

## EPILOGUE: SOME SYMPHONIES HAVE TO END QUIETLY

This closing essay will be a bit like a sermon and something like a final exam.

It's typical, especially in humanities courses, for a final to start with an enumeration of passages or incidents that are to be identified or woven together in a discussion.

So I'll name or point to a few more "visuals" of incidents "from my life."

One (1998): On a late spring evening, a good friend, graduating from a nearby Twin Cities college, shows up in his shorts at an Embers for dinner. During the dinner I show him all the Rosenfels literature. We have the discussion of the dichotomy between "winning converts" and "winning arguments". Even he wants me to try to "win converts" through ballet access petitioning drives, at least. The next day, the restaurant closes to make room for University of Minnesota expansion. Later, at a ballet access petitioning exercise in a small Minnesota town, the women do better than the men. It's summer, even up north.

Two (2003): Working on the "floor" as a debt collector, I remind a debtor that his bill is "only" \$65. He asks if I will pay it for him personally.

Three (2003): A recruiter for a company that will try to round up whole life policyholders and convert them to term says, "We give you the words." What? I am a writer already. He gets defensive quickly.

Four (2010): A chaplain from Hospice reminds me of my declining Mother's sense of humor.

Five (1961): When coming back to see me "at home" after my William and Mary expulsion, a high school friend says that with me, a handshake was like a kiss.

Six (1956): On a misty spring morning, I leave home for school with makeup on my hands. I will appear, with Mixed Chorus, in the school operetta, "The Sunbonnet Girl". I'm a little uncomfortable with lotions being put on my body. A few weeks later, I leave for school with "my short sleeves debut".

Seven (1958): I hit a home run in my back yard and win a "league" softball game with a walkoff.

Eight (1968): On arriving at "tent city" in Fort Jackson SC Basic, we're so shellshocked that we urinate in a wash basin in a common latrine. Later, a "Special Training" (aka special education) company commander says we could be here six months, and recounts the story of a draftee who had said that morning, "I want a discharge from the United States Army". In three weeks, I pass the PCPT, running the mile in 7:18.

Nine (1977): A friend tells me how he was laid off from his teaching job in Brooklyn because he was single, and then about his weekend at a Moonie retreat as he looks for another job.

Ten (1972). A pastor at my parents' church preaches about "The Rich Young Ruler", after my own admissions in an encounter group. He says, none of us know who is "good". He equivocates, however, on the limit of unconditional love and compassion, saying it belongs to the world of motherhood.

Eleven (2007). Another pastor speaks about the Parable of the Talents (Matthew 25:14-30). All things come to mind: some people are given “more” than others, but are they supposed to use it just to win converts? (Mormon boys pay to go on their missions to proselytize).

Twelve (1996). I have gotten in to a party at the House of Representatives. But I am asked if I would like to “serve food” to pay my dues.

Thirteen (1980) I find a “lost everything” message at MCC Dallas and take someone in. His being home will prevent one burglary later.

Fourteen (1968). A drill sergeant says my problem is “too much education” and then asks “where you from.” Later, on KP, another EM asks how many jobs I’ve had and how many I’ve been fired from. Zero.

Fifteen (2010). A local outdoor market in Arlington has a “Be Brave and Shave” fundraiser for cancer. I decline to be shaved (I don’t need to), but blog about it.

Okay, those are the fifteen, or even more numerous “parts”.

Let’s set up the train of thought. I have been motivated by what happened, to understand what people wanted from me, and why they wanted it, and why they sometimes interfered. “I wasn’t hurting anyone”. I have a sense that “they” thought I could become a burden on the group, slow it down, jeopardize the survival of everyone. Now, I have to say what my own “goals” were. On one level, it was self-expression: first music, and then “giving others the words”. It was recognition, which isn’t the same as attention (despite what “they” say).

Others, it seemed, were determined that I would join their teams and play by rules that they had made. I was even expected to root for their purposes, to join in their song.

Now, practically all major religions, Abrahamic religions at least, place a lot of emphasis on “common good” and sustainable future for some group of people (such as “The Jews” in the Old Testament). All religions expect the individual to accommodate himself to and sometimes “sacrifice” for the needs of the group. Obviously, this can encourage abuse by the leadership of “the group”. There is a general impression that over time and generations, things get better for the individual, and ideas like equality and justice for the individual can germinate. But this always requires sacrifice. Eventually, a culture has to deal with its notion of the value of every human life. To deal with some of the inevitable contradictions that follow, Christianity introduces the idea of salvation by Grace. It’s necessary. And individual people have to deal with it. Life has to be unfair to become fairer, eventually. (Think about those Talents. And rent “So Dear to My Heart”.)

Now, my own “fundamental problem” --- with how others perceive me and with my getting my message out – is my insistence of following goals I have chosen for myself. The writings of Paul Rosenfels showed how this is an attribute of an “unbalanced personality”. Over the years, that has gotten easier to do, but recently this became challenging for me again.

But over the years, three or four major aspects of my “problem” stand out and stitch themselves together.

The first of these is my use of “upward affiliation” in relationships. I explained this at the opening of Chapter 2. Now it can happen with either heterosexual or gay relationships, but in the context of male homosexuality it seems particularly sharp-edged. Remember, society was presented as a competitive enterprise to me when I was growing up. Those who did less well wound up with a lower “station in life”, serving others, or sometimes became cannon fodder in the military draft. Why, then, wasn’t it “logical” that people who “fail” are morally less worthy? In this sense, everyone is morally responsible for his own circumstances in life. But that makes a “relationship” with someone “below” less “worthy” of being experienced. This gets to be mapped to the area of physical attractiveness, where I would “feel” that the “superior” (and more “masculine” and more “perfect” young man was “mine”, with his body replacing (or even becoming) mine. (In my mindset earlier in life, having a body that was more “feminine” equated with “moral inferiority” because it implied becoming a burden on the community, in line with right wing mindsets common in the 1950s -- or even today with right-wing authors like Joseph Nicolosi who speaks of “gender deficits” in counseling parents on “preventing homosexuality”). We won a war against this kind of thinking, and then embraced ourselves anyway, just out of human nature.) Of course, that makes me vulnerable to rejection by the other person, and tends to lead to running around in circles.

In practice, a lot of this didn’t matter too much over the years when I lived in my own urban enclave and things went relatively well. As times got harder, after 9/11 and during all the other crises, I would more often hear people honored as “husbands and fathers” as if non-parents were less, and in line to make the sacrifices or ride in back of the bus. The gay marriage debate became as much about “equality” for the unattached as about equal “benefits” among different kinds of couples.

But what’s become apparent in recent years is that I don’t experience the emotion from familial experiences that others do. At first this seemed like a refusal to “join in” and be recruited (or do the tailgating myself). But now it’s clear it’s also a lack of readiness to take on family responsibilities from others (in areas like living habits) if needed, something other families experience (as with people raising siblings’ children after tragedies). But this all goes back to the teasing and physical humiliation (of not having a good enough “body”) in early interpersonal relations as a boy, all of which would make adult relationships with women a sham.

It’s apparent that the “hypercompetitiveness” demanded of young men (when I was raised) risked an unsurmountable contradiction. If I was to be humiliated and be brought low, I couldn’t turn around and give other marginal young men in my cohort (as in college dorms) confidence that they could expect to be successful with women either, leading to a vicious cycle. The value system I grew up with desperately wanted this kind of reassurance from me despite my past competitive problems, and I could no longer give it to them.

It may be Rick Warren (not Pat Robertson, in the last chapter) who “gets it right” when he says (in his book **“The Purpose-Driven Life”**) that people have to learn “it’s not about you” (or just about you)

before they can put affection for and fellowship with others in the right place, and then be able to create and keep a marital relationship that can stand the tests of hardship and age – and then (without a sense of “humiliation”) be prepared to extend some of this to others even outside of a partnership relationship as needed by “living in a community.” My whole own track in life could be seen as taking me away from the community resource pool if needed. I had my musical and partial intellectual gifts but, for whatever reason (genetics or maybe even boyhood measles) not enough room in my brain for everything, at least without a lot of sacrifice.

The second part of my “problem” was that I tended to demand a high profile for my views (on “personal responsibility”, especially in areas like taking in too much mortgage debt) when I hadn’t taken on the risk or responsibility that others have assumed by marrying and having children. On my blogs, I have called this general problem “The Privilege of Being Listened To” and “Paying Your Dues”. It’s dangerous to depend on the unseen sacrifices of others, especially those who do risky or dirty jobs one can’t do oneself. Yet, it seemed for years that I could be very effective by playing the role of “journalist—alien anthropologist”). It was my tendency for observation and transmission of what I witnessed than changed my own perception of personal freedom, away from just privacy and being left alone, and even from equality, to something much more tied to a common future where I really belonged.

Here comes the “Third Part”: All of this can be foreclosed by the possibility of major disruption from circumstances beyond my control. That’s become more apparent in the years since 9/11, with many disasters, including Katrina, and financial crisis, and the like. All of these invoke continuing questions of sustainability, and whether “hyperindividualism” is driving society to live beyond its means, or to antagonize potential enemies around the world and at least give them excuses to complain that they are “exploited”. (in the matter of low-wage workers overseas, they certainly are.) In this regard, earlier catastrophes like the sudden eruption of AIDS in the 1980s all seem like examples of a basic principle: as patterns of social behavior change, huge and novel problems and threats can occur suddenly. (One could say that about agricultural practices, international travel, and pandemics.)

Personally, I have found that coercion does affect my thought processes. Coercion involves threat, and the possibility of giving up my own direction and accepting that of others. In the past, this could be avoided by care in my own work, because a lot of my work was done essentially alone and the premium was on accuracy and repeated dependability. (That raised its own issues, related sometimes to lack of immediate attentiveness and compulsiveness, but all of this relates back to earlier periods of coercion, I now believe.) Even if the circumstances of my mother’s passing have left me much better off than they might have, I can certainly imagine how catastrophe can occur. And I can imagine the forced bargaining that would follow – to step up and become a role model for OPC, other people’s children – when I was never competitive enough to have my own.

In fact, a lot of the value of my writings goes beyond just “warning people” of how catastrophe could occur, to what we can do to prevent it. There are numerous dangers that have been little discussed – such as coronal mass ejections (geomagnetic storms related to gigantic solar flares or “space weather), or EMP attacks by terrorists (pointed out as early as pre-9/11 2001 by **Popular Science**), possibly targeting specific domestic interests, or lesser known potential natural disasters like an avalanche in the

Cumbre Vieja volcanoes across the Atlantic, possibly creating East Coast tsunamis several hundred feet high. There are things that could be done to prevent some of the possibilities, just as with pandemics.

Of course, there are personal dangers, too, mainly medical, as anyone gets older. In the past, we tended to accept that we wouldn't live a long time once we had major problems. Now, we can treat things and keep ourselves alive longer, but only if we offer one another much more compassion than in the past. This completely transcends the highly personalized notion of "personal responsibility" developed in the past few decades. So I think my writings should prod people to reconsider our social contract – how we will strike the right balance between individual and common goals, without any more government than necessary – call it "social contract". One of the most "obvious" challenges will be demographic – maintaining reverence for life as people live longer and become dependent longer. That probably means that "responsibility for others" (both the elderly and other people's children) becomes a positive expectation (as it once was), not just an avoidance of having babies outside of marriage.

As my own life experience started, I was struck by competitiveness, which migrated into a kind of expressive individualism, and a loss of sense that the point of a lot of these "sports" exercises in youth was to learn team play (even down to sacrifice bunts in baseball). I came to view people as I saw them, as did our culture. In more recent years, we have again been reminded that good or bad fortune makes a lot of difference – especially with a climate that grows more unstable possibly because people don't cooperate to the extent necessary. Earlier generations accepted the inevitability of hardships as part of a family or community's evolution, and dealing with this was something parents expected to pass down through families, and that has held much less so in recent years. Instead, my own life migrated into an exercise in preventing all possible mistakes, partly because I was "alone", but also because of the kind of work I did. Yet, I depend on the kind of people who can live on the Gulf Coast or in a wildfire zone, lose everything, and rebuild – together with others committed in a family.

I would even say that some scenarios (nuclear terrorism, to give an outlier example) could leave a society for which I have nothing to contribute and would not want to live in. And some medical scenarios, with extreme measures in terms of bypass surgeries and transplants to prolong life that may not be very "productive", would not be appropriate for me, as I cannot command or give familial affection very well in such novel circumstances.

One can ask again, however, what is the point of all this "talk" (or Pharisee-speech) if I am not prepared or "willing" to be close to people who "need" me or would actually benefit from my example. This is not easy to answer. I can suggest, however, that love or charity – in the best sense of the New Testament – is not something we ration – by giving away our "allowance" or time online. We do the best we can with our own talents or "gifts of the spirit" and some of that time does need to be alone. It makes more sense, for example, to finish my music and get it into professional shape so that I or someone else could play it in an assisted living center program than just give up my time and never finish it, to others who really don't benefit that much.

Because of the experience of coercion, and the prodding sometimes to settle for selling other people's causes, I've come to understand the extreme negativity – even nihilism – in some parts of the world,

even if I would condemn what some people actually do. I can imagine now the outrage someone could feel over the “contamination” of his religious heritage by foreign forces, enough to the point that, even if spoiled, he thinks the world is no longer “worth” living in. (Yup, sounds cowardly, doesn’t it!) I can see how a psychopath could want others to “learn a lesson” about their own hidden exploitation of others, even at the cost of one’s own freedom or life. I’m sane enough not to follow this kind of action myself, but I do see how it has happened to others, and it is frightening. And a lot of it happens because of aggression by others. Christianity has something to offer here (above the calls of other religions for some kind of collective focus under the authority of God): the necessity of Grace, and forgiveness. For when people think they are completely on their own, they wind up paying for the sins of others anyway.

I’d mention here a particular concept, **expropriation**. It’s closely connected to sacrifice. The prospect of it, going unanswered, can be particularly galling. I would see the failure of the government or anyone else to pay a debt already incurred to me (and I regard most of my Social Security FICA contributions as a debt to me), and particularly its possible repudiation – as a kind of expropriation. I do not view reasonable taxes of an ordinary nature, or even an increase in them to meet the debt crisis, however, as “takings”. I differ from some in the “Tea Party” in this regard. But I regard crime as expropriation, particularly when committed by those with nothing to lose, and I would see conscription that way now.

During the past decade, I have been surprised by the way other have served up interpersonal challenges as if they were knuckleballs. Since I am public, as noted, my “indifference” (unwillingness to pander) to some people, formerly not so noteworthy during those couple of decades where marriage and family had become a matter of “private choice”, and a tendency to reduce my view of people to moral computations) becomes viewed as aggression, and my speech sometimes comes across as intended to show others up, as if others really will fail if reminded of the possibility. I’d say, not really: I think there’s a lot we need to understand if we’re going to make it, after I’m “gone”. Yes, it would be easier to offer communal intimacies to others if I had generated my own family. Nature values diversity just as it follows (and then extends, in psychological areas) some basic patterns, so a family could come from a same-sex pairing, even if that doesn’t support a backup of someone else’s child’s “birthright” to a particular kind of family. But was I too self-absorbed with my own peculiar “talents” to have a family at all, and get back in the game in middle innings? Phillip Longman (“**The Empty Cradle**”) may have a point. The truth is, I need to accomplish my own thing, to be good for anyone “interpersonally”, and that means content creation, journaling, music. Yes, I do like “keeping them honest”. I could even imagine doing this on my own show.

As I get older, and can see the “other shore of endless worlds” appearing, I do wonder what happens at passing. Why am I “me” and not someone else, maybe living in Somalia? Is it my karma? Even given mathematical arguments about the total number of people who have ever lived, it seems to me that the “soul” is a basic object in physics or cosmology, and cannot be destroyed. Maybe the laws of entropy and thermodynamics apply. As I already noted, I can say that I do not think I would try to survive certain catastrophes, or accept radical medical intervention of some kinds (like organ transplants or mutilative surgeries), and I may not get all the desperate medical care at end of life that others expect, especially those with kids. (My financial planners already having me looking at “single premium” long term care products, which sounds like a moral obligation on my part.) But it may be dangerous to “bargain away”

your last period of life, as disheartening as I think my Mother's experience was. We really don't know what happens at the end. Maybe one stays in one's last moment for eternity – as if the progress of space-time locks up – like a dream one cannot wake up from (that little top in the movie "**Inception**" keeps spinning). Or maybe I would wake up on another planet, maybe in this galaxy or maybe in another universe, in another world's equivalent of Somalia here. The climb back might be unattainable.

"Je ne regrette rien".