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.