My Favorite World #10

The athletics-entertainment machine, especially at the professional level, never fails to bring us a parade of behaviors that, if it were our own children acting out so, would make us want to crawl behind the nearest rock in shame and disgrace. Every game from bouncing balls to twirling on the ice to driving around in circles real fast has its Hall of Shame inductees. Go back at least to Ty Cobb<fn>At least…we have no way of knowing, but I'm willing to bet that the guys who were winning marathons in ancient Greece were probably over-indulged boobs themselves.</fn> and bring it on up to today.

It makes sense. Elite athletes are among the most pampered and cosseted class of people around. They've spent most of their lives being told how special they are. When they find themselves in trouble, there are often legions of protectors to make their troubles go away.<fn>As long as they continue to perform, naturally. Failure to excel means exile. It's a helluva motivator.</fn>

It's one part of why I really don't follow the sports world in any detail. I'll watch a game here and there (hockey is once again tickling my interest for an hour at a time), but I really don't care what happens.<fn>As long as the fucking Yankees take a kick to the junk on a regular basis. Fuck the fucking Yankees.</fn>

Except for tennis. I love tennis, and this week finds us midway through the Australian Open, the first major tournament

of the year. The time difference makes watching it live a little hard, but I check the results every day, even after my second favorite player ever – and perhaps the best ever, period – Roger Federer was eliminated. Watching him play has been a big piece of My Favorite World for years.<fn>Also, too…David Foster Wallace wrote a profile of Federer for the NYTimes magazine years ago, and it's my favorite piece of writing on any sport, ever. Do yourself a favor…</fn> But even with Federer out of the tournament, there's still plenty to love.

What really makes tennis stand out right now is that most of the top players in the men's game consistently behave with remarkable style and grace. Don't misunderstand. Tennis is filled with entitled schmucks, just like any other sport.<fn>The elite women have more than a fair share of prima donnas, though there are a few coming along now who threaten to upend the game with style, wit, and grace. Eugenie Bouchard and Madison Keys…I'm looking at you, ladies. Brava!</fn> Of the top five men, four always show class and sportsmanship. Federer's speaking, like his game, is elegant and deceptively smooth. Rafael Nadal, who may be the second best player ever behind Federer, has had the good luck to have a rival in Federer who brings out his own generous and elegant nature. Novak Djokovich,who's making his own case for joining the 'best ever' bracket, settled in as third wheel in this rivalry with incredible humor and a style all his own. And now, Stan Warwinka is making a run at the top tier, and as a Davis Cup teammate and countryman of Federer, he's had a great role model for how to behave like a champion.<fn>Pro tip: it has nothing to do with stepping on an opponent lying on the ground, for example.</fn>

These guys, especially the top 3 of Federer, Nadal, and Djokovich, demonstrate great skill and ruthless intensity on the court, but it never devolves into trash talking or strutting. <fn>I deliberately do not include Andy Murray in

this group. His playing is often superb. But geebus, what a whiny dick.</fn>

The piece of the Aussie Open that really hits My Favorite World this week came in an early round match between Nadal and Tim Smyczek, ranked 112th in the world, present in the Open through the grueling qualifier process, and given no realistic chance of beating the top-ranked Nadal. But he gave Rafa a hard match, and was within reach of a fifth set victory. And as Nadal was struggling to win the set up 6-5, someone in the crowd let out an intentionally distracting shriek as Nadal was in his serve motion. He shanked the serve. And Smyczek, who could have used the moment to regain the advantage, did what too many people call "unthinkable". As the crowd was booing the noisy jerk for his rudeness, Smyczek raised two fingers to indicate that Nadal should receive a do-over on the disrupted serve.

This is about the same as offering a batter a fourth strike, or letting an opposing team have another shot at first down because something was distracting. Try to imagine any other sport where someone within a whisker of pulling off the greatest victory of his career would do such a thing.

The chair umpire was amazed. The crowd was amazed. Nadal's team gave Smyczek a standing ovation. Even Nadal was amazed, but given a reprieve he quickly served the game out for the match. Think of it…you're *that close* to beating one of the best in the history of the game, and you elect sportsmanship over cutthroat. Asked after the match why he did what he did, Smyczek replied:

> *I know my parents would have killed me if I didn't. It was the right thing to do."*

We grow weary of watching people time and again twist conditions to gain advantage – because to let the opportunity to take advantage pass by has come to be adjudged 'loser'

behavior. We are often certain that we are being lied to or manipulated by people who long ago ran out of shits to give about whether or not their parents would approve of their choices. But here, in this favorite game of mine, involving one of my favorite players, an unknown kid from the Midwest made himself one of my new favorites through a simple act of decency.

Courtesy. Decency. Style and grace. Tim Smyczek. My Favorite World.

Sartre Got Nuttin on Me

A Monday has come and nearly gone, and the Writer remains chained in the dankness of his scribbler's warren, seized by the bitter darkness that attends the cold winds of hopelessness and despair.<fn>These are metaphors, you know.</fn> And yet, as the daylight wanes and the hoarfrost descends, there is no post. No hope. Only a bleak, suffocating sense of emptiness.

What harsh deity delivers this wrath upon my sensitive – yea, though ceaselessly questing – spirit? What miasma of gloom places its icy, bony fingers on my neck, reminding me of the impossibility of relief, the sheer and forbidding rock walls that bind my very soul?

Yes. It is The Bachelor/ette. On ABC.

My Women<fn>Implying no sense of ownership, naturally, but merely referencing our familial proximity.</fn> watch The Bachelor/ette. It is a time for chocolate, popcorn, and (well deserved) hyper-critical fashion commentary. The girls, they bond and giggle, they take a well-deserved break from the rigors of their jam-packed lives. They have earned their pleasure.

Alas, the presence of this program within 100 feet of my person is the televideo equivalent of a thin-needle aspiration removing my scant remaining testosterone directly from my bits and pieces. I quail, I quiver, I quest for another tremor word that begins with ‘Q’. To no avail. There is no exit, no hope.

Because I am Immune to Boredom(TM), I do not fall asleep during the broadcast. Quite the contrary. Against all reason, I am consumed by the fabricated dramatics, the over-emphasized faux sexuality and faux bosoms. I confer moral judgments and establish favorites among those competing for their shot at true love, but only for those worthy emblems of strong womanliness deserving of my affections. The rest are targets of my withering scorn. Harlots!

Of course, my emotional investments are well-shrouded by snark, by sarcasm, by base commentary on the lack of basic intelligence exhibited by, well, everyone on the show. I am, I realize with a frisson of self-satisfaction, a laugh riot, the personification of comedy gold, mirth made flesh. Certainly my witticisms and piercing bon mots earn me the accolades of My Women<fn>Again, proximate, not property.</fn>, spurring them to cast roses at my feet and gently slip bon bons between my wise-acreing lips?

Alas, no. No prophet is extolled in his own land, and instead I face umbrage and exile. And now I will never know which animatronic inflatable will claim the heart of our hunky-yet-sensitive man beast who only wants to find true lasting love just like every good man before him has done – by sleeping in

succession with 16 conventionally beautiful women with genuinely stunted mental capacity.

America. Freedom. And I, lonely man, am cast off the island.<fn>Different show, I know, but the meta-metaphor that connects one sliver of the…oh fuck it, you get the point.</fn>

My Favorite World #9

I've been listening to a bunch of Jim Hall recordings lately. This one, a duet with Ron Carter from 1972, exemplifies so much of what I love about the music called jazz.

It's all there…the playfulness, the attentive listening. More than anything, the sense of two people having a real conversation while never saying a word.

Jim Hall died at the end of 2013 at the age of 83. Along the way, he wrote a few of the definitive chapters on what's possible with a guitar. He played smooth, he played cool, he played hot. He could play inside with great taste and economy, as in this Cole Porter classic with the Paul Desmond Quartet. (1959)

But Hall was also an adventurer, and he was one of few the

cool guitar guys to embrace the heat and risk the expanded harmonic challenges necessary to keep up with someone like Sonny Rollins. Here's some terrific footage from that era (1962).

Jim Hall was widely praised as a generous teacher, as well, and spent time with Bill Frisell, Pat Metheny, and Julian Lage, helping these guys find their own voice and navigate the dark trench of the music industry. The following link is a full set of Hall's trio with Lage at Newport, recorded just a few months before Hall died in 2013. It might be the best hour you spend this week.

Jim Hall Trio w Julian Lage, Live at Newport Jazz (via NPR)

Nothing new in any of this…unless this is the first you've heard of Jim Hall. He kept playing well into his 83rd year, and every step of the way he was listening closely and responding with taste and honesty. His work, his legacy…a big part of My Favorite World.

As I Lay Sighing

For most of the past 8 years or so, I've embraced my

introverted hermit instincts. I've always tended that direction, but once we decamped our lifelong hometown of Atlanta – leaving behind a crazy great network of family, friends, resources, institutions, &c. – I overindulged my love for solitude until it morphed into full blown seclusion.

The virtues of solitude are plentiful. Man, what a great period for guitar practice and learning to write, reading all the books I can eat, engaging with myself in the best Walden Pondish tradition. Know thyself, mofo, and all that entails. But I began to feel that I was becoming invisible. Solitude is all well and good, but seclusion is a terrible platform for actual *doing*. It also gets kind of lonely in the cave.

My Apocalypse Summer was the zenith<fn>Or nadir.</fn> of my retreat into seclusion. (Aside from the immediate family, about the only people I saw and spoke to for several months were medical professionals.) As I lay sighing, a terrible thought occurred to me: I had all but written myself out of the story over the space of several years. I began to wonder whether anyone would show up at my funeral or if my family would toss handfuls of dirt on my box and wonder why I had no friends to see me off. This thought did not arise out of any kind of self-pity.<fn>By some weird trick, the Episode had exactly the opposite effect. Go figure.</fn> It was just frightfully obvious; I have lived in my new hometown for over 6 years, and I could count the number of people I've had meaningful conversations with up to that time on slightly less than all my toes. I envisioned myself slipping under the water and leaving barely a ripple. That, I thought, was a sad statement about a life (or at least the most recent part of it) ill spent.

None of this has to do with any burning urge to leave some kind of enormous legacy, some sort of Birdman-esque megalomania. I may still paint my masterpiece, but I don't think everything's gonna be different on that far away someday. Anyway, I have all the legacy any one person could

want in my two kids.<fn>I refrain from braggadocio right now, but ask me about them sometime when you are ready to hear me rave at length.</fn>

Still, one considers the prospect of his funeral unattended with some sobriety. My best eulogy would be a group of people agreeing sincerely that, hey, all in all, this guy was good to the people around him and made a positive difference in his time on the planet. I'm not worried about historical legacies, but I would really prefer that when I slip under for the last time, the ripples are noticed by *someone*. Hermits are not notable ripple makers.

As I recovered and contemplated this dilemma<fn>In my solitude, naturally.</fn>, I began to marvel at how many people reached out to share their own Apocalypse stories with me – people who just wanted to tell their own version of here's-this-fucked-up-thing-that-happened, usually with a little trepidation, but brimming with a hopefulness that somebody else will *get it*, will know what it feels like to have the world turn upside down on you. And to be honest, many of these stories made me think, damn, I'm not sure I could have endured that ride, knowing that of course, the ride is the same for each of us in spite of the almost inconceivable variety of Apocalypses we each endure: that the specificity is only surface, that the real connection arises from our shared fragility and from the immense randomness of it all, with every bit of the absolution and terror and opportunity that the fickleness of nature confers.

Once I regained my legs and my wits, I decided to toss the script and rewrite my final act. I've had some excellent assistance in this, from family and good friends who refused to let me completely disappear into the hermit cave, and it appears that, now and at last(!), the gears are starting to catch. I've enjoyed several conversations with longtime, very close pals about the Apocalypse and the accompanying cloud of whateverthehell. Great stuff, down to the bone stuff, the kind

of connections and honesty that makes life hard and beautiful and challenging and utterly worth the price of admission and ongoing participation. The right kind of encouragement-slash-asskicking I needed, it is impossible to overstate the gold-and-jewels level of wealth these people gifted me.

I've also managed to re-connect with a number of once-close pals that I had allowed to drift away, or that I had drifted away from/closed off/shut out/convinced myself that the moment had passed. I'm also meeting and connecting with some really dynamic and creative and interesting people, new friends who are getting my motor running in a scary and exciting and powerful sort of overdrive. Possibility in abundance!

But even more than all this luxe bounty, two more or less random exchanges landed in the middle of my pond of ponderous pondering with a hearty splash. And the ripples keep on rippling. Amazingly enough, the ripples started with me.

First: I was having a Facebook exchange about music with someone I knew during my college radio days. I was station manager then, and she was a young and eager station volunteer. We were never close friends or anything, but now with FB we're getting to know each other a bit, and we were talking about music and such, when out of the blue comes this:

> *You were my mentor though. Did I ever say how grateful I am to you? I am.*

Well knock me down with a feather. The idea that I had ever been a mentor to anyone is sort of bewildering, especially when it is someone that I probably met with a dozen times or so over 30 years ago. She went on to describe several specific events that made a difference and stuck with her. For 30-plus frigging years.

A few weeks after that, I was on Facebook again chatting with a woman I knew years ago from the Atlanta band scene. She was

an active friend, someone I ran into and hung out with fairly often. But I'd never considered myself a significant factor in her world at all. And again, out of the blue:

> *oh you got me started…that's what i mean. I owe my entire career to you. early to mid 90s you helped me blag my way through a sad, soulless job into a technical writing job that i figured out by the seat of my pants and then i ended up managing teams of writers, graphic designers, and online help developers and have been an expert project manager (not so overnight) ever since.*

Holy shit. I mean seriously. Ho. Lee. Shit. I had no idea.

These sudden and random splashes left me wondering how many other times I had done something with/for/to people that had left such generous, warm remembrances of me. Made me feel all George Bailey and such, wonderful life-wise. Ain't I swell?

And then the flip side hit me. If I've stumbled through life unaware of the positive impacts I've had on others, how many equivalent dark side episodes have there been? I aver that I can be a prickly prick, and that I am not always<fn>OK, rarely.</fn> an exemplar of patience and kindness. How many times have I pissed on somebody's shoes through carelessness, or even worse, through intentional disregard? How many people remember me as well as these two fine people, but for all the wrong reasons?

It is to shudder.

A Facebook pal posted this earlier today, a quote from Chicago choreographer Nana Shineflug:

> *Since I am growing older, I am concerned with death and my desire to pass through this final act of my life with as much consciousness and understanding as possible.*

I’m not too concerned about death. There were several times during the Apocalypse when I sensed that I could choose to just let go and go,<fn>I had no illusions that my surviving was a matter of choice. I was damned lucky.</fn> and there were moments when that seemed a pretty reasonable path. I’ve been close enough to death that it does not worry me much.<fn>Though I’m in no hurry, believe you me.</fn>

But that second part of the quote, the bit about “pass through this final act of my life with as much consciousness and understanding” as I can muster: that’s the tickler.

Several people have asked whether the Apocalypse left me with any sense of majestic religious enlightenment or epiphinal awakening, and the answer is: not so much. No bright light or hallway lined with dead ancestors. No scent of brimstone or flames licking at my sinful heels. It’s actually much simpler than that. I saw that my final act could last 40 years or 4o days or 4o minutes.<fn>This is true of everyone, sure, but it’s probably easier to not examine that too closely.</fn> How it plays out depends on randomness and chance, sure; but there are at least a few ways that I can influence the remaining scenes.

I’m left with this: every encounter I have with another human being<fn>And maybe this extends to all living things, but sweet suffering Mary, I’m overwhelmed enough as it is. Mosquitos and ticks can still go to the devil.</fn> carries the potential to leave a mark. How I behave towards the people I meet every day can have implications beyond my limited imaginings. I may save someone from a dead-end job or share something that changes their lives. Or I might step on tender feelings, derail an earnest ideal, crush a dream in its infancy. I might speak and act with kindness towards someone who feels invisible, like a cashier at the take-out joint or the person cleaning the office you work in. Or I might be careless and act like an ass.

The choice is mine. I can think of no more awe-inspiring responsibility than that. I'm not much for divinity and concepts of sacred supreme beings and such, but I am beginning to feel that this goal is something that makes the idea of sacrament a practical reality. If we<fn>And as always, when I say 'we' I mean me.</fn> can maintain the awareness that our surface specificity obscures the shared randomness/loneliness/yearning, if we can find it in ourselves to hold that do unto others suggestion in a way that helps us remember each other through our real connection – ah, but that's hard stuff, and so and so did this and that and she's a bitch and he's an asshole and and and. I know too well my deep flaws to pretend that I can practice this 24/7, but it does set an aspirational standard for the final act, however long it may last.

It might just add up to something.

I realize that this all lands pretty squarely in the realm of the thuddingly obvious. But I'm not only stubborn; I'm slow, too. So allow me to play catch-up for a while.

To the people I've wronged<fn>As if any would be here interested in my feeble bloggy witterings in the first place.</fn>, my deeply felt apologies to each of you. If any of you feel the need to get in touch and let me know what a right bastard I am, have at it. Really. Unburden if that's what you need. I can take it, and I certainly have earned it.

To the people who have benefited from knowing me…keep it under your hat. Seriously. Otherwise, I might get a big head and think I can ease up on making the most of whatever time I have left.

But it would be pretty great if you turned up for the funeral so J and the kids don't have to stand alone.