlete with lots of energy that is not always focused. For example, he started the game playing in the outfield where he was waving and jiggling with excitement. When it came time to bat, he was the picture of intense concentration.

I was watching the game with dozens of families who were congregating on the sidelines and in the bleachers. I was nibbling on French fries when my grandson came up to the plate. He drilled the first pitch into center field and took off running. I jumped up, sending the French fries flying everywhere, and hollered encouragement as he rounded the bases for a triple. He was met at third base by the coach, who happened to be his father, who gave him a high-five and a pat on his fanny (This may be the only place you can do this in a schoolyard without getting arrested). There is a lot of fraternizing between parents and kids.

I watched this display of support and enthusiasm and remembered my childhood when baseball was king and neighborhoods and families came together in community.

The same day, the "Snapshot" corner on the front page of USA Today reported that almost half of American families spend less than ten minutes eating dinner together. Maybe they are all out watching their sons playing in Little League games, but I'm afraid that in today's marketplace, we neither have time for eating or playing together.

I'm going to take more afternoons off to watch my grandson connect to the joy of life, remembering when baseball was king and newspapers were for wrapping fish.

## HEAVEN ON EARTH – 5/13/02

It was my oldest daughter's 40th birthday, and she wasn't very excited about it. (Frankly, I can't believe I'm that old either.) Her sisters and husband, appreciating her agony, decided to honor an old family tradition: when in doubt, party.

They decided on a party whose theme would be kept secret from the birthday girl until the night of the event. They assured her they would make all of the arrangements and not to worry. The theme was Pimps and Ho's. Invitees were asked to come to this soiree dressed-up as their favorite bordello participant. It took place at Alwun House, the funkiest alternative arts scene in the city. Alwun has been instrumental in revitalizing the inner city. Its home is a magnificent Victorian next to the tenderloin district.

Friends came from as far away as Canada and Mexico--beautiful people extravagantly dressed (and undressed) as madames, pimps, seductresses of every description, even a prodigious flasher. Hugh Hefner was there and two less recognizable old men.

I was one, dressed up as a gaucho pimp, wearing tight leather bell-bottoms, a tiger spotted vest, a purple beret with a long yellow feather, and gold chains wrapped around my neck. The other old man was my Oregonian brother Jimbo, a retired airline pilot. He came in full drag, which surprised us all because he insisted on dressing alone. Jimbo arrived, a fashionable hour late, as Miss Kitty.

In resplendent color and glitter, he wore a flowing gown and sequined bustier with push-up Wonderbra. His face was adorned with long fake eyelashes, which he learned to put on at a make-up studio. In a three-hour lesson, he learned how to apply the glue to his eyelids and stick the lashes on--no easy task. Miss Kitty was an unbelievable once-in-a-lifetime sight.

This extraordinary party danced, sang, and laughed late into the night. When the wine, women, and song lulled our consciousness, Jimbo and I mused at the unlikelihood of such an eye-candy experience ever befalling us again in this lifetime. At that moment of dejection, my brother, his creative unconscious flowing, came up with this stroke of brilliance. He knew how to make the two of us up into credible drag queens, and then we could go to Victoria's Secret, pick out some panties, and spend the rest of the day in the dressing room.

We've laughed about it since and feel no shame. We hold our children responsible for making us believers that two old men can catch a glimpse of heaven on earth.

To see the photos that accompany this Schlag Byte, click here: <http://www.healingdoc.com/bytphotos/051302.html>

## FANTASY ISLAND – 6/10/02

Where is Fantasy Island? In the Islas del Rosario in the Caribbean, about an hour's boat ride from Cartagena, Columbia. We flew to this beautiful country, sadly now more famous for its 'narcotraffickers' and terrorists, because my daughter and her Colombian sister, Manuela, had access to her family's house on one of these tiny islands. It came with maid, cook, and a yacht with its own captain. All we had to do was get there. How can you refuse such an invitation?

Actually there was a moment's hesitation when we remembered the last time our daughter made arrangements for us to visit her abroad. We went diving off an island in the Indonesian Celebes Sea, which turned out to be accessible only by outrigger canoe. We spent a week in a banana-thatched hut in a jungle without running water or toilet. We swore we'd make our own arrangements next time, but this invitation seemed worth the risk.

We spent the first night in Cartagena, a beautiful old walled city that still has an intact Spanish colonial fortress guarding the harbor. This was the place of the real pirates of the Caribbean; it was also one of the largest ports of call for African slavers. It was once the home of Caribs, Taironas, and Sinues, the fierce tribes of the Caribbean. The descendants of all these people still walk the streets.

The next morning we shopped for groceries and met the boat (which turned out to be a 35-foot yacht with twin Volvo engines). Within an hour, we docked at the pier of an island with several homes. An exquisite single-story colonial estate with a deck overlooking the water, private beach, hammocks stretched between coconut palms, replete with lights and air-conditioners powered by their own generator...this was definitely not the Celebes Sea.

Yoga out on a deck in the morning followed by a swim and a breakfast of traditional arepas, cornmeal cakes stuffed with egg. One morning we went to an oceanarium, (a national park), which housed dolphins, sharks, groupers, sea turtles, and all of the colorful reefs in outdoor pools. Turned out that the superintendent was a friend of Manuela's family, and he invited us to join him in feeding the fish and turtles.

The next morning, with our snorkels on, we followed him into a large pool. Dragging three large bags of frozen fish through the water attracted thousands of fish. When he opened them, we were surrounded by swarms of fish eating from our hands. It was unbelievable.

At night we swam with the dolphins. In the dark with moonlight illuminating the surface, you saw them only when they were almost on top of you. It was like looking at an approaching torpedo. It took my breath away. Turning away at the last minute, one let me touch its exquisite satin skin. Within a short time, it rolled over and let me tickle its belly. In those moments, I felt at one with the universe, a peace

so profound it made the awesome visible.

You don't have to wait for an invitation to Fantasy Island to escape a fast-paced world that magnifies our vulnerabilities. Summer is here--get away with your kids, grandkids, lover...and find a lake, a beach...look at the night sky and experience the awesome.

AWE is the antidote to OW.

(See photos for this Schlag Byte at <http://www.healingdoc.com/bytephotos/061002.html> ; the full page is 494 kb so it may take some time to load for slower connections.)

P.S. I'm putting together a Best of Schlag Bytes anthology over the last four years and would like your help in picking out favorites. Please take a minute and send me your vote. Thanks!

## THIS IS PATHETIC – 7/8/02

This is one of those stories that make you shake your head in disbelief. The short version is that a high school teacher failed a senior student, which resulted in her not being able to graduate with her class. Her parents hired a lawyer and petitioned the school board, who ultimately overruled the teacher's decision and ordered the school to allow the student to be able to take the test again.

This story was picked up by local and national news outlets who detailed this pathetic story. The student knew she was failing, had multiple unexcused absences, had failing test scores, and had even cheated on an exam. Her teacher told her that unless she attended make-up sessions she would not pass, but the student never showed up for those. The teacher sent failure notices to her parents and even spoke to the student's father by phone, telling him his daughter was in danger of failing her class. They finally took action two weeks before graduation, when they learned their daughter would not graduate at which point they hired a lawyer.

The lawyer threatened the school board and also sent a letter directly to the teacher, telling her about the pain and suffering she had caused this young lady and that she had ruined this girl's life forever. His letter, published in its entirety in the local paper, informed the teacher that he wanted to see all of this student's work and, in addition, the work of other students so that he could compare their grading. The lawyer then added, "Of course all the information regarding your background, your employment records, your class records, past and present, dealings with this and other students, become relevant."

The teacher's response was also published. She said the student had ample opportunity to make up the work and that the student and her family knew she was in danger of failing, but took no steps to change the situation. The teacher said this student was no longer a child and ought to accept responsibility for the choice she made, and instead of being 'scarred for life,' perhaps it was useful for her to learn now that there were consequences for one's actions in life.

At first the school board supported the teacher, saying it was the teacher's call and the failing grade accurately reflected the student's performance. Later, however, they bowed to the legal intimidation tactics and ordered the teacher to let the student to retake a final examination. The student took the exam just hours before the graduation ceremony and then marched in the ceremony with her class. The community exploded in outrage and pilloried the school board for its failure to support the teacher, the parents for their disgraceful actions, and the lawyer for his filing of an inappropriate suit.

I share their outrage, but I'm also wondering what it says about all of us. As a society, we have come to depend on lawyers to tell us what is right and wrong, because we can't seem to tell any more. Even when in our hearts we know we've done wrong, we can find a lawyer to point the finger of blame at somebody

other than ourselves to make us feel better. In our society, if you can get away with something, it's right.

A society without consequences for misbehavior encourages a world of irresponsibility. When right and wrong become a matter of legal interpretation, we subordinate morality to expediency; this is pathetic.



## CHERRY PITS AND OTHER TIDBITS – 8/12/02

I participated in two ceremonies last weekend which brought to mind the purpose we serve in being here.

My son-in-law's sister had a baby-naming ceremony for her newborn daughter. She named her Jules after her grandfather, Julius, who died five years ago. Julius was revered by his family. He was that rare combination of man who lived the life he spoke. He was a man of honor, wisdom, and good humor. My son-in-law, whose hobby is 'jerking my chain', felt his grandfather was responsible for every decent and humane part of his character. I have often blessed his grandfather because I can hardly imagine how much more insufferable he could have been.

Jews generally name their children after somebody who has died. We believe a part of every soul is a piece of God's spirit in us--it's called our neshama. Our neshama returns to God when we die. When a child is named for someone who has passed on, that person's neshama is reborn.

The new mother told the gathering how she remembered her grandfather. With tears and laughter, she recalled her memories of him until she couldn't continue to speak. She nodded to her brother (my son-in-law) to say something, and uncustomarily he too had trouble speaking. He said that whatever redeeming features he had were the result of Julius' love and discipline. Then he reached into his pocket and pulled out a jeweled pillbox that had belonged to his grandfather. He opened it to reveal a cherry pit inside. It turns out Julius was a great fan of sucking. He'd suck peach pits, prune pits, and cherry pits, presumably as an alternative to chewing gum and smoking tobacco. That pillbox was one of the few things my son kept of his grandfather's. He said he still carried it when he needed to feel his grandfather's presence. Then he walked over and gave it to his niece to whom he said, "This is for you to remember your great-grandfather, and when you get older, I'll tell you stories about him."

I was having trouble speaking too.

The following day I went to the home of my beloved sister Ann. She is facing another cancer and spending more time at home. Her two grandchildren were visiting from Spain. Her ten-year-old granddaughter had recently celebrated her first communion in Madrid, and today they were going to celebrate it here. Everyone knew that she might never see her grandchildren again. Family and friends gathered together in the style of a Native American talking circle. We would celebrate Ann's granddaughter's life and spirit, sharing our thoughts and blessings.

When it came Ann's turn to speak, she told her granddaughter, "I was there when you came into the world, and I'm with you as I'm getting out of it." Ann told her she wanted her to remember these celebrations because this was the kind of joy her granddaughter always inspired in her life. Ann want-

ed to give her something that was very special to her, took out her grandmother's jeweled coinholder, and gave it to her granddaughter. She said, "I can remember getting on the bus with my grandmother, who would open this coinholder in which she kept nickels, dimes, and quarters for the exact change she dropped into the coin receptacle. The bus drivers loved her for making their work easier, and she always smiled when she thanked them for driving us. I remember those smiles when I look at this and hope you'll remember mine."

Cherry pits and other tidbits immortalize our presence here. They carry the stories that ennoble our spirit. Pass on your tidbits, and you may inspire your grandchildren to tell your stories forever.

## FIRST DAY AT SCHOOL – 8/26/02

Two of my grandkids just started school, which began a couple weeks earlier than usual this year. Lots of schools are opening earlier to give teachers more time to prepare students for standardized achievement tests. Turns out that in order to be eligible for federal funding, students will now have to meet mandated minimum standards. Such testing always seemed like a good thing to me--the idea that we'd upgrade standards so that students would be challenged to learn and teachers could do what they do best which is turning children on to learning.

My thinking may have been more fanciful than real. Mark Edmondson, an English teacher at the University of Virginia, has just written an interesting book, *Teacher*, in which he says that standardized testing has resulted in teachers being told to prepare students for these fact-based tests. Teachers are encouraged to be uncritical of student performance, inflate grades, and write only glowingly exaggerated evaluations. Edmondson says it is because our culture is asking teachers to become just another part of a service economy. Teachers are to provide their customers with what they think they want rather than what they truly believe students need. Teachers are being told that their primary task is to prepare students to pass these tests which means stuffing them with the information they will be tested on.

Because teachers are being pressured, they are becoming discouraged and leaving, causing critical shortages everywhere. Teachers are being sought out everywhere--from abroad, from different professions, and as volunteers, as if anybody will do. Not everybody can be a teacher. It is a difficult and noble profession, and we need to support great teachers, those who are willing to stand up for students and inspire them to grow--who don't just teach stuff but who can ignite a love of learning...great teachers who encourage students by their commitment and capacity to love.

I asked my grandkids about their teachers, and they responded in unison, "They're fantastic." My fifth grade granddaughter has her first male teacher. She is so taken by the idea that a man can love teaching and the kids in his classroom that she wants to be a teacher too. I'm thinking, "Hallelujah, there are still teachers who love us, inspire us, and kindle the fires of discovery."

## JONATHAN LIVINGSTON SEAGULL – 9/02/02

I recently returned from the annual 'boys' trip'. This is the annual bonding expedition I go on with my sons-in-law to help me come to peace with these hormonal cripples for stealing my babies.

Over the years this fishing/camping trip has evolved into first-class travel and a Freudian psychodrama. The young bucks--in repetitive chorus--join in a tune whose message is that I am a deteriorating, foul-smelling, forgetful, impotent old goat. Having taken my babies, they now want the whole territory. Sometimes this repartee can get tedious, and the only way to bear it is to sneak away with my brother, John Koriath, on what the boys call a 'sweetie walk'. John's presence is a life-saver; 14 years ago, after I had just come back from the first trip with then my only one son-in-law, I told John if I had to go away alone with my son-in-law again I'd kill him. John has been on every trip since; we call him the Cosmic Peg because he holds us together.

This year was one of those years we abandoned the tents for exquisite lodges, chartered a boat, and explored Washington's Olympic Peninsula. We trekked through magnificent old-growth forests of red cedar, Sitka spruce, and Douglas fir. There was a rainforest whose perpetual moisture fostered such luxuriant growth that moss hung so thick from the trees it looked like a scary movie scene. There were mountain lakes, blackberries, waterfalls, hot springs, and tidepools. Spectacular Pacific coast beaches were cluttered with driftwood that extended for miles.

On one of those 'sweetie walks' along the coast, John came upon a dead bird. He called me over and asked what I thought it was. From its size and color, I said it looked like a hawk to me; he agreed. I said we needed to take it as the gift it was offered and preserve its feathers to use ceremonially. Respectfully and with tenderness, I picked it up; when I did, the bird's head, which had been trapped underneath its body, fell free. I recognized immediately that it was a gull. "It's just a gull," I said with some disdain and dropped the bird like a hot potato.

John mimicked me with some glee. "It's just a gull; it's just a gull, which means this is not a sacred bird. Its feathers are unworthy? You call yourself a man of spirit!" he gloated.

I tried to wiggle out and acknowledged that perhaps it was a bit royalist--maybe even judgmental and pretentious for a man who liked to see himself as an egalitarian. John refused to buy it. He said 'pretentious' hardly captured the disgust with which I had flung the dead bird down.

Needless to say, the story made it to the dinner table that night. My sons feasted on it...said it was corroborative evidence that the old man was not only weak and toothless but also a hypocritical swine.

I do look at seagulls differently now, this made me re-read Richard Bach's 30-year-old book, Jonathan

Livingston Seagull. Jonathan was no ordinary gull; he could fly in the dark like an owl, dive like a falcon, skim the surface like a pelican, and do aerobatics like an eagle. Jonathan said seagulls were extraordinary birds because they never stalled. For a gull, it would be a dishonor not to land with grace.

That was no common gull on the beach; it was an exceptional bird that helped me become the man my grandkids think I am, rather than the schmuck my sons know me to be.

(For images to accompany this Schlag Byte, visit <http://www.healingdoc.com/bytephotos/092302.html>.)

## PRIZE WINNERS – 11/25/02

In November of every year, I attend the National Caring Awards ceremony in Washington D.C. where ten adults and five young people are selected, from a quarter million nominees who represent the most caring people in America. This annual pilgrimage is my antidote to cynicism and despair. Surrounded by good people doing good things, I am most moved by the children. These kids have not been captivated by cultural messages that magnify appearances and promote materialism. Somehow they have gotten the message that caring about and being a service to others is a critical value.

One of the young people selected this year was Mattie Stepanek, a 12-year-old best-selling author, speaker, and advocate for children with disabilities. Mattie has an extremely debilitating form of muscular dystrophy. This disease has already claimed the life of two brothers and a sister. Mattie scoots around in a motorized wheelchair, which carries a ventilator attached to a tracheal tube. He is small for his age--about 50 inches tall--and weighs only 50 pounds, but his spirit is gigantic.

Two years ago he almost died after several months in a coma. When he recovered, he decided to express himself in books and poems that speak about hope and the fulfillment of dreams. Mattie Stepanek's books have become bestsellers; he has appeared on all the talk shows. The day after he received his Caring Award, he introduced former President Jimmy Carter and Rosalyn from the stage of the Kennedy Center. Mattie rolled to center stage and said, "Jimmy Carter is my hero; he showed me how through words and actions we can help people celebrate life. A couple of years ago, I was close to dying. When I came through, I had this dream that I would be able to tell my story and give people hope. I also dreamed that one day I would meet Jimmy Carter and I did; he is a peacemaker, peanut farmer, president, Nobel Prize winner, and he is my friend. Here's Jimmy Carter."

When Jimmy began, he said, "I think I became President because otherwise I would not have met Mattie Stepanek. Mattie understands with wisdom and uncomplicated vision that we all have gifts and dreams that can be achieved." Carter then talked about his political career and what he was doing now. When he concluded, he said that it was possible for us to move toward the common goal of peace and the elimination of human suffering. He suggested that as Americans we needed to get over our ego and arrogance and reach out to others in the spirit of humility and love.

Two prize winners who embody the greatness of the American ideal and the Thanksgiving spirit. We are a people for whom freedom, democracy, and caring are not a sacrifice, but are the hope for the world.

Happy Thanksgiving!

## NO STRESS IN THE NEW YEAR – 12/30/02

I'm at the Rancho la Puerta in Tecate, Mexico, one of the great destination health spas in the world, where I am conducting a workshop entitled "Creating Healing Ceremonies." When I am not working, I'm playing, sitting in hot tubs, and being massaged with warm hands, hot rocks, and dribbling oil.

I'm getting better at reveling in such self-indulgence but can still feel a twinge of guilt at such pleasures when I think about the pain and suffering in the world. This week I'm trying to work through my neurosis.

The Gerontological Society of America reported at their recent annual meeting that low levels of neuroticism (anxiety, guilt, shame, obsessions, and phobias) kept people psychologically and physically healthy. The study said that seniors who were still working, reading, exercising, relaxing, going to lectures and concerts, meeting friends and socializing stayed vigorous. The old people acknowledged that genetics and keeping active were important, but they said the key to their longevity was not getting too stressed out. They agreed life was filled with grief and joy, evil and goodness, darkness and light, but that to live long, you had to be able to roll with the punches.

So here I am sitting in this hot tub waiting for Cesario, a world-class masseur, to rub out my kinks and soreness. In this moment, the world is not on the brink of war and recession; rather it is a place of blessing and thanksgiving.

May this be a year in which we all learn to roll with the punches better. Let's smile more, touch each other lovingly, live long and in good health. Happy New Year!

To all my relations,

Mi Takuye Oyacin

For photos that accompany this Schlag Byte please visit <http://www.healingdoc.com/bytphotos/123002.html>

## MERRIMENT, MADNESS, AND MATRIMONY

I find myself back in Eugene for a little work and lots of pleasure, visiting family and attending a wedding. Actually my niece and nephew were married last year by a Justice of the Peace in a civil ceremony that they attended dressed in leotards. Now they have a child. They always wanted to create an exquisite ceremonial event. Their official wedding took place last weekend on the grounds of the Oregon Country Fair. It was a full moon.

The Oregon Country Fair is a three-day extravaganza which combines music, dance, arts and crafts amid the ambience of a medieval jousting tournament. It is organized and run by volunteers who work for this nonprofit foundation. These volunteers called "the family" come together the month before the Fair to prepare the grounds. This means fixing the booths and the stages, maintaining the foot paths, organizing security, preparing food and the triple-tiered sauna which is fired up 22 out of the 24 hours. The Fair attracts over a hundred thousand people.

Both sets of parents have fully supported their children's decision to throw this extravaganza. The extended family comes from Florida, Illinois, Montana, Arizona, Washington, Alaska and California. Grandmother is an 85-year-old church going Catholic who told me before the wedding, "This is my granddaughter's wedding, it may not be my way, but it's a good way."

Wedding guests were asked to dress "festively" (which gives you some idea as to the tolerance for self-expression. I had my face painted at the Eugene Saturday Market. I told the face painter to do whatever she wanted and that it didn't have to be symmetrical or anything. Her response was, quite simply, "I'm a Libra." In Eugene, this response makes sense because everybody here knows that Libras seek balance. She assured me that she would make a symmetrical image.

Some wedding guests came as butterflies. There were medieval maidens, people wearing togas, sari's, even jackets and ties. The entire assembly gathered in an outdoor reception area to nibble on fresh fruits, vegetarian California rolls, humus, babaganoush and homemade Pita bread. Then we gathered together into a wedding procession that was led by an Elizabethan handmaiden playing tambourine and accompanied by a dreadlocked drummer. Together we walked to the ceremonial grounds, a multi-generational parade representing the full range of human expression. I was giggling all the way.

We arrive at a circle created by hay bales. In each of the cardinal directions is a hay bale alter that holds candles and incense. The one I face also has a picture of Jerry Garcia. In the middle is a wooden arbor built by the bride's brother and husband. Standing together,



We all turn to the four directions and are led in a spiritual greeting by a Garland-boughed maid of honor who asks that the spirits bless this couple and this gathering. The bride and groom spoke to each other in the arbor. It was an incredible evocation of lovingness and by the time we closed the circle this was a community of shared spirit.

Then the orgiastic feast: wine, beer and root beer on tap; tables laden with fresh fish, organically harvested vegetables and fruits, and an assortment of herbs. A nine-piece marimba band provided the music, and 200 dangled, painted, pierced, coiffed and unusually dressed celebrants undulated to the rhythm.

After midnight, those who remained lounged in the sauna and then sat around the fire and sang. Among the tunes was one by the Grateful Dead because this night was the anniversary of Jerry Garcia's death, and I'm moved to tears again as I think there is still hope for civilization. Young and old from different paths in life who still believe when people come together something good is going to happen.