
WHY DO I WRITE: "of words, of lives, of living..."

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Holidays serve as markers - of family, of friends, of tradition. A period in which time is engrafted, if engrafted is the proper word. Somewhat akin to a tree marking time; irregular overlapping lines forming intricate rings, woven, round and round. Markers are reminders which both invoke and create memories, reassuring us - of lives loss, of births, renewal. Periods in which those no longer in our lives – the living, the dead - take on mythical proportions, reaching from afar, stretching, touching from known and unknown places; reclaiming territory. Refreshed through dance, stories, food; generation after generation, marking the seasons' change, providing life's coloring and contours, in both expected and unexpected ways.

I stood no farther than forty five feet away, washing dishes, separated by a wall - listening - not listening - listening. The intrusion was, in some sense, represented paying homage. Trying to remember, counting, 92, 93, 94, 95, *no she's 94 ... I think*. An exercise in affirming her importance in my life: bestowing her blessings when marrying her fifth child; providing countless stories and laughter in good times and bad; saving my life after my mother's death when she visited, just to talk and at the same time provided me comfort while sharing wisdom.

Listening – not listening – listening. I did. I sure did.

Moving plates from one sink to another, sorting, scrubbing, rinsing, wiping – brow, plates, hands - looking about for an apron, refreshing the dishwater with more hot water, opening the dishwasher, seeing it was full, adjusting the placement of dishes, deciphering the settings through fogged over glasses, closing the door. Soon the dishwasher became an active participant – whoosh – whoosh – whoosh - competing against my splashing, well the water's splashing in the rinse sink – splash – splash - splash - and the sounds entering from the other room, floating overhead; voices enveloped in distinct bubbles, random bubbles.

Listening – not listening – listening.

I bowed, in manner (over the sink), and in thought (further creasing a creased brow), positions imposed by thoughts and memories. Sweat migrated, filling the creases, which grew deeper with each passing year. The laughter, her laughter, a defining laugh, seemed less vibrant, quieter. Her Louisiana “lisp” (lisp may not be a perfect word to describe the distinct southern Louisiana cadence) seemed less punctuated, smoother. Maybe the difference could be attributed to the bubbles (overhead), possibly the splashing (below), conceivably the whooshing. Heat rises, so they say – it did - intermingling with the bubbles, lifting them, pinning some against the ceiling, punctuating a few, leaving incomplete sentences.

The stacks of plates grew, no matter how fast I washed, inching closer to the edge of the sink, invading the space reserved for clean dishes, making the task all the more time consuming. The production routine I instituted would never make America great again. I sure no one cared. I am not sure I cared at the time.

Dirty plates were inserted wherever, catch where catch. Invisible hands moved quickly, moving away, as if to stay clear, as if to secret their owner's identities, as if my activities were foreign to them (never volunteering to help). And since I am “as if [ing]” ... one more ... as if

they had never seen anyone do such strange things in their lives, or if they had, remembering their childhood, promising never to wash another dish again.

“Please put the dirty dishes on the left side...thank you”

Draining the sink, refilling, collecting additional plates, cleaning, rinsing; making room to make room, looking for an end, believing there was an end. Looking around for more dishes, seeing what I saw – more plates, invisible beings, invisible hands, no volunteers.

My activity represented a different type of marker - training; engrained by Chester Anna (my mother’s mother), carved deeper by Georgia (my mother); haunting words, instructive words, words which will surely follow me the rest of my life: out of the bed, to the shiny walker (when I’m barely able to stand), to the sink (when I’m barely able to hold my water), thinking not thinking, resorting to little boy status, peeping in the sink, on those bad days. I will. I sure will. I see it coming. “Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.” Yeah, yeah, yeah ... their words, their training, embedded deep.

“If you don’t work, you don’t eat,” words spoken before the meal.

“I cooked. You ate. I believe I have enough children to keep the kitchen clean,” words spoken after the meal.

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Leave it to Beaver aired weekly on American television from 1957 to 1963. The patriarch of the fictionalized family (the Cleavers) was Ward Cleaver. Ward administered advice in a measured tone, always attired in a business suit, never angry. The matriarch, June Cleaver, Ward’s supportive wife, was forever neat, nurturing, and loving. I must confess that I do not know whether “She of Ninety Four Years” ever watched Leave it to Beaver. Her favorite show,

One Life to Live, aired from 1968-2013, airing every week day between the hours of 2:30 and 3:00 p.m. One Life to Live evolved around the wealthy Lord family, the middle-class Woleks and Rileys families.

“She of Ninety Four Years” always started dinner around 2:00 p.m., around the time General Hospital came on. I always believed General Hospital was the warm up act, the precursor to her favorite; moving to and from, couch to kitchen, kitchen to the edge of the doorway, watching, staring, back to the stove.

Watching - not watching - watching, even if it meant burning dinner.

Something generally did burn, some days the rice, other days the meat. Cooking – watching – not really cooking, not really watching. Dividing her attention; balancing both, in order not to miss the developments on both shows, so that she stayed on schedule and had dinner ready when Mr. Adolph arrived home. Old folks use to say, “If you watched too much, it will never get done.” Whether she believed in such common-sense wisdom or not (I never asked). She did apply the age-old wisdom however, allowing meats to smother, onions to caramelize, flavors to blend. Watching – not really watching – watching.

“Mrs. Lena something is burning on the stove!”

Always teaching - how to adapt – correcting the burnt, incorporating the flavors, never starting over, seasoning so that her children and Ward never tasted the burnt. Opening the door, raising the windows, airing the house out, removing the smells, successfully protecting her secrets. Over the years, each time I have consumed or read about other cultures burnt rice dishes (come-chay (Vietnamese), tah-ding (Persian), socarrat (Spanish); nurungji (Korean), xoon (Senegalese), con con (Dominican), I have thought of the watching – not watching – watching techniques which served her well and created her version of burnt enhanced dishes. I say all of

this to say: years ago, I created a list of dishes I swore never to cook, preferring a love one's version instead. Admiring the perfection established over time, taking a family recipe and making it their own, through births and deaths, holidays, special occasions, to celebrate the birthday of one of their children. My promise was a simple one: never duplicate, they have set a marker which should be cherished. Georgia's sweet potato pie, cornbread dressing, pecan pie, okra gumbo were part of the promise. Mrs. Lena's dirty rice, Louisiana gumbo, homemade rolls were also part of the promise.

The self-imposed restraint was accompanied by the refusal to try anyone else's version of the food items – reserving memories, protecting markers, paying homage. Making the pilgrimage to their kitchen, allowing myself to be consumed by the moment, cherishing their talents, giving thanks; extending both hands upward; the ultimate food lover's declaration of loyalty, fealty.

Thanking the Gods was my practice. An absolution and fealty which existed up to the time my mother's health began to fail, requiring me to sit down with her to obtain her secrets, the changes she had made, over time, to the traditional recipes. On that day, standing only a short distance away, listening-not listening, reminded me of my promise. I also wondered whether it was time to have the same conversation with June, with pen in hand, to discover her secrets.

Every second - moment - day represents a gift. She is the last anchor on both sides; a link between the past and future, representing time's grace. Absolutely, time has changed her routine: no longer driving at night, requiring the company of one of children for any trips out of the community, standing long enough in the kitchen to get water, to set the microwave, decreasing the length of any walks, adapting.

Years ago, when trying a case in her hometown (Opelousas, Louisiana), I saw her look-alikes in the jury panels, throughout the community, in the stores. I heard variations of the accent, saw the skin tone, eyes, and smile, an almost “stepfordy” experience. I know “stepfordy” isn’t a word, neither is “stepford”, like Stepford Wives , be that as it may, stepfordy is an apt-description. I know no other way of explaining, so bear with me. Her grey mane forever reminds me of the beauty of Louisiana’s byways, and bayous, don’t ask me why.

So it was, listening from afar, forty, fifty minutes at most, completing a common and necessary task. Wiping, drying the counter - rubbing in circles – harder - deeper - polishing the marble – removing the other dishes from the dishwasher, all part of the process, before hearing my mother’s voice, *“Did you sweep and mop the floor.”* I listened to the internal whispers, a voice which has remained fourteen years after her death, and complied. Turning, turning, turning … looking about for the broom and mop.

Then it came! Words - spoken clearly – floating overhead, encased in new bubbles, absolutely no interference. Words packaged in the form of a statement, a matter of fact statement, not needed, not welcomed.

Sometimes parents make mistakes. Mouthing that their child a friend, instead of their child; crossing the invisible line, trapping themselves and the child. Sometimes sharing too much, ignoring the child doesn’t want to know everything, forgetting children refuse to see the parent as a person; preferring death, if given a choice, instead of knowing, yes, death. Bragging to other parents, teachers, administrators their child is perfect, setting both the parent and the child, for disappointment. Believing there is perfection in parenting, when there is no such thing; not realizing the experts are flat-out guessing, flat-out lying. One other – sometimes parents provide too much information; this was one of those occasions. .

“I don’t make dirty rice anymore,” were her words. The last family dinner, I served Zatarain’s Dirty Rice. It’s pretty good!”

Time froze. My body stiffened. My posture straightened. I moved away from the counter, clenched both fists. I looked about and above, to assure I read right, to make sure I heard right. The bubble still remained, overhead … I read right. I heard right.

I moved towards the source of the statement, as blue crabs moves, sideways; screaming as I walked, “no, no, no”, dropping all pretenses of not listening.

“Yes, I have been listening. No, no, no”!

Erasing the forty five feet, stepping, sliding, as if a slip and slide had been recently been installed, leading with the right leg, tucking the left, navigating the corner; letting the no(s) flow like bile.

“Please don’t say that. I know you don’t cook anymore. No, no, no … Zatastrain’s … No!”

June threw her head back, appreciating the earth quake all around her. Her head moved up and down, in the same cadence she had done for years when the Lords, Woleks and Rileys invaded her living room, causing her to jerk, involuntarily, spasmodic.

Nothing separated us at this time, no splashing, not whooshing. The bubbles had now disappeared. The sight line was clear. Hers was an unbounded giggle. She bobbed gleefully, an unencumbered movement. June’s eyes danced, as if dancing with the moon; stars, the heavens.

We were that audience in the movie theater – you have seen the picture - eyes bulging, mouths agape, hands in positions of excitement – shocked, pure shock. Confession of adultery – no! A secret love child – absolutely not! Conversion from Catholicism to another faith, while

denouncing the Pope – Please, No, No! No! Her revelation was far worst – Zatatrain's Dirty Rice!

There I stood in the middle of memories' wasteland, trapped, feeling as if I was being violated. Watching June move her head back and forward, as if the confession meant nothing, said in a matter of fact manner, knowing the outrageous humor of her admission. Reaching back, flinging the markers over the fence, with her off hand, against the wind; yes, she did; yes, she did.

“No, no, no”!

Wishing time would stop, rewind, erase, like a cassette player; old technology, sure. Not too much to ask, just stop, rewind and erase, as if none of this ever happened. She didn't stop smiling. She couldn't stop smiling. She appeared to want to mouth her heresy again. I wasn't having it, popping every bubble they floated out, forbidding the sacrilege, stepping over the respect your elder's admonition.

“Please stop!”

An irrational soul I was. Five year old irrational; wanting a bandage, saying my stomach hurts, while holding my finger to show the hurt.

“See, see, this finger.”

Irrational behavior accompanied by screaming, “no, no, no”; as if she was four years old, ignoring she should have stopped cooking years before, having dutifully served her lot, parenting, grand-parenting, a great, a great-great. My behavior was akin to the stroke victim bumming a cigarette from a stranger, irrationally believing the stranger didn't notice she was a stroke victim and would not think how foolish the request was ... I was that irrational, proceeding anyway.

Standing in the middle of the room, somewhat like [Abbot and Costello](#); slowly turning, step-by-step, inch-by-inch, grabbing, slapping, hitting, incensed because of her mention of the word Zatastrain's.

“Zatastrain's”!

“Slowly I turn. ... step-by-step, inch-by-inch...”

Grabbing June mentally, slapping her face, hitting her in the head, knocking her to the floor; the same way Bud Abbott did to Lou Costello, that same as Moe did Curley. An incensed, irrational soul I was.

June wasn't having any of it, slapping back, repeating Zatastrain's at will, pronouncing her freedom, the change in life, passage of time, the season's change. The sparkle in her eyes told of our, of my, ridiculousness.

Proceeding toward the door to travel home, she reminded her eldest daughter of the need to leave early, to arrive safely, a parenting skill she had yet to abandon. Steadying her stance, secured herself, needing little help to move from the chair to the door, smiling, giggling at our reaction. She needed no help in laughing, smiling, and poking - as she always had - as she retraced her path to the car. Some markers never change. From birth to death, so it will be.

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Why Do I Write? – I write because life's convergence of thoughts of ideas; a convergence which is all controlling, forcing memories to be relived, and retold. Stories which are told through items as simple as quilts, foods and clothing - if we stop and listen - if we stop and observe. What does inspire the artist, the quilt maker? What is the history of a food, causing it to adapt as people cross borders, intermingle, share and borrow? Colors, textures, design tell

stories. The pretty blouse was maintained for twenty years, worn occasionally by your mother, containing her secrets of the first date, first kiss, the first time she fell in love.

I write because of the stories and events which captivate me on a daily basis, oft-times not making sense at first, waking me up days later, only then knowing the meaning, seeing the meaning. Like life, influences long forgotten, enveloped in sadness, anger, tears, a touch, smiles, laughter ... stories.

Within the last year I was asked by a dear friend whether the stories I told were all made up. I looked at my friend and responded, "I label the stories either fiction or non-fiction. I don't understand what you are asking." She reached and touched my shoulder, as if not knowing how to say what she wanted to say, "The non-fiction ones?" I understood her confusion. She was asking stories which were labeled non-fiction were in fact enhanced to more exciting, that a non-fiction story is told in a straight line, never deviating, never invoking television characters, misplaced names (June and Ward Cleaver by way of example), and surely not Abbott and Costello. I disagree.

Life with all its predictably is exceedingly unpredictable, providing exceptions to the rule, ever moment of the day, providing exceptions. Events to some are accompanied by smell, colors, textures, recessed memories, tears, laughter, even flat out silliness. Sounding like, looking like, feeling like, touching from afar, reaching from graves, telling you over and over again, *I warned you of this when you were young*. Seeing events, plays, and sketches played out in real like, like Abbott and Costello. Events which make you want to scream like Curly (A Three Stooges reference), wanting to slap yourself, fall down, or even lift your leg and exit stage right (a reference to the Slowly I Turn routine), particularly when you realize how silly you may have looked at given moment.

I write because, through fiction and non-fiction, because life is both fiction and non-fiction. I hope I am making sense. Telling the story, reaching for examples, seeing examples and influences, getting it right, getting it wrong; making clear the distinction between fiction and non-fiction, conveying the power of the mind, telling, retelling life events in order to convey the richness of one's culture, of other cultures, is why I write.