

Driving into Haywood County this morning I was taken by an odd storm front that had the sun poking through dense fog and then clouds at intervals and then as I drove into the corners, near Canton, I watched this fascinating cloud. It was wrapped low around the hills near me. It extended fingers out and around the dark green wet trees, seemingly grasping this entire hill. These tendrils conjured in me how I am being held right now by others in my life. Tendrils seeping across my landscape, and apparently holding me and saturating my thoughts in my waking and my sleeping.

I pulled into this little breakfast place in Clyde, and took out my laptop at the counter. Surrounded by that part of the blue-collar community who had a later start to their day. I sat there tasting my hurriedly prepared eggs, and over-warmed, stiff bacon, while inhaling the oddly comforting cigarette smoke from the men who measure their indulgences by the pack. It was a funny place to flee to as my ideas need to be vented, surrounded by plaid and camouflaged outerwear, and the baseball-capped clientele. Yet I had to pull over and consider this image as it imprinted on my thoughts: odd compulsions from that writer in me who dominates so many of my actions: this observer and reporter inside, who demands certain obediences from me.

His ongoing directive goes toward collecting a data sample of words and impressions as though they were each clues left in some prearranged scavenger hunt. I try to continue this quest to create some order from what, deceptively, seem like random events and personalities in my world. But I know that the sighting of this cloud on this particular day required some attention. This was one more of the clues that I needed to make note of and then add to my treasure map of ideas and observations.

The point of this activity is, of course, to bump into all of the connections and inferences that nature, or more broadly, reality throws at me. Then, if I pay close attention, and do not let the details sneak by I can take all of these threads and cleverly weave them into the suggested pattern. I say "suggested" because this is like a model kit that came without directions. While it seems clear that some pieces fit together, and some do not, there are an abundance that lie untouched spread over the floor, waiting to be considered and met with their fellows. But they are spread out over a floor that seems endless, and only by steadfast diligence can I hope to put this all together. Without directions or even the box top I am not certain if the assembly will generate some type of model car or plastic dinosaur, and I realize this is the clever part, where one must not be fooled.

Another way to look at it is like this card game I played one night. The idea is that several of the folks at the table know the gist of the rules. Then as the play continues, through observing the other players and the conventions of passing cards, and taking them and interacting with the newcomer, he or she may begin to ascertain the, otherwise, undivulged rules of the game. It is at first a fascinating exercise because one feels as though they are the only one who does not get it. That is, of course, the whole point. In this game the goal is to learn how to participate while never being told the object of the game nor the penalties for playing poorly. The whole time you are losing your cards, being held accountable for the rules and trying to figure out enough of it to continue playing before you find yourself summarily finished before knowing whether keeping or losing cards was even the object.

Regardless of the simile I see my daily activities as part of this elaborate puzzle that surely has a solution if only I paid enough attention. This implies adding some structure to the parts of the task that lay in front of me. With my task of adding order in a disordered world, one of the primary questions I have in this effort is to decide if the others here are part of the pieces of the game, or if they are fellow players. In this regard it is like another party game. In this one the host has prepared a stack of cards and each has the name of a different celebrity written on it. As the game begins each person has a card affixed to their back, in plain sight of everyone in the room except for themselves. Then the goal is to casually interact with others throughout the room to arrive at conclusions about your assigned identity. This strikes me as part of the broader game that we are all being asked to play. We wander about this hypothetical room trying to approach our own self knowledge by receiving cryptic clues from others who are themselves trying to see who it is they are.

Of course this flies in the face of those who feel that we each need to A.) know ourselves without the input from others, B.) be happy by ourselves, C.) not require the opinion of others for validation...And you know, you hear this from various camps that all have a questionable bias, and it really is starting to bug me. I hear this from those who are in these long-term relationships (i.e. marriages) who say this as though this is the thing that allowed them to be stuck with one person their entire lives. "It is because of my self actualization and contentment that I chose to be with someone else." It is like the TV show, Kung Fu, where the young priest could not leave the Shou Lin Temple till he snatched the pebble from the hand of the master and carried a pot of red hot coals burning a tattoo into his forearms: some right of passage that those who are in these relationships have already suffered through.

I also hear this from the other group, those who are embittered about the couple crap and are themselves either intentionally or unintentionally single, but who—at least at intervals, for the press—say all the same jazz about “feeling good about being who I am...” blah, blah, blah... Well I see this as about as convincing as Paul the apostle who says in 1st Corinthians “*I say therefore to the unmarried and widows, it is good for them if they abide even as I. (meaning single) But if they cannot contain, let them marry: ” for it is better to marry than to burn.* But face it, he was not a happy guy and would have been a lousy date. Like it was hard for Paul to stay single.

In my game at least we do need others to tell us who we are, and I am OK with this. If I were alone in the world I would not like it. Sure the beaches are still pretty and the snow is still cold, but while I appreciate beauty without needing some symbiotic enjoyment holding hands on the beach or in the ski lodge, there is a lot to be said for not living like Kaczynski in some isolated cabin claiming that regardless of what John Donne had to say, we are indeed islands. I actually like the abundance of folks out there. Further I find that I am not only searching with them for this larger order-of-all-things deal, but I am also finding what is called *Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle*, which in short states that in observing we alter that which is observed. In this I feel that —whether Heisenberg agrees or not—that when we see, and when we are seen, that it alters who we are.

I have these people who are like jewels to me. Well, that’s an overstatement. They are stones in my life. Now I must take an aside here and explain the context. On many, many weekends I will go into the wilderness here in the Western North Carolina and hike up the streambeds with my children. During these unstructured events I tell them to each look for one special stone, so that at the end of this clamber over rocks, while wetting our shoes and stumbling in and out of the fun, we finish the jaunt and we each have a method of holding the memory. Yet these stones, which we have inevitably found under light creek rapids, lose a bit of their brilliance when they are pulled from the stream and then dried. The gleam and the shine seem to be synonymous with the stream from whence they came.

I feel this way about those I meet in my very real search for meaning and self-knowledge. Heisenberg was right. By looking I have altered the item for which I looked. As the person that I see, sees me they alter me right back (which Heisenberg never even touched on). So these people that I meet are not stones found and dried, but they are the rocks with the gleam back on them because, near as I can tell, they are still dripping

wet from the stream. I have these beautiful people in my life who seem to glisten and make those things that I see shiny because this interaction with the whole is to me my own little geologic quest. And to pursue the analogy just a little too far, those with whom I spend so much of my time become water on the stones, that makes all the rest look freshly pulled from the stream.

In this way I feel that these other people out there are not incidental to who I am, but are part of who I am. My observing them is altering them and altering me. So instead of understanding sight as collecting light rays that reflect off of others, it is probably more accurate to comprehend looking at, and interacting with others as some type of clay bumper car park. Everyone is zipping around laughing as they continue shaping and reshaping their cars while pounding into one another. It is not silly new-ageism to say that there is clearly a link between that which we observe and that which we are. I also feel that it is safe to say that the type of interaction that occurs between us and that which we call inanimate; and us with our fellow animate observers is qualitatively different. Because we see them, and they see us. More happens than seeing sometimes but that is the entry-level interchange, and it affects both parties.

If others impact us, I believe the impact is always on the whole. It is not an additional grain of sugar in the bowl of sugar. On the far end, my children serve as an example of this. They become more than another cup of tea in my life, they are the sugar in that cup of tea. Their presence does not change a thing quantitatively, but qualitatively. They are the saturated difference. This is holistic. I meet others and (while trying not to make this sound totally sentimental and exaggerated) they too may change the whole by scale and by kind.

Of course, I have met individuals who have had no meaningful impact on my life at all. More than not I meet people who leave no impression whatsoever. They are less than significant in my life, and they seem to serve as filler to the plot, in that they allow the dialogue to continue but add nothing to the script whatsoever. I have also had the experience referenced in the film Citizen Kane, as Kane's colleague mentions why "Rosebud" may be a memory from a single occasion.

A fellow will remember things you wouldn't think he'd remember. You take me. One day, back in 1896, I was crossing over to Jersey on a ferry and as we pulled out, there was another ferry pulling in and on it, there was a girl waiting to get off. A white dress she had on and she was carrying a white pastel and I only saw her for one second and she didn't see me at all - but I'll bet a month hasn't gone by since that I haven't thought of that girl.

This too is significant, when we discover those who in moments of observation are not only changed but alter us irrevocably.

In Arthur Golden's novel "Memoirs of a geisha" there is a mention of the fact that sometimes a single misstep is very important, as Sayuri says that if one has a single stumble as a train goes by it can alter a life. I have fallen in front of many trains in my day. I have also bumped into subtle evidences of my ongoing imperative: things that I must note and take down or I will miss them entirely. It is the combination of the giant hard things that are the trains to me, and those ineffable cloud fingers reaching out over the green hills that give me context for my search. It is this knowledge that had me in the breakfast place in Clyde as I began this rambling articulation. I see evidence of things that indicates a larger architecture and alludes to some unseen schematic to my efforts. So I type these down thinking that by enunciating them, they will become distinct if not discernable.

As I finish I mention a concept in the bible that I have written about before, of the tradition of setting up an Ebenezer. It is only known now to people from Robinson's hymn, *Come, thou Fount of Many Blessings*, which is a remarkable work as it states that "I am prone to wander," which honesty is not common in the era of wordy hymnology. An Ebenezer is a rock that the Hebrews set up to remember an event. If there was a battle or great effort at a certain place they would mark it and remember it with a stone. My loves are stones and they are the markers that I am alive. But they are at once the stones and the water on the stones that makes them beautiful.

I am forced to pull over in life at intervals to record these small clues, which seem to intimate a broader purpose or patterned fabric as I drive along. Today it is the understated evidence of this cloud's fingers wrapping around this hill. I know that the hill is me and foggy fingers are where I am right now. I cannot yet separate who is included in my current reverie, but I have been here before and I will just place this aside until I know. But first I will write it down and create my own little digital Ebenezer. Noting the small steps that will land me in front of another train. Paying attention to the tiny hints that let me understand the whole. Noting the small indicators that so many others overlook, but I am required to record. When, like today, I see this Platonic form shadowed on the wall in front of me I have to take quick note, like a man waking from a dream who knows if he does not turn to the pad of paper on his night stand immediately his dream will vanish like the ghost that it is. As I am awakened by these apparitions I take note and wait for my next sighting.