

Such a Lovely Word



Everyone has a set of favorite words. Even if you've never thought about it, you have a go-to collection that would represent pretty nicely in a wordcloud illustration. Even with kids and teens (allowing for some obvious weighting towards utterances such as the *quotative like* and *whatevs*^{Like totally, like, whatevs.}), there are just certain words that work, that ring, that roll off the tongue and end up becoming as much a part/reflection of your public identity as your choice of clothing, car, music, &c.

And so we observe our friends with their own style: some who regularly use *quite* as a modifier; others who would die rather than say *utilize* rather than *use* (or vice versa); and even some with a let-us-say *narrow* linguistic palate v. those who seem to have eaten a dictionary and *logorrheacally* spew synonyms and obscure references^{Geez, don't you hate that?!}.

Which brings us somewhat discursively to one of my long-time faves: *discursive*. I've always taken this to describe a style of speech or writing that trips along more or less aimlessly from point to point, an amble, rather than a march, toward some destination at which we shall inevitably arrive, albeit with some mild surprise/disappointment at the banality of it all.^{Kind of like that sentence.} A great example is the classic *shaggy dog story*, of which, say, *The Big Lebowski* is the classic exemplar.^{From Wikipedia: "In its original sense, a shaggy dog story is an extremely long-winded anecdote characterized by extensive narration of typically irrelevant}

incidents and terminated by an anticlimax or a pointless punchline.” Loyal readers of the i2b blog likely experienced a *frisson* of recognition just now.</fn>

But I began to doubt my understanding of *discursive*, so I opened the dictionary with no little worry that I had been mis-using this word all these years. And lo and behold, what I found was this:

1. passing aimlessly from one subject to another; digressive, rambling

So far, so good. But then...

2. proceeding by reasoning or argument rather than intuition.

Well then. What we have here is a word that means both itself and its opposite, and vice versa. My excessive fondness for the word has been validated; it’s even better than I thought.

In honesty...most of the time my thoughts rattle around like a BB in a bucket, like a carrot in a bathtub, like a... Well, there I go again. Your Narrator often finds himself bouncing from pillar to post, often with a vague destination in mind, sometimes not, but always confident that the destination will be worth the journey.<fn>How we get there is where we’re going?</fn> So off I lurch, dictionary recently eaten.

And admittedly, I happen to love writers who begin in one place, proceed to the next logical checkpoint, and then veer off into pasta-knows-what twisty turns and digressions that lead one to think that either the narrator or the reader/listener has lost touch with reality, only to arrive at a conclusion that elicits a “holy shit, where did that come from?” reaction alongside a recognition that there was really no other possible destination, all things considered, though we never could have guessed at the outset.<fn>Let’s consider this a codicil and corrolary to one of the ruling precepts of

the blog, that being: resolved endings suck.</fn> Consider the explorations of Waterloo and the Paris sewers in *Les Misérables*.<fn>The novel, not the musical. I can't even bring myself to watch it.</fn> Consider James Burke's fantastic excursions in the TV series *Connections*; the flights of fancy in Proust and Wallace and Barthelme for example, and, again, *Lebowski*. All of the things that appear to be random and discursive turn out to be...well, given definition #2, they actually end up being *discursive* in both senses of the word. Random? Maybe not quite so much as it first appeared.

Are your Narrator's discursions actually random, or do they instead conform to some deeper pattern of rational argument that could not be clearly revealed through a more formal $A+B=x$ sort of explication? Consider who you/we are asking? What kind of rigorously logical answer can you possibly expect from someone who just danced you through 650 words to get to the question in the first place?

And furthermore: What in perfectly fresh hell is a picture of Satan's Dick doing at the top of this ramble?

Think about it people. This is a post about discursion, which is exemplified by the shaggy dog story, which is in turn exemplified by *The Big Lebowski*, which is itself all about bowling. And discursion. And some other stuff, too, but do we have to spell it out?

Wheels within wheels, my friends. Wheels within wheels.

My Favorite World #13

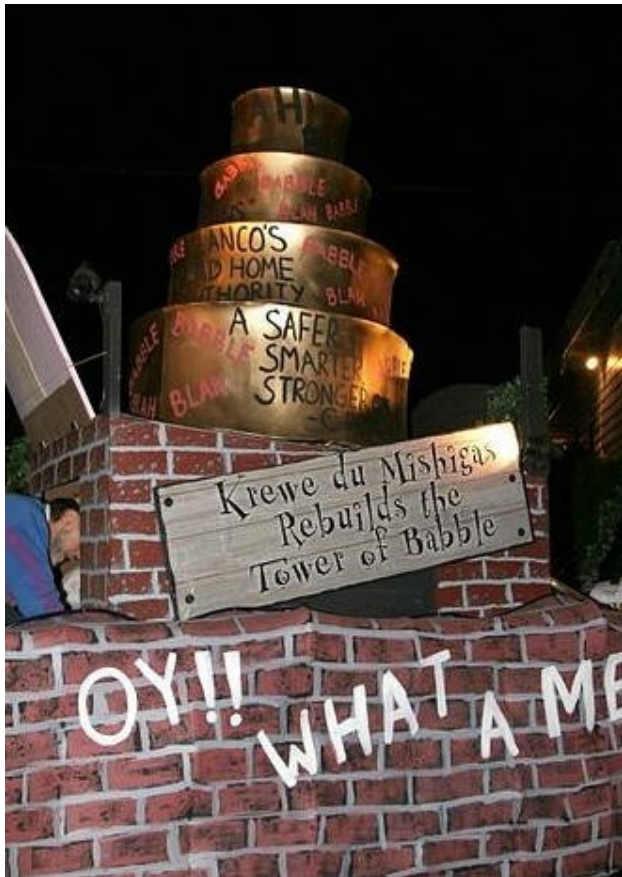


Mardi Gras from the Inside

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 Pee-wee Herman, Bush, Nixon, local politicians, 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 debauché leading our youth down the primrose path of Sodom 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 tourist 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.

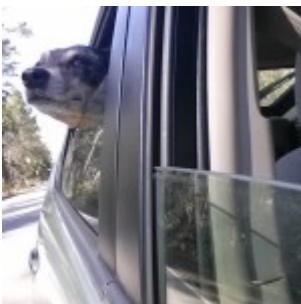
After the parade, we visited the Krewe Ball at the State

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.

Material. Timing. Delivery. And the beauty of random disregard.



Life is busy and such, mostly in ways good. But one must never disregard the wisdom of Miss ~~Latella~~ Rosannadana.

(Ed Note: Eagle-eyed reader Popopopovich correctly points out that it was in fact Rosanna Rosanadanna who made famous the "It's always something" catchphrase. The management apologizes for any inconvenience and begs forbearance of the litigious demons of the Gilda Radner Estate.<fn>Worse than Disney, I hear.</fn> The Writer has been put on a strict diet of gruel made from the ground up bones of our recently departed fact-checker. We regret the error.)

It's always something.

In the past two weeks...two biopsies to try and figure out why my aching Studebaker of a body continues to drop parts despite the mechanics' best efforts. The first: mostly negative (yay!) but inconclusive as to another one of those melodramatic 'C' word diagnoses. Results of the latest test due Friday. I expect good news, as most of my symptoms have disappeared untreated. Go figger.<fn>And I still cannot grip a guitar, and fk that shit, Rupert.</fn>

In the meantime, Awesome Daughter is expecting news about whether her first choice college welcomes her with open arms. Decision day is Friday. Well.

Yesterday, as she was asking for a favor, she demurred at pushing too hard, because (her words) “you’re dealing with that whole cancer thing.” I laughed so hard I thought I’d plotz. And of course, she won her request. Comedy is all about material, timing, and delivery. A-plus on all fronts.

This evening, we were all laughing about her remark.<fn>Graveyard whistling and disregard for solemnity being big around these parts.</fn> Son declared her horrible. I declared him my favorite, as one is always well-advised to encourage sycophancy from the underlings.

Then it struck me: a thought experiment!<fn>I’ve been reading the latest Daniel Dennett. My puzzlers are not nearly as profound, but I aver to the inspiration.</fn>

A family awaits two pieces of news of critical importance. Only one response can be positive. Do you, daughter, wish me to be cancer-free, or do you wish to be accepted to your dream school?

Zero hesitation from my (truly) loving and wonderful child:

College acceptance. Cancer is treatable.

A moment of WTF was that pause, and then we all fell down laughing.

Material was a tad off center, but the timing and delivery was pure Coltrane. Brava.

Also, too, in the realm of casual disregard...

The bloggy vineyard of i2b attracts a steady parade of eyeballs, but few of the humans bother to leave comments. This makes me very sad.<fn>Try to hear that phrase in the icy teutonic accent of Heidi Klum dismissing a Project Runway contestant for bad taste.</fn>

So, dear reader, your random disregard leads me to bask in the

warming glow of nothing but spambot generated comments intended to entice me to purchase sports jerseys, weight loss supplements, and penis enhancers.<fn>Aside from the jerseys, none of that stuff is for real. Believe me.</fn> But I've come to love some of these simplistic machine friends, as their comments serve to encourage continued blogularity.<fn>And to stimulate my tumescence for under the medically recommended four-hour maximum.</fn> To wit:

What i don't understood is in reality how you are not actually a lot more neatly-appreciated than you may be right now. You are so intelligent. You know therefore significantly in terms of this subject, made me in my view consider it from a lot of various angles. Its like men and women are not fascinated except it is something to accomplish with Girl gaga! Your individual stuffs excellent. At all times care for it up!

Damn right, registered user Tanya3756dc from Uzbekistan. And thanks for the shout out.

There are two kinds of these auto-messages. One is dry, written in impeccably poor language, and offering nothing but commercial enticement. But such feeble witterings are not sufficient for my dear Tanya3765dc. These comments find art in the strangest places.

You know therefore significantly in terms of this subject, made me in my view consider it from a lot of various angles. Its like men and women are not fascinated except it is something to accomplish with Girl gaga!

A shrewd judge of literary merit is my Tanya3765. Indeed, does not Girl Gaga make the world go 'round? Mais bien sur! Even Cole Porter knew that!

Your individual stuffs excellent. At all times care for it

up!

You bet your sweet Uzbekian bippy, Tanya. My individual stuffs excellent, as legions far and wide will attest.

But more critically, my beloved Tanya3765, despite her automated disposition and limited linguistic facility, has arrived at the existential core of Immune to Boredom:

At all times care for it up.

Amen, Sister Tanya3765. Amen.

And one last thing...

I watched *Casablanca* for around the 75th time last night. I was really just going to watch for a minute, but one thing led to Sam and Ilsa and *Les Marseilles* and "Shocked, shocked I say!" and I was done for. And while I always choke up at the big moments and miss subtleties because goddammit the problems of two people don't amount to a hill of beans in this world and we'll always have Paris, and therefore I'm a helpless heap incapable of critical scrutiny...what I realized in watching this time was: there is not one wasted word, frame, musical note in this movie. Every cut, every aside, every casual glance at the side of the scene contributes to a deeper story.

Try to think of more than a few works of art that achieve this superb economy.

You think the great works of Dickens or Dostoyevsky or Tolstoy might not have benefited from a little judicious pruning? How about *Lawrence of Arabia*, or even Billy the Bard's plays? Oh, how they do go on!

Even my favorite book of ever, the infinite *Infinite Jest*...even that epic could probably have lost a word or 5000 and suffered nothing from the loss.<fn>Though I would not be the one to cut

even a punctuation mark from that one.</fn>

I bring this point to bear for two reasons.

One, *Casablanca* may just be a perfect piece of art. Consider it. The story is timeless. The material is poetry. The delivery and timing, utterly majestic.

Two: however perfect the movie may be as an example of aesthetic precision and efficiency, this blog post stakes out the opposite pole as an exemplar of free-floating random and discursive disregard.

Mea culpa. This shit don't write itself.

Here's looking at you, kid.

