Such An Ugly Word



Special Message From the Mgmt.

The Mgmt wishes to inform you that The Writer is “away on assignment” this week, and will therefore be unable to serve you, loyal blog visitor, this week.

Enquiring minds (even inquiring ones) express wonderment: away on assignment? What can that mean? It’s simple: the Mgmt, as per the terms of its contract with The Writer, has the right to hire The Writer’s services out to interested bidders with a willingness to pay. In our benevolence, we are always willing to share.

This week, The Writer is asked to unlimber his mighty pen to make the world a better place for actuaries specializing in claims predictions for the pest control industry. The pest control industry pays handsomely, well more than this blog could ever earn for its long-suffering investors and Mgmt team.

This research-heavy project requires The Writer to inhale, absorb, and otherwise ingest the bio-agents and neurotoxins prevalent in modern pest control practices, the better to understand the motor- and neurological-malfunctions that can occur under certain circumstances<fn>Conditions so statistically rare as to be barely worth the mention, and in no way does this constitute any admission or assumption of responsibility or culpability, moral or otherwise, &c.</fn>. The Mgmt and the Pest Control Industry’s representative

decided that this was necessary to enhance the veritas and gravitas of the assigned writings; the hazardous nature of the work also means that the Mgmt can upcharge for this engagement, further enhancing the investor/Mgmt team revenue stream. It is, as the wags like to say, a classic *win-win* scenario.

Alas and as always, though, The Writer is turning a simple sub-letting of human capital into some sort of issue of quote-fairness-unquote. Further complicating the situation, accusations of disregard for the mental and physical well-being of The Writer, along with charges of *street-level pimpery*<fn>Such an ugly word, along with *indentured servitude* and *slave-wage*. The Writer's sharp tongue will, in the end, bring him grief, just as his mother warned lo so many years ago.</fn> have brought progress to a near-standstill. The Writer, despite the clear contractual agreement under which he toils – and all the while luxuriating in his Mgmt-provided abode and sustaining himself on Mgmt-provided victuals and comforts – nevertheless considers himself worthy of surplus-remuneration for this assignment. In case the loyal reader has not surmised by now, it always seems to be about The Writer. The Mgmt, however, regards such selfishness as unseemly and will not tolerate such a breach of the socio-economic stratification that benefits us all.

The Mgmt views this uprising as born of naked greed coupled with an unhealthy contempt for established property rights and contract and labor law. As such, we have implemented a lockout and begun a talent search for a new ~~scab~~ replacement writer eager to find her Big Break. No pay, people, but really…just think of the exposure!

My Favorite World #13

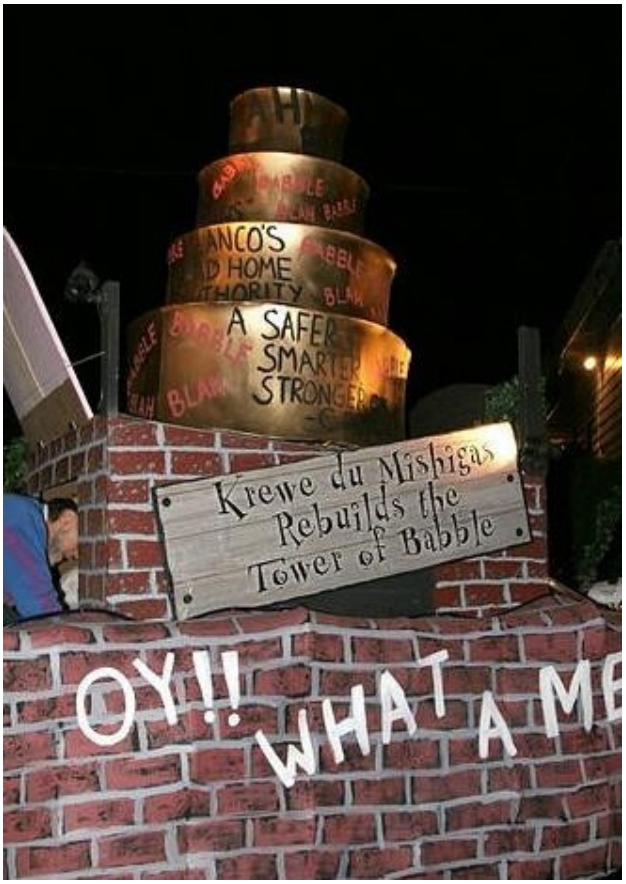


Mardi Gras from the Inside

My Favorite World always has a bit of New Orleans in the mix, even when it doesn't, which isn't often, and even then, it does. So for Ash Wednesday, this raw journal entry recounting the time Your Narrator marched as a member of Krewe du Mishigas in the Krewe du Vieux parade.

We pick up the journey as the Narrator and She Who Makes Me Better arrive at the staging warehouse in the Marigny on the afternoon of the parade, Feb 3, 2007.

… and stayed there until 4:30 when our host drove us to the Den of Muses in Architect Alley. This is a huge, old warehouse in the Marigny district where all the Krewe du Vieux floats are built. Here's a shot of our float.



Krewe du Mishigas – Re-Jewvenating New Orleans

This place is a Fellini set on mushrooms. Huge bits of floats from years past hang from the ceilings – oversized papier mache busts of Peewee Herman, Bush, Nixon, local politicos, not to mention the anatomically (extremely) incorrect sculptures of semi-private body bits. A very colorful and lively setting. In the middle of this, a brass band led by the esteemed Trombone Shorty. These guys can get a crowd cooking.







And this crowd was well cooked

All around us, hundreds of creatively festooned paraders, with lots of food and drink, and the aroma of cigars (cheap *and* Cubano), patchouli, and high-grade pot wafting on the breeze.

There are vendors hawking shrimp and oyster po’boys, bowls of jambalaya and gumbo,<fn>A po’boy is a traditional sandwich on a loaf of French bread with lettuce, tomato, ketchup, pickles and mustard, with some kind of meat that is usually deep-fried. It is truly heaven on a stick. Jambalaya and gumbo are traditional Cajun dishes, the first a rice based casserole and the other a stew, usually filled with seafood and other delights. When done well, there is no better food anywhere. Period. All of these foods were originally poor peoples’ food, true folk dishes. Now you can pay bookoo bucks at linen napkin restaurants to eat like a pauper.</fn> huge bags of strung beads to toss to parade watchers, pocket-sized bottles of

liquor, and several essentials that fall outside the legal economy. Heavy local TV coverage.

It is fucking cold, and I am under about five layers of clothes. We wander around a bunch to stay warm, checking all the other floats and krewe costumes because once the parade begins all you really see is your Krewe<fn>And the ass of your asses.</fn> and the passing parade route. Sort of an inverted viewing of a parade, if that makes any sense. At one point, someone stops She Who to verify that it is really her – one of her students! So come Monday, J will either be known as the coolest prof in her domain or will be typecast as a representative of the pointy-headed liberal elite, some sort of demented, libertine queen of debauche leading our youth down the primrose path of Soddom and freethinking secularism. Maybe both. The pink wig was certainly an eye-popper. Here we are *en regalia*.



The prettiest accident victim you ever saw



A pair of Jewish carpenters

Finally, at 6:30, we move to the beginning of the parade route, where we stand and wait and apply some more special cough syrup while the handlers lead in the mules<fn> KdV is the only parade that still uses mules for float propulsion. This is both a feature and a challenge. Mules are testy beasts, and we were repeatedly warned that i) they kick, and ii) they bite. They are also highly flatulent and have efficient intestinal function that produce copious steaming piles. Figure a dozen mules in the parade, and our team next to last in line, and you can well imagine that we did a lot of fancy stepping to avoid the mule memories. Mules also have a tendency to stop and back up without reason or warning. On the other hand, there were no nasty diesel fumes, and the humble mule is certainly more true to the tradition of Mardi Gras.</fn> and hitch them to the floats. Then more waiting, and it is getting verry fucking colder.<fn>At this point, mid-30s. By end of the parade, 27*.</fn> Another nip of

special cough syrup to stave off the cold.

By this time, all the brass bands are in place. Several of the best bands are here – Treme, the Original Hurricane Brass Band, Trombone Shorty's gang, this bunch.



Paulin Brothers Brass Band

Our krewe hired NOLA's only marching klezmer band, the Panorama Jazz Band. I did not know about this ahead of time, and when they started a traditional second-line drum beat, I expected the traditional good stuff. Instead, trumpets, saxes, alto horns, tubas, and clarinets began wailing an improvisation in a harmonic minor mode, Eastern European in maximus, and then hit the most jaw-dropping ensemble passage I've ever heard on the streets of New Orleans. This team was ace, and even had several women players,<fn>Especially the incendiary Aurora Nealand. Look her up.</fn> which is pretty rare in the brass band world.<fn>Panorama has since become one of my NOLA faves. And the presence of wymmins in the second line is not quite the rare sight it was then.</fn>

Finally, we begin marching at 7:15. I'm not certain exactly where we are,<fn>SOP for carnival season.</fn> but I eventually suss that we began in the Bywater area and thread through Marigny. Crossing Esplanade, I recognize our route as we forge ahead through the French Quarter to end at the

Central Business District and the State Palace Theatre where the ball is underway. But that's getting the float ahead of the mule.

The crowds in Bywater and Marigny are mostly residents. Lots of people on their front porches and balconies, and very cool crowds in the streets clamoring for beads and trinkets, which we tossed with abandon. Occasionally I would notice a stunning old building like this one.



Hail Krewe!

Peering through one window, I spot a wall of oversized stuffed heads of cartoon characters watching us sashay. No idea what the place was about, but it is somehow an appropriate audience to view our passage.

One of our krewe's trademarks is handing out painted and decorated bagels, so in-the-know revelers know to shout out for these. We also toss beads and bubble gum, fake nose toys, party cups, wooden nickels, and tiny dreidels. Judy received an airline-sized bottle of bourbon in return for a special bagel. More cough syrup.

Once in the French Quarter<fn> Krewe du Vieux is the only parade that still traverses the French Quarter. The narrow streets of the Quarter cannot handle the kinds of crowds that

show up for the later parades. </fn>, the mood got very boisterous and the crowds were much bigger. Scores of people hanging from the balconies, the crowd was 10-15 deep in spots. Lots of kisses exchanged for beads and bagels, the occasional naked breast proffered<fn>Hey, Mister!</fn> and heavy excitement over the Tower of Babble's offerings of Double-Bubble Babble Gum. Basically, a great exchange of goodwilled energy. I am typically nervous in big crowds, being that a crowd is never more than a turn or two away from becoming a mob. But not tonight. The crowd is generally generous, festive, and filled with joy. Several times, She Who got the crowd going with a chant of "Oy!" For my usually-reticent wife, this is quite something.

Lots of good humor mixed with lingering resentment at the poor performance of local and national government post-Katrina. This pervades all of life in NOLA these days, and it is only natural that the parade theme (Habitat for Insanity – Rebuilding the Tower of Babble) would reflect this.

This parade in particular reflects the "real" New Orleans, and the locals know this is one of the parades that is a must-see during the season. For one thing, the krewes in this parade builds all the floats without professional help.<fn>Some of the 'bigger' krewes spend up to $40,000 to have their floats built by a local specialty business. These are enormous constructions that can carry several dozen people. Member fees for these krewes can run into the five-figure range. By comparison, it cost us less than $350 for the whole season, and that included the babysitter to keep our kids while we marched.</fn> And because it comes so far ahead of Fat Tuesday (the peak of the tourista invasion), it is pretty close to a locals-only event. This helps tamp down the wretched excess that accompanies the later parades…this night was simply about excess.

But it was also about joy, and shared community, and resilience and tragedy. Because the roots of Mardi Gras stem

from the deep Catholic culture here, originally a big 3-week celebration of the prevailing *carpe diem* of NOLA before the more sober re-assessment and reflection that accompanies the Lenten season. And because reflection here inevitably leads to contemplation of the loss and horror of Katrina – with all the attendant challenges of dealing with the breakdown of systems like garbage collection and public safety, not to mention the greed-soaked and sloth-like responses of government at all levels.



Vast parts of New Orleans still look like this – this is the house where my grandmother lived when I was a wee sprite

So for these few weeks (and especially at these earlier parades and the other krewes that are less geared for the tourist industry), this is a community that comes together for a rolling thunder of celebration of what remains the most distinctive civic culture in the United States; and a living memorial for all that was lost; and finally, at essence, a mass prayer for what is possible and what could be.

After the parade, we visited the Krewe Ball at the State

Theatre on Canal for about ten minutes. Too crowded, too grungy, too loud. Fittingly for this post-Katrina realm, the bathrooms flooded and there were 4-5 inches of standing water everywhere except the balcony. Not even Ziggy Modeliste and George Porter on the stage could keep us there. We were sensorially overloaded, and had been on our feet for 7 hours, small bits frozen, so we left and found some food and a drink. Alas, the world's very worst blues band began playing (they were ugly, sounded like shit, and were very loud), and we bailed quickly and returned to Chez V to tumble abed at 1 a.m.

This morning, coffee and breakfast and enjoying some quiet time with our friends. And for the past little while, typing this report, hoping to convey some of the essence of a really marvelous and rare experience. I'm not a New Orleans insider, but I have been privileged to see this magnificent celebration from the inside.

My Favorite World.

It's Always Something. Usually.



Last week left us with a thought experiment, predicated on the proposition that, given two pieces of looming news, only one

can possibly turn out well.<fn>For me, that qualified as a burst of optimism.</fn>

Well imagine my surprise. The verdict on The Cancer is negative; the verdict on Daughter's acceptance to first-pick U is positive. We have defied the odds. I will live long enough to be bankrupted by my childrens' higher education expenses. And my allegedly data-based pessimism has taken yet another blow, maybe even enough to convert me into one of the smiling optimists of the world.

Ah, pshaw. Go on.

In the aftermath of all the shoes dropping, each in their preferred place, this weekend was an orgy of indolence and self-indulgence. Yeah, ok, I completed taxes and did some real work<fn>My Calvinist streak never far from the surface.</fn>, but we blew off and went to the movies and down to the shore and out to dinner and drank beer in the afternoon and took naps and let the dog hang her head out the car window.

I also stalked an egret for a short conversation, getting within about five feet of this fella.



He didn’t have much to say, but he made his words count.

This was part of a jaunt to St Marks Wildlife Refuge, a piece of paradise on this planet. Proof….



That post-bridge, thanks Clarence, George Bailey feeling is getting all up amongst me. Why, I’m downright ungrumpy.

Also, too…I may actually be able to play a guitar for the first time in about 5 months. Not quite, but the wrist seems to be trying to get better. And the guitar anxiety dreams<fn>Picture naked for a final exam, but more fraught.</fn> are kicking in with a vengeance. Dare I express optimism on this score? Dare I not?

Your regularly scheduled dyspepticism will resume next week. Or not. No promises. Maybe I’ll be Captain Fucking Cheerful from now on.

Bwahahahahahahahahaha.

My Favorite World #12



There Is No Joy in Mudville

So by now, everybody has heard that Stewart is leaving the Daily Show. The Daily Show has been a huge factor in My Favorite World for years.

I am inconsolable.

But he was 'just' a comedian, a joker who made up stories to make people look foolish.

That this happens in the same week when an overpaid Wigstand was sacked from his Respectable Anchorman Desk for making up stories to make himself seem cool…well, the bullshit piles up so fast you need wings to stay above it all.

Even more better: I read the news of his departure as I watched him deliver a right rogering to the self aggrandizing Wigstand from last night's ep, a man who happens to have been his college roommate and one of his oldest friends – neither of which fact saved the Wigstand from a savage kick in the junk, satire-wise – all of which serves to unleash a cascade of multivalence that reminds me of my absolute favoriteness of this world of ours that is so bitterly saddening me right now.

And I really thought I would cry.<fn>Jury's out. It could still happen.</fn>

Stewart is one of the most effective critical operators facing the machine of our modern corporate media, perhaps the single most salient and effective critic we've seen of that frothy mix of ego and insiderism and fecal matter and rank commerce we've gorged upon as a staple of our diet of manufactured consent for the past 30, 50, 75, 150, however many years. Period. Say what you will about McLuhan and Chomsky (and others): no matter how sharp their insights, Stewart managed to tap the lode vein of bullshit running through our public discourse and present it in way that the powerful – and their media enablers – could not afford to ignore. For all the intellectual power of McLuhan or Chomsky, they were easy to ignore. Not Stewart. He pulled peoples' pants down and spanked them, in public, and dared them to ignore it.

They couldn't.

Even the Foxbots – who tried their damndest to ignore the power of The Daily Show<fn>And the parade of spinoffs and imitators who followed in its wake.</fn> could not escape the impact of Daily Show's critical stance. It's pretty simple…Jon Stewart and his writers fundamentally altered the way major media reports the news now. Even – especially – when they pretend it hasn't.

Time moves. Colbert is the new Letterman. Stewart has been at this gig for fifteen years. It's a long time for any gig, but you have to imagine that the pressure that the DS crew put on themselves – and the pressure of knowing that so many were waiting to pounce on any actionable misstep<fn>see, e.g., Dan Rather or Brian Wigstand</fn> – well that has got to wear a body down. Who can blame the guy for wanting something different?

I can't blame, but I can mourn. We need someone like this to keep the heat on those vapid performers with serious mein, the Wolf Beard of CNN, the shoutyfacers of MSNBC<fn>The Good Doc Maddow excepted, may she stay forever.</fn>, the horse's asses

of the Faux fools. John Oliver is doing good work. Colbert will be around, though I fear he will be more of an everyman host than has been his legacy. (You won't see him savaging the White House Correspondents from his new gig, I'll wager.)

And that leaves me bereft, thinking about a cable landscape that will be missing the sanest voice it has had for the past fifteen years. The ancient tradition of the jester, the fool, the one voice with the license to say what really needs to be said, to declare the Emperor naked, to afflict the pompous, &c. — there looms a gaping maw that Stewart filled for years. Shtfkgdmn.

It's still My Favorite World, and I'm raising a glass to the great fifteen years of work Stewart has delivered. We are a better society than we would have been without him. Salute, Stewart. Salute.

But joy? Not in Mudville. Not tonight.