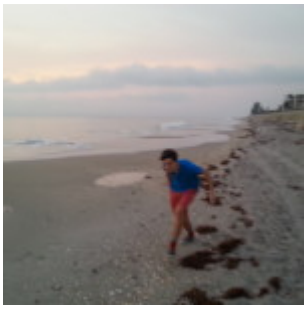
My Favorite World #17



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.

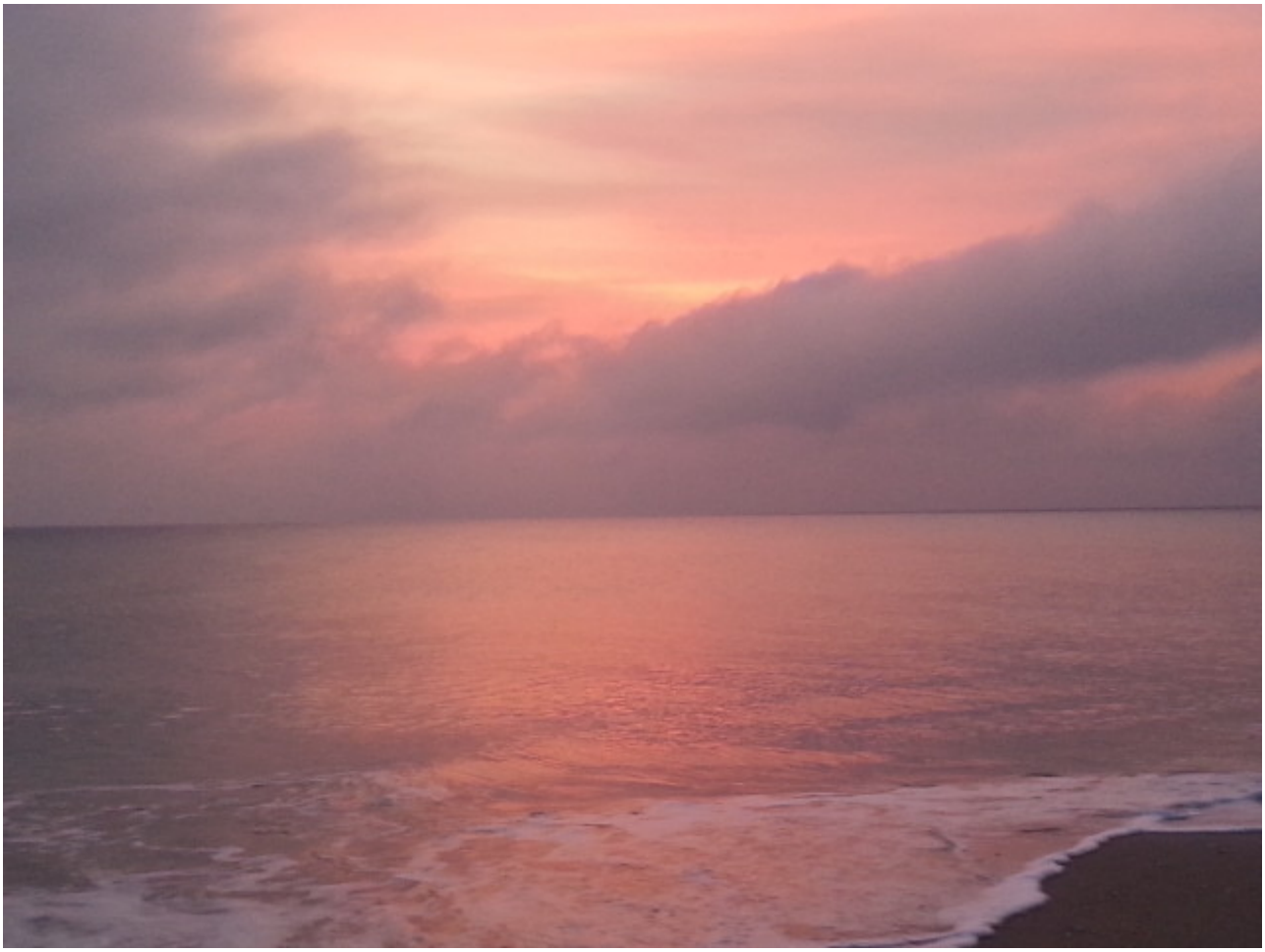


Son with photobombing hound

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?

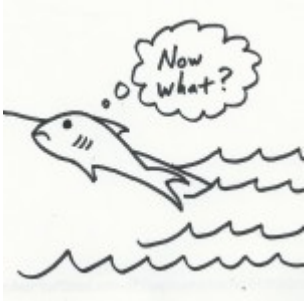
It’s that boy up there. We have a few days at the beach, away from the wymmins of the family, and – annoying though I certainly am – I love that kid more than anything.<fn>Even if he does spend his every waking hour rolling his eyes at me.</fn> For a couple of days, I have him pretty much to myself.

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.

The Flying Fickle Finger of Fate



The hand of Fate has bony fingers. Cold, too. When it pokes, The Flying Fickle Finger of Fate will not be ignored. Attention must be paid. Nobody puts Fate in the corner, try though we may.

Fate’s touch is a harbinger, a moment of reckoning. It could represent an awakening to an essential truth about ourselves. The presence of true love. A recognition of one’s duty and obligation to someone/thing else. A growing awareness of our minuscule place in the larger order of things. A glimpse of life’s abundant potential or a reminder of fragile mortality. Messages derived from the random associations generated by the gnarly digit’s touch drive inspiration and striving. Its touch can serve as a welcome reminder of our vitality, no matter the shiver down the spine.

But comes that moment when the bony digit lays its frosty touch on your shoulder yet again, and all you can say is, “Fk, dude, could you just give it a rest?”

Alas, no, as the FFFoF has no intention, no agency, no recognition of any of us as an anything. It is random and impersonal, and any meaning we may derive is our own doing. There is no task from which it could rest. The Finger, c’est moi, c’est tu, c’est notre. We can no more ignore it than we can ignore ourselves.

Still, I am compelled to exclaim: “Fk, dude, give it a rest already.”