University of Northern Iowa

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Source: *The North American Review*, Vol. 294, No. 6 (NOVEMBER-DECEMBER 2009), pp. 6-9
Published by: University of Northern Iowa
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I left work early to buy snow tires

ERIC ZENCEY

TUESDAY I LEFT WORK EARLY TO BUY SNOW tires. At Sam's Garage I gave the keys to the young man behind the counter, a blue-eyed swain less interested in selling me tires than in raising a look from the blonde who sat in the corner of the cramped office-showroom, her battered naugehyde-and-chrome chair hard by a Coke machine and some artfully piled Hakkepelitas that insistently out-gassed their fresh-auto-tire smell. She glanced up at me from the old *Car and Driver* she was thumbing. I smiled; she nodded slightly, went back to her dog-eared pages. Enforced lassitude: it comes with winter-tire changeover. There was another chair beside her, and I might have taken it and struck up a conversation, but the dirty linoleum and cheap wooden paneling gave the space a grimy, overstuffed feel, and there was the ratcheting hammer of airguns in the background and that smell of tires front-and-center. I decided to make my way downtown for a cup of coffee.

I left my briefcase in the car—work undone, work I should have been doing—and took with me instead a copy of Sebald's *The Rings of Saturn*, the book my book group was reading. Back in October it had been easy to say we'd meet to talk about it the Wednesday before Thanksgiving, but as the work of Monday and Tuesday unfurled in front of me—urgent emails about deadlines and late grades and problem students and the need to organize the schedule for next semester—I'd felt that rising sense of tension that movie directors build by having a character labor away in the foreshadowing doom of a non-negotiable, consequential deadline. Everyone else in the office would be working through Wednesday, but no matter what came up, no matter what I had done or not done, at 3:00 on Tuesday I needed to leave my work-week behind to get snow tires, or we couldn't make it back to Vermont, to book group, to family and friends for the holiday. For weeks I'd been hearing other clocks ticking: student work to read. The January term to organize. My father's bills. His newspaper subscription in the nursing home—such a little thing, why hadn't I taken care of it? The realtor trying to sell his house. Calls to return to his cardiologist, his urologist, his physical therapist. And beneath everything: *You'll never get tenure if you don't step it up.*

The bright autumn morning had promised warmth that never came, and I was not comfortably dressed for a walk downtown. I adapted my plan to circumstance and ducked into a fast food restaurant, a Wendy's, after just a few blocks. I had worked through lunch and was hungry. I ordered and ate a sandwich, then pulled out my book to read.

The dining area was empty except for me and half-a-dozen teen-aged girls, divided into two tables some distance apart, snacking after school, talking back and forth, keeping up a continual buzz of comment and exchange, doing the work of defining themselves in relation to others, that effort that psychologists say is the adolescent girl's primary developmental task. Was this their ritual, this daily after-school debriefing, accompanied by the intake of fats and sugars and salt? Surely their parents would have preferred that they were at home, with stout glasses of milk and a dish of wholesome nibbles—sliced carrots, fruit, or something like the crustless triangles of peanut butter and jelly sandwich that my mother used to make for my brothers and me, before she went back to work and left us in the care of my grandmother after school. The thought made me feel like an old codger. *Hey! You there! Let me tell you what it was like when I was your age! You kids—you don't know!* But still, but still...it seems a loss that we—our culture—have corporatized the care and feeding of adolescents this way.

I buried myself in my book, scarcely looking at the girls, though they were exactly the sort of girls that once upon a time I had labored to impress, back when I too had been a high school student. Reading, I was of no concern to them, part of no social calculation they needed to make. Betty Friedan talks somewhere about how as a woman ages she becomes invisible; as I could attest, the dynamic applies to men as well. But neither did I have any need to study them—there came to me none of that "wonder which one is most approachable?" "which one would I most like to approach?" "that was definitely a register of interest, there" that had been second—well, first—nature to the adolescent boy I had been.

I was in a part of the restaurant that on a sunnier day could have been a solarium but for the fact it was on the northern face of the building. The chair was comfortable enough: it and the tables were free standing, not bolted to the floor as in other fast-food restaurants. I could put an elbow on a wooden window sill (another feature unusual in fast-food joints, where non-porosity is valued for being impervious to grease) and read my book. I arranged myself and turned my pages to find my place, quieting thoughts of work undone and duties shirked, feeling as though I were playing hooky. Soon I was in my book, safely ignoring my environs. This is all a reader asks of the world: that it not threaten or surprise him, that it be comfortably submersible to background, that it be capable of being forgotten. I read a long paragraph—Sebald seems to have neglected paragraphing in his book, which contributes to the feeling that it is a sustained reverie—and encountered a description of the sarcophagus that held the bones of St. Sebolt of Nuremberg. Sebald describes in detail the ornate figuration that embodies

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telling moments from the saint's life. The paragraph ends with this:

> ...crowning all [is] the celestial city with its three pinnacles and many mansions, Jerusalem, the fervently longed-for bride, God's tabernacle amongst mankind, the image of an other, renewed life. And in the heart of this reliquary cast in a single piece, surrounded by eighty angels in a shrine of sheet silver, lay the bones of the exemplary dead man, the harbinger of a time when the tears will be wiped from our eyes and there will be no more grief, or pain, or weeping and wailing.

The last words in the paragraph struck me with especial clarity. There is a kind of plain straightforwardness to Sebald's sentences though they, like the thoughts they record, are long and complex. His sentences don't read as breathless acts of bravado, like those of some writers who use a caffeinated version of Jamesian syntax to bring energy to exposition that might not otherwise sustain our interest. No, once you relax into its rhythms, you find Sebald's prose is perfectly suited to its matter. It offers comfort; it is a caress, a gentle suasion of speech. Reading him, you feel you've been taken by the hand by a wise and trustworthy soul, sad but persevering in the project of finding meaning in the erratically accumulated experiences of life, a scout who's just going to help you across this street here and show you something, if you don't mind.

What Sebald said about Jerusalem gave me a powerful sense of the world that had produced that reliquary, and of how familiar grief and pain and weeping would have been within it. Before the industrial revolution humans knew death from disease and hunger with a daily intimacy that we have mostly escaped, we with our medicines and sanitation and technological control of nature and our custom of placing our elderly into ghettoes of age and frailty. Just as the contemporary beholders of that reliquary would have understood the narrative elements of the casting not as decoration, but as physical incorporation of the story of the saint into his final resting place—as a record for them, the non-literate, of what the saint had said and done—just so, they would have understood the surmounting figuration of Jerusalem as Sebold describes it: as a physical manifestation of that promise made by their savior, that those who know and follow and believe in him would find solace in the life hereafter, a joy that would more than compensate the sorrows and trials of life in the mortal flesh.

That thought brought me a sudden, careless understanding of just how filled with grief and pain the average human life could be.

I looked up from my book, out the window, and dwelt in this thought for a time. I found myself remembering Daniel Dennett's explanation of the origin of human self-consciousness: religion posits a skyhook—something outside and above us, that drew us upwards—while evolution tells us that no, the heavy lifting could all have been done by crane: the machinery of evolution, building on what has been erected before, advancing incrementally in successive stages. And soon I found myself thinking this: Either god exists, and allows suffering, but offers us our only relief from it through the grace of His savior; or God does not exist and consciousness itself is the product of brute, unenspirited evolution.

Life seems tragic either way. On which heading is our plight the sorrier?

I watched traffic on the street in front of the restaurant, heading downhill from the direction of the tire store east toward Broadway, where the street terminates and cars have to turn left or right, north or south. On the small sidewalk in front of the restaurant a pair of boys rode their ridiculously tiny bikes, practicing stunts; beyond Congress Avenue was a grassy lot, not quite lush enough to be a park, yet green and therefore alive in ways that the typical empty lot is not. The buildings I could see from Wendy's were nondescript, a fate that seemed to me worse than had they been positively, memorably ugly; for like filial love our aesthetic sensibility is more prey to the death of a thousand cuts, to gradual, anaesthetic diminishment, than it is to being obliterated by the deeply felt, roundhouse insult, which prompts a cry of rebellion—prelude, sometimes, to the work of negotiating some accommodation to the different understanding implicit within it. My father had been a

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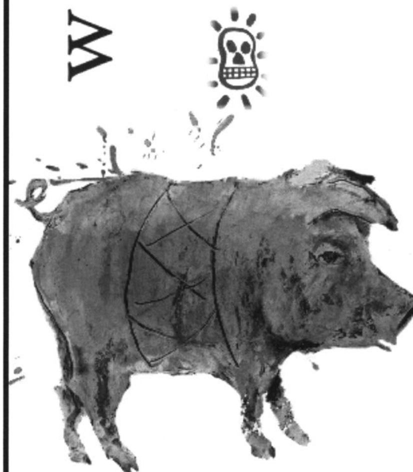

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difficult man. Our relationship had suffered a thousand cuts, not all of them inflicted by his hand. When he went into the hospital he'd ceased to pay his bills, and refused to give a power of attorney to let me or my brothers take care of them. On desperate petition—the sheriff was looking to sell his house for non-payment of taxes—a court had appointed me his guardian, so I could tend to his affairs. As a result we were negotiating, he and I, finding our way into this new balance of son and father who had long been estranged; but he was dying, would certainly die, too soon for much of the distance between us to be bridged successfully.

On the grass across Congress Avenue was the bright-yellow shape of a heavy construction vehicle, which contributed to a sense that what I beheld was not and never would become a pleasing vista. There would be construction soon, offices and commerce to fill the empty lot. I had little hope that the building would be beautiful. Americans build some very ugly things. Why?

Outside the boys on their bikes were coursing back and forth, unaware of how mannered and peculiar their machines looked to anyone used to thinking of a bicycle as an efficient mode of transport. To them, no doubt, their bikes weren't mannered but were simply bikes: they were what they were; normal; accepted. It seems we have an inference generator buried deep inside us that perks away unbidden, generalizing, assuring us that whatever is regular and customary in our experience is normal. Darwin spent a decade researching and writing a definitive text about barnacles, cataloging every variety then known to man (an effort, one of his biographers said, to establish his credentials as a practicing biologist before unloosing on the world a theory he knew would be controversial). Darwin's young son, on being shown about the house of a neighbor, asked at the conclusion of the tour, "But where does your father do his barnacles?"

Each of the biking boys was taking a turn at swooping up the curb-cut that made the sidewalk handicapped accessible, lifting the front wheel as he did so, to balance on the back wheel alone, becoming briefly unicyclar. This was in some part a demonstration for the girls at the other end of the solarium, who would have been clearly visible behind the plate glass window. I watched: the girls were taking notice, discreetly, of the boys outside. One of them broke through the muzakked quietness of the restaurant to call out to a friend at the other table, "Do you want any French fries? We have a whole thing of them we don't want." And yet what the boys were doing was also clearly simply what they were doing: repetitive practice of a skill that they themselves were competent to judge, the mastery of which would bring them little else than personal satisfaction and some small measure of reputation within their set. As all of us have at some point had to do, they were learning something their fathers were incompetent to teach them.

> What matters to him is the trick, the jump, and how he looks to others as he does it.

The skill they were practicing was not likely to win them much of anything, nothing so grand as honor and integrity and a durable sense of self-respect, not even the admiring attention of the girls who sat at the other end of the dining area.

But in this I might have been wrong. Maybe there would come a day when a girl, perhaps even one of these girls sitting near the window, would say of one of them, "Oh yes—of course. I know who you mean. He's that bicycle trickster. He's very good." More likely, not. Much of male adolescence, indeed much of maleness, is guided by the effort to distinguish one's self from other males, including friends, including the father. The root may be Oedipal or, more broadly, some evolutionarily selected need to attract the notice of breeding females, but the urge has been domesticated, submerged, and stylized, converted into forms of striving that are at times as formally mannered as those diminutive bikes, with their small wheels and high handlebars and extra sets of footpegs.

I thought that "bicycle trickster" was probably not what these boys called themselves but I couldn't think of anything better. And watching the lankier of the two pause for a moment on his bike, balancing on two wheels without putting his foot down as he waited for a car to pass so that he could circle in the parking lot and come at the handicapped curb-cut again, I thought about my question—which is the sadder fate?—and realized *he doesn't care.* It doesn't matter to him, not at all. He doesn't care if spirit arose in the world from without, the gift of a godhead-skyhook, or simply, miraculously, incrementally from within, by crane, a more or less accidental by-product of a series of adaptations made by living replicators over eons of time. What matters to him is the trick, the jump, and how he looks to others as he does it; it matters also how he feels to himself, what he can think of himself when he masters it. And maybe it matters what his mother will say to him when he sits down to dinner tonight, and what his father will think of his skill if he ever shows it off to him. Close overhead as I watched the circling bicyclists a skein of geese veed past, heading north, the wrong direction for autumn. Do flights of geese, like waiting airliners, gradually descend in large circular patterns, spiraling down across a city like this to pitch into their favorite stubbled field? I thought it possible, but unlikely: why would they waste the energy? Geese do what they do. There must be some other explanation.

I used to think that geese offered a fitting metaphor and perhaps a moral lesson: wild, unruled but not unruly, they fly in regular formation, ordered but on no orders. They seemed to embody the idea that it is possible, by nature, to be wild, ordered, free. But I learned that geese fly in wedges for a reason they can't be said to know. The eddies set off by the lead goose form an invisible wake that the other geese can feel. By positioning itself to the side and back of a lead goose, another bird rides that eddy the way one race car drafts another. Both of them travel with less work. Conscious choice has nothing to do with it, not at all. It's easy to infer that the behavior was evolutionarily selected: fail to vee, work harder, get exhausted, die, leave no offspring.

Yeats: "God save us from the thoughts we feel in our minds alone." Sure. But I had been struggling with the opposite problem—too much body-thought,

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with not enough clarity about who and what I'd become in the wake of an illness that had sent me to the hospital the same time as my father, a neurological problem from which I recovered—was recovering—but which had made the routine performance of my duties at work a challenging version of occupational therapy, like a man with a brand-new prosthetic leg being forced to run a marathon. Animals that have been hurt crawl off to lick their wounds alone. It's a sound practice: seclusion offers less chance of infecting others. But some end up dying. Instinct alone won't get you back to connection.

I had eaten a sandwich and was still hungry. In the hospital and during my recovery at home, prostrate on a couch, I'd gained weight. Determined to lose it I decided to deny myself more food, but that a cup of coffee would be permitted. I approached the counter and waited: it took a moment for the young woman behind it to notice me. She wasn't a teenager but older, closer to me in age, maybe in her thirties. She was tall, with the sort of plain looks that would have been improved by a smile but she was not smiling. The uniform she was required to wear sat upon her with an authoritative appropriateness that deprived it of any charm. It seemed possible that if she wasn't careful she might have found her life's calling, wearing a ridiculous red outfit, complete with hat, and asking customers of Wendy's what they wanted. *She must know the uniform doesn't flatter her,* I thought, and I wanted to say something that indicated I could empathise. Once I'd had to attend an event at a distant college with my ankles painted pink with calamine lotion, pants rolled up to keep them away from my blistering flesh, my feet in shower slippers, the least confining footwear I could muster. At the reception afterwards my peculiar way of dressing was roundly ignored, except, finally, by one attendee who said to me "Poison Ivy?" He became, in that instant, my best friend in the room. I thought that mentioning her uniform to the woman behind the counter might provide some of the same kind of relief, but could find no easy way to come anywhere near the subject.

I ordered my coffee and smiled as I asked for it—not flirtation, no, but simple pleasure in human contact. She drew the coffee from the stainless steel box-urn behind the counter and then gave it to me with a bright "there you go." She ignored the dollar bill I held out to her. "Do you want...?" I began, before realizing that her intention was that I shouldn't pay.

Dude, I thought to myself. *Nice.*

What I was recalling was The Dude, a legendary student who was a fixture on campus at the college I attended my freshman year, back in the early seventies, which was the heyday of the sixties, a time when the continuity of generations was broken, when youth who didn't want to go to Vietnam to die rejected other aspects of the values of their parents, throwing themselves into new forms, exploring new ways to think and be. I used to see The Dude in the pool hall at the student center. I never learned his name, never actually spoke to him. He brought his own cue in a carrying case and screwed it together before playing. He had long flowing golden hair, which fell in waves away from his face, down to his shoulders, which were usually covered by a creased and faded leather bomber jacket, which he didn't remove, not in the poolroom. He wore tight jeans. He kept a toothpick parked in the corner of his mouth. He was very, very handsome. A naming story was told of him: he'd gone into a record store to buy an album, and the girl who staffed the register took one look at him, rocking on his heels, golden hair around his angel-manly face, hands in the slash pockets of his cracked-leather bomber jacket, toothpick waggling, and waved him through without taking his money: he was too cool, too much of a dude to have to pay. Thus would the revolution manifest itself in our lives.

I had never been waved through a check-out line solely on presentation of self, on looks alone. Getting a cup of coffee for free pleased me.

Not until I sat down with it did I realize that the coffee was lukewarm. It was four o'clock in the afternoon: the urn had been turned off for the day. At some point soon the woman who had served me would have to drain away the day's dregs and throw them out. I'd impressed her that much: maybe about a nickel's worth. □

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