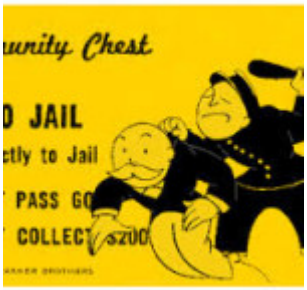
Breaking: Water is Still Wet



Late last year, the NY Police were very, very cross with their new Mayor, who had the gall to mention that he had instructed his son to be very careful and respectful if he had any encounters with the police. Here's a picture of the mayor and his son.



What possible reason could da mayor have had for saying such a thing?





(Excuse my insolence. I forgot we live in the post-racial America now.)

In response, the police union announced a virtual work

stoppage during which they would not issue citations or make arrests “unless absolutely necessary”. Arrests fell by 66%, parking citations by 94%, and traffic tickets by 94%, according to the NY Post. My favorite stat:

> *“Summonses for low-level offenses like public drinking and urination also plunged 94 percent—from 4,831 to 300.*

Of course, everyone remembers all the headlines about how NYC became a flame-engulfed hellscape in which drunken parking scofflaws urinated all over unsuspecting touristas. Snake Pliskin himself would have fled in horror, amirite?

Alas, no.

There was no surge in crime. The city went on as before. It turns out all that hyper-vigilant enforcement activity was not the only thing standing between Gotham and Somali-esque chaos. It turns out that most of the police work was not, to borrow from the union’s statement, “absolutely necessary”. Who knew?

The ‘broken windows’ policing philosophy that became (in)famous under NYPD in the 80s-90s became a tool for harrassment of minorities and other “suspicious” characters. In tandem with the lunatic war on drugs frenzy, this was really nothing more than a cudgel to keep Those People™ in line. Stop-and-frisk statistics clearly demonstrate the disproportionate burden imposed on minorities through its practice. Even after research demonstrated that the tactic had little real effect on wider crime rates, most police forces insisted that this was the only way to keep the streets safe for our law-abiding citizens.<fn>Who, it turns out, are bad for budget solvency!</fn> But America loves it some authoritarianism, and so long as the burden is borne by Those People™, Johnny Law had no reason to change.<fn>FWIW, I have little patience with the smart-ass ‘*No cops? No crime!*’ tautology of the gLibertarian crowd. Many – maybe even most –

police officers are decent people trying to do a difficult, often dangerous. Though statistically speaking, the chance of death or injury on the job is greater for about two dozen other careers, e.g. fishing, logging, or collecting trash.</fn>

Last week, our local fishwrap reported that the Leon County budget is facing a million dollar hole "because of a decline in the number of traffic tickets being written by the Tallahassee Police Department over the past 18 months." Shortly after TPD settled an excessive force lawsuit <fn>Half a million bucks, taxpayers!</fn>, the chief of police "… went to the patrol division and instructed officers to continue writing traffic citations for serious offenses, but gave them the option and encouraged discretion in issuing warnings for stops for minor offenses."

The article goes on to talk about TPD shifting it's emphasis to a law-enforcement model that encourages engagement over confrontation. A TPD spokesman offered this:

> *"Our policing in Tallahassee has changed. In the past we may have been doing a traffic stop, and immediately the idea would be to write as many tickets as would warrant. Now the process is more of an education over enforcement at times."*

The result? TPD wrote fewer than half the number of tickets compared to the prior year. That number had been pretty steady for years. Perhaps some of that hard-core Barney Fifeing was not "absolutely necessary"? Maybe that instinct to "write as many tickets as would warrant" led to some, oh, let's call it overly creative police work.

The news that the city government in Ferguson, MO, viewed its citizenry as little more than a dusky-hued ATM has spread far and wide.<fn>As long as far and wide does not include that place where certain friends and relations think everything

would be fine of Those People™ would just simmer down a little and know their place.</fn> Ta-Nehisi Coates provides a rundown on the situation in The Atlantic, and there is really little I can add to his excellent work.<fn>Why this guy does not have a twice-weekly slot on the NYT editorial page is an ongoing mystery.</fn> Notably, the federal DOJ reported that the department held contests to see who could write the most tickets for a single offense<fn>Merely a motivational tool to ensure greater public safety, no doubt.</fn> and that the city manager actively encouraged the police to step up citations when revenue began to lag. Suffice to say that there has been an ongoing and conscious effort to balance the city budget on the backs of the (mostly) Black citizens who can least afford it.<fn>That the collection agency is the predominately white police force is certainly just an unfortunate coincidence that makes this situation appear *racial* despite the fact that we have arrived at an utterly color-blind and post-racial period of harmony and unicorns. Pardon my insolence.</fn>

(By the way, I am not accusing Tallahassee police of this same racially-structured revenue enhancement, but I am curious to see the statistics one way or the other. However that turns out, I have not noticed our little burg devolving into any sort of Mad Max-ish dystopia in the absence of hyper-vigilant policing.)

I'm no public policy expert, but it seems pretty clear that if eliminating "unnecessary" citations and fines creates a hole in the budget, that money is going to have to come from some other source. <fn>But that leads us to the word that must never be spoken: taxes. Yet another legacy of St Ronald the Dim: we can have everything we want without paying taxes. It's magic!</fn> "Enhancing" revenues through law enforcement is just another creative means of making up the shortfall that was, at one time, borne by the community as a whole. It essentially makes criminal activity a necessary component of a healthy city budget.

What would happen if, miraculously, our entire population became perfectly docile, law abiding citizens, as in Singapore, where the idea of a stray gum wrapper or jaywalking is unthinkable? If we are relying upon revenue from citations to balance the budget, we would have two choices: raise revenues some other way or *create* criminal activity where we can impose fines. (Are we headed to a day when people who do not commit infractions are labeled "takers" because they refuse to pay their fair share; at that point, the police will be viewed as "makers".<fn>I kid! Such Randroid stupidity could never happen here.</fn>) Couple this impulse with the distortion already created by militarizing the police and inculcating an occupation force mindset<fn>cf.



</fn> – alongside the budget-balancing incentive to confiscate property under drug laws run amok – and the inevitability of our descent into police state-ism is apparent.<fn>Has that ship sailed? Is it too late?</fn>

Back to our local budgetary shortfall and the role of (not-enough) traffic fines in funding the local government. I happen to really like my current hometown. The services the city and county provide are generally efficient and enlightened.<fn>After enduring the incompetence of ATL's city governance for years, our local gummit is a marvel.</fn> I know this kind of service doesn't come cheap. But if we are relying upon illegal activity (or at least the citation of same) to fund our community, we are doomed.

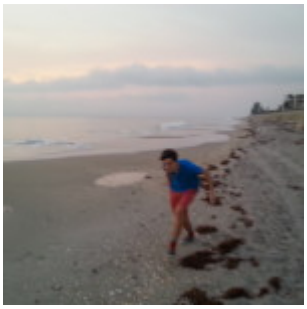
I grant our local PD, and our new Police Chief, this: they recognize the problem and are taking some steps to move away from this kind of zero-tolerance policing.

> *“Our officers are spending less and less time doing what we would call proactive policing. They are doing more of the answering calls for service.”*

There’s some radical thinking. Maybe a slogan to reflect this new emphasis. Hey, I got it. How about “To Protect and Serve”?

Nah, that will never catch on. Too hard to monetize.

My Favorite World #17



That fellow up there trying to avoid my camera’s eye is my son. <fn>He is also my wife’s son, but this is about me. So there.</fn> This attempt at candid capture is Exhibit 5234 in a series of why I am the most annoying person in the world.<fn>To be fair, he suggests that I am only tied with Mom. Again, this blog is about ME. So there.</fn> Mea culpa.

We were up at dawn today to catch sunrise off the Right Coast of Florida. The clouds were uncooperative, which may explain my apparent posture of despair and despond.



Photo by Son

Eventually the son assented to photographic embrace, with no small amount of protest.

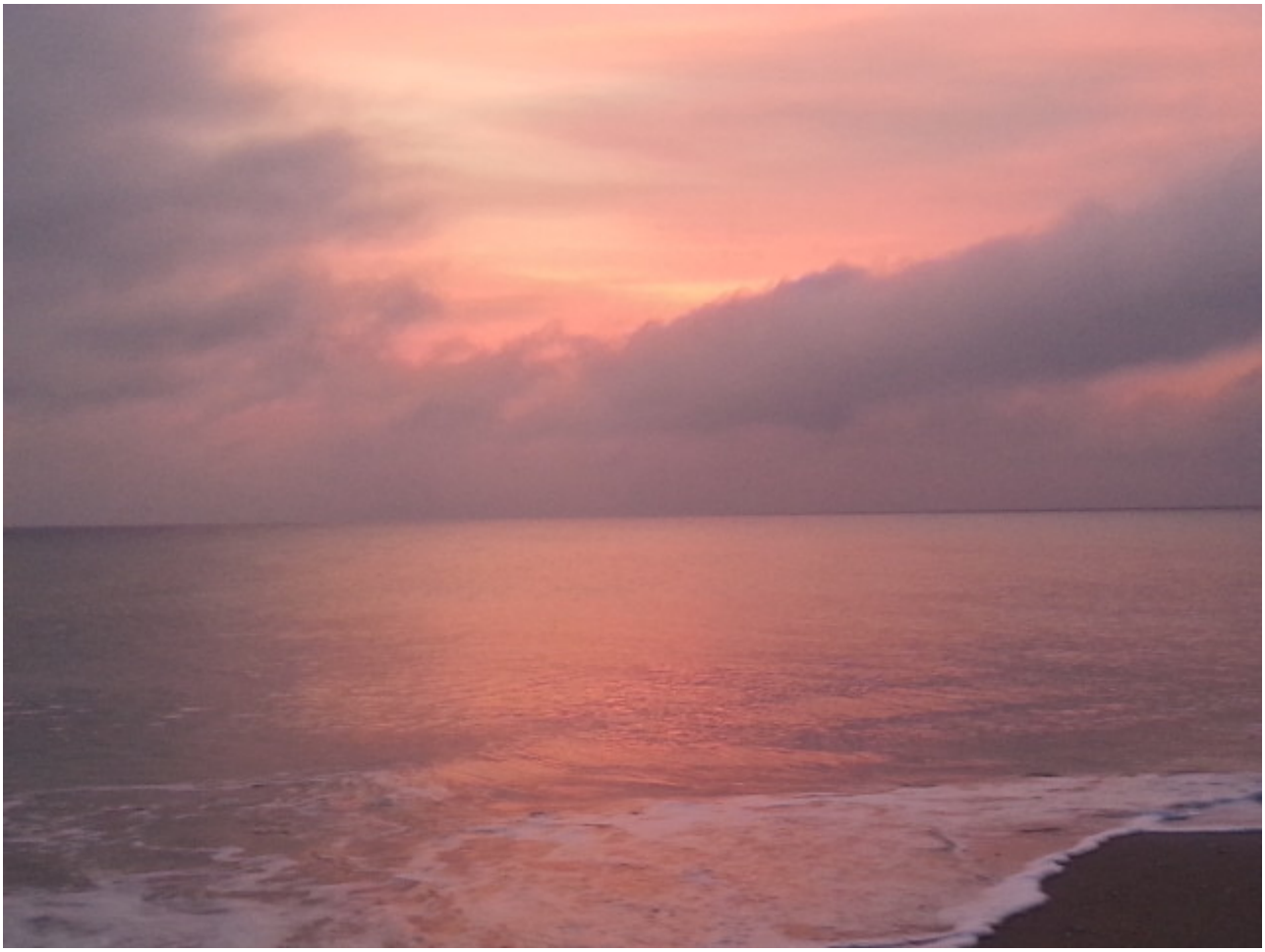


Son with photobombing hound

Alright, it’s cloudy and I’m clearly the world’s most annoying person. A wet and sandy hound named Andy has just assaulted us both. What could possibly make this post part of My Favorite World?

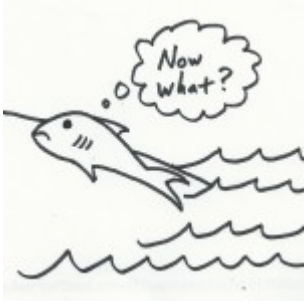
It’s that boy up there. We have a few days at the beach, away from the wymmins of the family, and – annoying though I certainly am – I love that kid more than anything.<fn>Even if he does spend his every waking hour rolling his eyes at me.</fn> For a couple of days, I have him pretty much to myself.

And eventually, the clouds gave way just enough to offer this epic display of psychedelia.



My Favorite World.<fn>I expect to catch an enormous flurry of shit for posting this. Whatevs.</fn>

What the Hell is Water?



Last week, a group of frat boys in Oklahoma were caught on video chanting a completely unhinged racist fraternity song. As any member of the privileged class would do, they lawyered

up right quick and issued a *sincere apology* <fn>Written for them by a crisis manager, naturally.</fn> in which they declared themselves thoroughly embarrassed by their "mistake", but that they want everyone to realize that they know in their hearts they are "not racist". The University expelled the ringleaders and evicted the frat from campus. Of course, now the not-racists-in-their-hearts and the fraternity are suing the University, because they are certainly the real victims in all this.

The easy smart-ass remark begging to be thrown here is, "See, white man can't catch a break." This crack might be funny if the teller and audience were in on the joke that it's a preposterous statement on its face, an obvious flip-take on the reality of race/gender privilege. Alas, there are too many whites out there who grimly nod their assent and file it away as another proof that, really, truly, it is they who are the real victims.<fn>It's a tricky form of satire/humor, going back to the days of Archie Bunker's transparently absurd character. Unfortunately, a majority of polled viewers did not view him as an absurd bigot; they saw him as a sympathetic victim of changing times. Just like the frat boys.</fn>

A couple of weeks ago I heard one of my favorite authors, Walter Mosley, speak at a Florida A&M. This was for a literary conference looking at futurist fiction by black authors called *Black to the Future*. As expected, Mosley was very smart and funny. Unexpected: he spoke to the 98% black audience as though there were no white people there. The talk was half over before I realized that, even though he talked *about* white people in his remarks, he never talked *to* white people.

I was unsure whether this was an amazingly clever tactic, or whether he just decided to be himself. Here was a man talking to and with his tribe, his people, and I and the 4 or 5 other whites in the auditorium, while not being excluded or threatened, simply did not matter to the form and content of his presentation. If one of us took offense, well…too damn

bad. Probably the way the two black kids in my elementary school felt.

Yesterday we went to see the movie *Selma*. Once again, I had the sense that while white people were sometimes being talked *about*, the movie itself was talking specifically *to* black folks. Again, not that "we" were being demonized or anything – though we were certainly being characterized across a range of behaviors and types – it was just that our prevailing white frame of reference did not really pertain to the story the movie was telling.<fn>Skimming a few interviews, it's clear the director of *Selma* intended this framing. She's caught a lot of heat for it, too.</fn>

And that was fine, even a little bit invigorating. For a moment I felt I was experiencing first-hand an aspect of living as a marginalized human in an other-dominated paradigm.<fn>Oh swell job, Mister Insight. Give yourself a cookie.</fn> But then I realized that I was viewing my insight through a lens defined by my generally overarching position of privilege, and that I could shift between the stances of *ignored listener* and *presumptive center of the universe* pretty much at will. My ability to recognize the distortion of marginalization was itself filtered by my fundamental *non*-marginalization, so that my epiphany of so-called *solidarity* was in fact yet another episode in my lifelong career of cluelessness about the effects of race and racial attitudes on anyone other than white males from the Deep South.<fn>As the fish in DFW's Kenyon commencement would say: "What the hell is water?"</fn>

Now it's beyond easy to point out the obviously racist behavior of the frat boys; or the Univision host who "joked" that Michelle Obama resembles an ape; or the systematic judicial apartheid of a Ferguson, Missouri. It's a little more troubling to recognize something as well-intentioned as my moment of solidarity as being, in itself, more than a little bit racist.

Fact is, the reason I registered Mosley's rhetorical stance of speaking directly to blacks as though "we" were not there is because it stood in such stark contrast to the stance that I have grown to expect as *normal*. It was the violation of this norm that registered. Why was he talking as though I were invisible? Because to him, at that time, I was. How dare he? My view of the event was tinged by my racism.

That's one hell of a word: racism. It's a fighting word, a conversation stopper. And its weight has come to be so restrictive that it allows too many of us who carry racist attitudes to pretend it does not apply to *me*, oh no, because I am a decent, well-intentioned person, and some of my best friends, &c.

But I think we need to reclaim the word for broader application, not limited to describing the likes of Bull Connor and Sheriff Jim Clark. Everyone can agree that they were racists; they were also cruel, sadistic, ignorant men whose behavior was at least socio-if-not-also psychopathic.<fn>They would have found a different outlet for their pathology in a different society. Either one would have made a fantastic Col Kurtz or FW de Klerk.</fn>

If the word is limited to the extreme examples – racism equals monstrosity, period – then the word loses its utility. It makes it impossible for someone like me to honestly assess myself and say, well yeah, I actually am a racist, I see events and people through a filter that imposes certain expectations of behavior and status and hierarchy. I hope I am evolved enough to not act as though those expectations are entitlements. But even if I am capable of behaving decently despite living within that structural view of the world, it doesn't change the fact: I am a racist.

It's critical that we who benefit from structural privilege be able to accept this word as descriptive of our attitudes – and of our behavior, if the shoe fits – if we ever hope to

transcend racism as a societal given. Denying racism does nothing to rid ourselves of the framework that codifies behavior and expectation and that, ultimately, robs us of the opportunity to engage each other on an equal basis.<fn>Which hope may in itself be white-normative fantasy nonsense that has nothing to do with what others may want for themselves. I so do not know.</fn>

There has been a noisy debate about whether *Selma* depicted LBJ fairly. In one scene, LBJ uses the 'n'-word to try to persuade George Wallace. Old-time LBJ partisans were outraged. I'm pretty sure that LBJ saw himself as a 'friend to the Negro' and did not view himself as a racist. I don't know if he used the word or not, but given his age and his upbringing in the Deep South, I would not be surprised.<fn>Perhaps he would have been more refined, the way my family elders were: they never would have said that vulgar, common word. They would have referred to the blacks as 'nigras'. It was considered more polite. Enlightened, even.</fn>

So sure, I like to consider myself an enlightened, fair-minded guy. But I'm drawing the line at "post-racial". This nonsense word has been run through the wringer of privilege and entitlement and asks solely that everyone please STFU about race because it makes *Us* feel a little bit uncomfortable. Can't we all just get along and pretend everything is okey doke? Come on, the water is just fine.

Robin DiAngelo's 2011 essay *White Fragility* describes a society "in which even a minimum amount of racial stress becomes intolerable, triggering a range of defensive moves." This stance – coupled with the extreme definition of racism – leaves us at a great divide. The in-group is outraged that they are criticized; the out-group can't believe the in-group refuses to recognize their role in the system's perpetuation, and everyone embraces the role of unfairly treated victim. It's a dead end of shouting past each other.

So no unfair victimhood here. I am a racist. I am also a sexist, and a bunch of other unpleasant isms. It’s the water we’ve been raised in, and that sometimes seems pretty insurmountable.

But.

While the vast majority of the bleeding and dying during the Civil Rights struggle was done by black people standing up for themselves, more than a handful of whites put themselves on the line, too, and made a real difference.

And even though they grew up in less enlightened times than most of us, they managed to see the water for what it was. If they can do it….

My Favorite World #16



See that way cool cat up there? That’s composer/pianist/bandleader Horace Silver. He recorded a bunch of very deep swinging albums for Blue Note in the 60s.

<fn>Turns out he died while I was in hospital last summer, passing without me noticing. Mea culpa.</fn> He’s not one of the *Major* figures in jazz, but he is significant. And swinging. Been listening to him a fair bit the past few days, thanks to the serendipity of Ipodius Randomonious.

Along the way, it occurred to me that Steely Dan might have copped the intro to *Rikki Don’t Lost That Number* from *Song for my Father* by Horace Silver.

Whaddya think?

Other than that, this week, I got nuthin. You might use it til you feel better.

Still my favorite world.